

Chapter 31 Viewpoint Activity



Some 15 million soldiers spent part of World War II behind the barbed wire of a prisoner-of-war camp, as did millions of civilians—often colonial families—who were “interned” in camps when the enemy overran the country (textbook page 799). Camp conditions varied from brutal to relatively comfortable, depending on the nation in charge. The first excerpt describes Allied prisoners in Germany. In the second, an American writer, married to a British civil servant, recalls the Japanese camp in Borneo where she and her two-year-old son were interned. ♦ *As you read, compare the problems each group faced. Then, on a separate sheet of paper, answer the questions that follow.*

Prisoners of War in Europe and Asia

Allied POWs in Germany

... The jaunty nickname [“Kriegies”] belied the grim facts of POW life faced daily by the more than seven million men—American, British and Commonwealth, French, Polish, and Russian—held by the Germans between 1939 and 1945. Barracks, often jerry-built, were freezing cold in the winter and stifling hot in the summer; food meager and unappetizing.

Most debilitating for the Kriegies, however, were the pervasive boredom and sense of futility. . . . Kriegies coped with captivity as best they could—by reading and study, sports, theatricals and hobbies, and by keeping track of the world outside the barbed wire. Prisoners published camp newspapers filled with hometown items from letters and newly captured POWs . . . They set up situation rooms equipped with maps and colored pins to trace the War on all fronts, using information they picked up on forbidden radios.

Sources: (1) *Prisoners of War*, by Ronald H. Bailey (Time-Life Books, 1981); (2) *Three Came Home*, by Agnes Newton Keith (Little, Brown, and Co., 1947).

A Japanese Internment Camp

We mustered at 7 A.M. and 7 P.M. daily in the compound. We stood at attention, numbered off in Japanese, bowed, and were dismissed. Our military style was ragged due to babes in arms and underfoot. If the guard felt wakeful, they would muster us several times throughout the night. . . .

“We picked up dirt and fruit skins and cigarette butts off the floor with our hands, while the guards threw banana skins and empty bottles at us”

Sometimes we were ordered to clean the guardhouse, while guards lay asleep or drunk on their beds. We picked up dirt and fruit skins and cigarette butts off the floor with our hands, while the guards threw banana skins and empty bottles at us. But we could usually steal enough to make it worthwhile. . . .

It was impossible to keep either our surroundings or ourselves clean on Berhala. The compound was a swampy morass from rain, with a few duckboards which sank into the mud, and a lot of children who did. . . . Here, doing very dirty work, chopping our own fuel, mending the broken barrack, working as hired men for the guards, clearing and road mending, we ceased to be the ladies of Sandakan. The mothers with children kept small campfires going to recook their food in the effort to make it more edible for the children.

Questions to Discuss

1. According to this report, what was the worst part of the prisoner-of-war camp for American prisoners?
2. What were some of the things the women in the Japanese camp had to do during the days?
3. **Formulating Questions** If you could interview a person who had been in a prisoner of war camp, what would you ask him or her to learn more about the experience? What would you ask the camp commander in a similar interview?