

CHAPTER 17

VISITS – TO AND BY INTERNEES

1. This subject can be treated to advantage under several separate Sections. The main problem was the proper handling of visits by relatives and friends of internee, but of no less importance from the aspect of International relations was the careful control of visits to camp by Representatives of Protecting Powers, Official Visitors, the International Red Cross Delegate and religious and welfare representatives. There was a tendency at all times for these types of visitors to interest themselves in matters beyond the scope of their normal functions and under these circumstances a considerable amount of diplomacy and tact was necessary, combined with sufficient firmness to ensure that they limited their activities to carefully defined matters.

2. The majority of authorised visitors invariably maintained a direct personal contact with the Directorate and were prepared to discuss freely the complaints of internees or other questions of conditions or procedure etc. In this way many problems were disposed of to their satisfaction without the delay of correspondence and protracted enquiries. By careful attention to detail and prompt handling of urgent matters raised by them a most satisfactory relationship was fostered and maintained. The courteous treatment of all such visitors, including the provision of Army transport and of meals was found to be essential, both to enable the visitors to perform their official functions and to maintain cordial relations with them.

Visits to Internees by Relatives and Friends

3. Authority for permitting visits to internees was contained in Regulation 29 of National Security (Internment Camps) Regulations, which reads :-

“Internees may be allowed to see visitors at such times and under such conditions as are specified in the Internment Camp Orders or the Camp Rules, but the Camp Commandant may, in exceptional circumstances, permit an internee to see visitors at other times.:

Internment Camp Order No.10 (para 32) provided for such visits with the approval of the Camp Commandant, once in each week, or more frequently in exceptional cases.

4. Throughout Australia, the friends and relatives of internees were quick to take advantage of this privilege and in a few instances abused the right by passing or attempting to pass to internees information or articles which might assist their escape. For this reason it was necessary to ensure strict supervision of visitors. In the early stages of the war it was not considered sufficient to merely ensure compliance with the various conditions laid down in para 32 of Internment Camp Order No.10.; it was also felt essential to prevent unauthorised articles being passed to internees by erecting wire grilles in all visitors huts at internment camps. Permission was given later for the partial removal of these wire grilles subject to the following conditions:-

- (a) Interviews should be permitted to take place at tables under supervision.
- (b) Internees or their visitors who in the past had offended against rules governing interviews or who later offended against those rules could be required, at the discretion of Camp Commandants, to hold their interview through grilles.
- (c) When the Camp Commandant considered that there were security reasons connected with an internee and/or a visitor which rendered it desirable that an interview should be held through the grille, the Camp Commandant could so direct.

5. As provided in Camp Order No.10 (para 32) the normal period for a visit was one half-hour. However, as many visitors were obliged to travel long distances at infrequent intervals, Camp Commandants were directed to exercise with leniency their discretionary authority in respect of the duration and frequency of visits. This was not uncommon for visitors from a long distance to be granted permission to visit internees for one or two hours on several consecutive days. The maximum time allowed had of course to be consistent with the control capacity of the camp.

6. While there were some variations in practice at different camps, the following is a general guide to the policy adopted regarding numbers and frequency of visits: -

- (a) The number of visitors during any one day were regulated according to the availability of interpreters required to handle them and to the space and other facilities available at camps.
- (b) Visits were permitted on public holidays but when large numbers came to a camp on such days it was sometimes necessary to restrict visits strictly to half-hour periods in order that all visitors would have an opportunity to interview the internees.

7. As an illustration of the problems which confronted Camp Commandants in handling visitors, during the 1941 Christmas week, at one internment camp, no less than 300 visitors were dealt with. This involved improvisation of facilities which were normally more than adequate for their purpose, the working of long hours by members of the guard, and great pressure on interpreters.

8. It will be observed that Camp Order No.10 (para 32(4)) made suitable provision for visitors to visit internees in the camp infirmary and provided for suitable security precautions during such visits. This Order also gave internees charged with offences other than disciplinary offences the right to be visited by their solicitor (para 32(6)).

Official Visitors to Internment Camps

9. The functions of Official Visitors, arrangements for their visits to Internment Camps and action taken on their reports are fully dealt with in Part I Chapter 9.

