

CHAPTER 15

PROPERTY OF INTERNEES

1. The proper control of internees' property during their internment and the handling of claims made by them for alleged losses, were live issues at all times during the existence of internment camps. Regulations and Camp Orders on this subject needed to be supplemented considerably by carefully drafted administrative instructions to ensure proper care of property. Where losses occurred the Directorate was responsible to make all necessary enquiries and to make firm recommendations to the Finance Branch for payments of compensation.

2. The following deals only with the custody and control of property brought by internees to their places of detention. Property left behind by them at the time of apprehension was the responsibility of Security Service, vide Chapters 6 and 7 of Part 6 of this report.

REGULATIONS GOVERNING PROPERTY

3. Regulations and Camp Orders governing the property of internees were:-

- (a) Reg.14 - this made provision for search of internees and their baggage on arrival at internment camps, and for all property which they were not permitted to retain to be taken from them, a receipt given, and particulars recorded.
- (b) Reg.16 - prescribed the action to be taken with this property and for it to be retained in a place directed by the Camp Commandant. This regulation also made provision for the safe custody and insurance of jewellery at the expense of the internees, and for lists to be made of all property, for signature by the internee concerned.
- (c) Reg. 25A- As mentioned in Chapter 4, paragraph 7, this amendment of regulations was necessary to limit responsibility for losses of property during movements of internees.
- (d) Reg.41(g)- prohibiting internees from having in their quarters or possession any article in contravention of the Internment Camp Orders.
- (e) Camp Order - stating the articles which internees could not retain in their possession.
No.10,
Para 8
- (f) Reg.46 - giving procedure for the disposal of the effects of deceased internees.
Sub Regs
(2) and (3)

ADMINISTRATIVE INSTRUCTIONS

4. Limitation of quantity of baggage : A prime necessity was to limit as far as practicable the amount of baggage etc. that internees could bring with them to their internment camps. This could not be properly controlled in the case of overseas internees whose baggage was consigned with them on the ship bringing them to Australia. Many of these internees brought with them large quantities of goods and chattels which caused undue difficulties during transport to their camps, in the problem of storage at camps, and during inter-camp transfers. In respect of local internees it was realised that individual circumstances would vary considerably, and that no definite maximum of baggage permitted to enter camps with internees could therefore be set. Reasonable local restrictions were therefore imposed by Commands concerned, after consultation with their local Deputy Directors of Security, and express provision was made for the exclusion, as far as practicable, of bulky items such as furniture.

5. Recording of property : This was recorded on Form WF121A (Register of property) on which form the internee and the receiving officer endorsed their signature. Disposal of copies of these forms was prescribed by Accountancy Instructions Part V Chapter 1, vide Appendix 9, and by Direction for Records Procedure No 26 issued by Section Echelon.

6. Storage : The quantity of baggage held by some internees in their sleeping huts caused unhygienic conditions, congestion of space and difficulties in searching, and consequently approval was given for the erection at some camps of baggage huts outside Compounds for the storage of excess baggage. Detailed procedure for the handling of such baggage required careful attention to detail, provision being made for proper records, periodical inspections of the huts, access of internees to their baggage etc.

7. Regular checking of property : Directions were issued that at each internment camp and place where any internee's property was held, a physical inspection and check of such property and the records relating thereto, should be made during the months of June and December in each year. These inspections were to be made by officers holding appointments not connected with the camp or group of camps at which inspections were made. Officers charged with this duty were to submit a certificate of inspection, a copy of which was to be forwarded to Army Headquarters (for DPW and I). A mere certificate of checking was found unsatisfactory, and the checking officers were therefore asked to further certify whether the records required by Regulation 16(1) and 16(2) had been kept, were in satisfactory condition and up to date, and whether the lists of property prepared as a result of the checking agreed with such records. District Finance Officers of Commands concerned with the holding of internees took over responsibility for this checking of property in 1944.

8. Custody of valuables, etc : To ensure safety of valuables, including jewellery and non-convertible currency, these articles were placed in bags or envelopes with internees' number, name and contents clearly recorded on the outside of the package, and were certified, sealed and lodged for safekeeping at a suitable bank in the locality of the camp concerned. Cameras, binoculars and similar articles, which might be of use to any one of the Services, were forwarded to Command HQ and when any such articles were impressed, the proceeds were remitted to the Camp Paymaster for credit of the cash account of the internee.

9. Use of internees' property by Garrison personnel : In view of reports that certain garrison personnel at Internment Camps were using wireless sets belonging to the internees, a direction was issued that the use of an internees' property by garrison personnel should not be permitted, irrespective of whether the internee consented, or not.

10. Disposal of deceased internees' effects : In order to facilitate the handling of effects of deceased internees in accordance with Regulation 46, and to prevent losses in transit to the Prisoners of War Information Bureau, Camp Commandants were instructed to include in each package an inventory of the contents, to properly label and fasten packages, and where possible to enclose each in a hessian binding. As many articles of clothing and bedding were forwarded to the Bureau in an insanitary condition, approval was given for such articles to be washed and fumigated by internee labour before despatch. National Security (Internment Camps) Regulations were amended by adding the following proviso concerning such items: -

“Provided that, where at any camp any personal effects (being articles of clothing or bedding) of the deceased internee are of no substantial value, the Camp Commandant may, in his discretion and in such manner as he thinks fit, after consultations with the internee's representative at the camp, destroy or dispose of the articles or bedding. (Reg. 46(2)).

These authorities did much to minimise congestion at the Bureau and the collection of useless or insanitary articles.

To further assist the Bureau in the performance of its functions, Regulations were amended to allow delivery to the person appearing in its records as the next of kin of a deceased internee of the effects of the deceased not exceeding in value the sum of 25 pounds, vide Reg. 46(3).

11. Baggage to be taken by internees on repatriation : A statement of Empire policy on this question is attached to the report as Appendix 10. In practice it was not found necessary to restrict to any great extent the actual quantity of baggage to be taken by internees on embarkation, but provision had to be made for limitation of funds, storage and recording of baggage not carried by them, and the custody of the latter. These matters are covered in instructions issued for each shipment as referred to in Part I Chapter 18. Surplus baggage of repatriated internees was disposed of as stated in Part II Chapter 10 dealing with the property of PW.

12. Disposal of parcels received for deceased and repatriated internees : On receipt from the postal authorities of lists of any such parcels, the Bureau requested their despatch to camps in which internees of the same nationality were held. Where possible the camp specified was that in which the deceased or repatriated internee was held. The following action was taken at the Camps :-

- (a) Contents, other than articles of personal nature of articles of value, were distributed among indigent or sick internees of the same nationality as the addressees.
- (b) Articles not distributed were forwarded to the Bureau, each parcel being marked with the name and address of the addressee, and if known, the sender.
- (c) The Bureau forwarded these articles to the International Red Cross Delegate in Australia for disposal by return to the sender or as appropriate in the circumstances.

CLAIMS BY INTERNEES FOR LOSSES OF PROPERTY

13. It was the constant aim of the Directorate to minimise all possibilities of claims by internees for compensation in regard to losses of property at camps or during transfers, and no opportunity was lost to impress on camp staffs the absolute necessity for scrupulous care and attention to internees' belongings. However, the circumstances under which many internees were apprehended in Australia, or received from overseas, were such that it was inevitable that claims would be made. Furthermore, the tendency of certain types of garrison personnel, ships' escorts and others, to treat internees' property as good spoil led to many petty thefts. Some of the major claims made by groups of internees are referred to hereunder as matters of interest to the reader.

14. Losses of United Kingdom Internees on the "Dunera" :- Considerable losses occurred on this vessel during the voyage to Australia. The Australian Army was in no way responsible as British escorts were used, but some time was occupied in collecting and collating claims from the internees involving the sum of nearly 40,000 pounds. These were referred to the United Kingdom authorities through the Army Finance Branch in Australia, and most claims were settled in full.