Visits by Representatives of Protecting Powers

10. Consuls General and their authorised representatives duly accredited as representing the interest of enemy governments were accorded the status of representatives of Protecting Powers in accordance with the relevant provisions of the Prisoners of War Convention 1929, and could so act in relation to internment camps and internees.

11. They were permitted to enter compounds and to interview an internee, if he so consented. Conversations were as a general rule permitted to take place without witnesses but in respect of any particular internee the Camp Commandant could require that all conversations with the representative he held in the presence of an officer or a member of the guard.

12. As reports by the representatives were communicated to enemy governments, a direction was issued that while officers should give all reasonable assistance to the representatives in the performance of their duties, great care should be exercised to avoid expressing opinions or making any statements to them which might constitute admissions of defects, shortages or of conditions which might be considered unsatisfactory. It was apparent that such statements could create a wrong impression in the mind of the enemy and might be used as a basis of retaliatory action against British internees and prisoners of war held in enemy countries.

13. Camp Commandants were instructed to submit a report on each visit by a representative, to the appropriate Command HQ concerned, including therein all matters adversely commented upon or suggestions made by the Representative and of any action taken or recommended. Commands took all necessary action on these reports, including reference to Army Headquarters for direction where necessary. The representatives themselves assisted greatly by visiting the Directorate immediately after they had discussed problems with the Commands concerned, and thus many contentious matters were cleared up before any reports were prepared by them for transmission to enemy governments.

Visits by International Red Cross Delegates

14. The International Red Cross Delegate in Australia was authorised to visit internment camps for the purpose of observing conditions and reporting thereon to the International Red Cross Committee at Geneva.

15. The Delegates were accorded facilities for visiting camps similar to those stated above in respect of Representatives Protecting Powers. They were permitted to discuss matters relating to conditions in camps with Command and Camp Commandants. Opportunity to offer suggested amendments to proposed reports to Geneva was given to the Directorate at all times and in this way several misunderstandings which may have resulted in serious repercussions abroad were avoided.

Religious Visitors

16. Heads of Religious denominations (including Lutheran) and one Deputy in each State were permitted to visit internment camps and to enter compounds. Their activities were strictly confined to the spiritual welfare of internees and were not to embrace enquiries regarding conditions in camps. Local clergy representing denominations, other than those of chaplains attached for duty at internment camps, could be permitted, at the discretion of Camp Commandants to perform the same functions as chaplains. They could enter compounds only for the express purpose of religious ministrations.

17. Visits to camps by representatives of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) acting in that capacity were not permitted unless Quakers were interned in the camps concerned. Any such visits were arranged outside compounds after reference to the local Deputy Director of Security.

Representatives of Welfare and similar Organisations

18. Commands were given authority to approve representatives of bona fide welfare organisation visiting camps for the purpose of ascertaining the welfare requirements of internees with a view to supplying same. Except in the case of YMCA representatives, they were not permitted to enter compounds but were permitted to interview representatives of the internees under conditions determined by Camp Commandants.

19. The activities of representatives of welfare and similar organisations was confined strictly to matters connected with welfare and which were within the objects of the respective organisations.

20. YMCA representatives were permitted to enter compounds solely for purposes directly connected with spiritual, recreational and educational facilities, but subject to the following conditions: -

- (a) Any YMCA spiritual activities were not to conflict with functions of camp chaplains.
- (b) Reports of representatives were not to deal with matters of camp conditions or administration.

- (c) Representatives while inside compounds were always to be accompanied by officers.

Visits by Internees to dying members of families

21. On humanitarian grounds, Commands were authorised to grant permission, subject to certain conditions, for an internee to visit an uninterred member of his family who was seriously or critically ill. This permission was not granted unless there existed a reasonable probability of death, as a general rule, was restricted to visits to a wife or child of an internee. The period of the visit was limited to the time of death or until the period of crisis had passed.

22. Definite procedure was laid down for these visits in the interests of security, including checking of the condition of the patient before approval, the withholding of permission if the location of the sick relative rendered it difficult or undesirable that the visit be made, and reference of all proposed visits to Deputy Directors of Security. Interned husbands or fathers who were in a position to meet the cost of a visit including the cost of the escort were informed prior to movement that they would be required to meet such cost, and an appropriate written undertaking was obtained. Where funds were not available the costs became a charge against public expense.