15. Losses by Straits Settlements Internees during transit to Australia.

These internees were transferred to Australia on H.W.T "Queen Mary" which arrived in Sydney in September 1940. Complaints accompanied by claims for substantial sums as compensation, were lodged by the internees, alleging losses of personal effects and valuables at some stage between the impounding of their goods and chattels at Singapore and their arrival at Tatura, Victoria. As investigation proved that no responsibility could be definitely placed on the Australian authorities for loss after disembarkation, claims totalling approximately 200 pounds were forwarded through the Home Office Representative to the Colonial Office for consideration and settlement.

16. Losses by Iranian Internees.

This group of internees was sent to Australia on the S.S. "Rangitiki" in November 1941. The Officer in charge of the ships' escort advised on arrival that he was forwarding to Army Headquarters in India proceedings of a court of inquiry concerning alleged losses or pillage of internees' baggage prior to arrival at Bombay, and that he would personally deliver claims by the internees on his return. The internees further alleged after arrival that 1,059,073 rials and 32, 343 American dollars were taken over from them at Basra. These funds had not been transferred to Australia, and steps were taken to secure transfer. Delay in transfer cause some embarrassment as it provoked unfavourable comment of the Protecting Power Representative and the International Red Cross Delegate in Australia. The funds were ultimately received and distributed through the Finance Branch. Various minor claims were made by these internees for papers and property left in Iran, and these were referred to India without any great success, as in practically all cases answers were received that property belonging to the internees had been taken with them on transfer and no trace could be found of the missing articles.

17. Losses of Japanese Internees apprehended in Western Australia:

Immediately after the outbreak of war with Japan, approximately 200 Japanese nationals on the north-west coast of Western Australia were apprehended by civil police as a preliminary to their being taken into custody for detention as internees. They were lodged in custody at Broome and at three other ports where local facilities were primitive and official personnel few in number. Personnel of an Infantry Unit were used to escort them to Perth. The state of tension which existed at that time undoubtedly caused the sundry possessions of the Japanese to be regarded as of little real importance, and many claims were later submitted by them for losses. On interrogation by an officer of the Directorate these were reduced from 1,550 pounds to 535 pounds, and further investigations in an effort to establish responsibility were unsuccessful. Ministerial and Treasury approval was therefore given for settlement of the claims.

18. Losses by Italian Internees from Western Australia

Following upon extensive searches conducted early in 1942 at the Harvey Internment Camp in Western Australia, during which large quantities of prohibited articles valuables etc. were found in the camp, claims were submitted by the Italian internees for missing property. A full investigation was ordered. The investigating Officer appointed submitted a report considered unsatisfactory and an officer of the Directorate further investigated the matter. It was, however, considered impossible to assess the validity of the outstanding claims especially as they arose partly because of widespread illegal activity in the camp. Claims related mainly to articles in the possession of internees who no doubt contemplated revolt with violence, and as no proper records had been kept, the only alternative was to request the internees to submit statutory declarations for consideration. Some internees concerned had been released before enquiries had been completed, and these persons were asked to submit declarations through Command Headquarters concerned.

The Minister approved of a recommendation that ex-gratia payments be made on the basis of 50% of each claim subject to certain defined definite reductions, and the amount involved in these claims was not great, but the investigation was prolonged and required careful handling.

PROCEDURE FOR HANDLING CLAIMS

19. The Directorate was responsible for the investigation of claims by internees for compensation and completed all necessary enquiries through Command HQ concerned up to the stage that definite responsibility was established, values fixed and a recommendation could be made for settlement and the basis of such proposed settlement. The advice of the Legal Service was sought when necessary to ensure that responsibility was clearly fixed and a recommendation was finally forwarded to Finance Branch for further consideration and reference to the Minister, if concurred in. The Finance Branch then became responsible to obtain Ministerial consent, to refer where necessary for Treasury approval, and to make settlement.

ACTION ON CLOSING OF CAMPS

20. Instructions concerning action to be taken in regard to internees' property remaining at camps after the departure of all internees are contained in an amendment to Accountancy Instructions Part V Chapter 1, vide Appendix 11.