



## MAIL TO JAPANESE POW'S WAS ALSO DIFFICULT

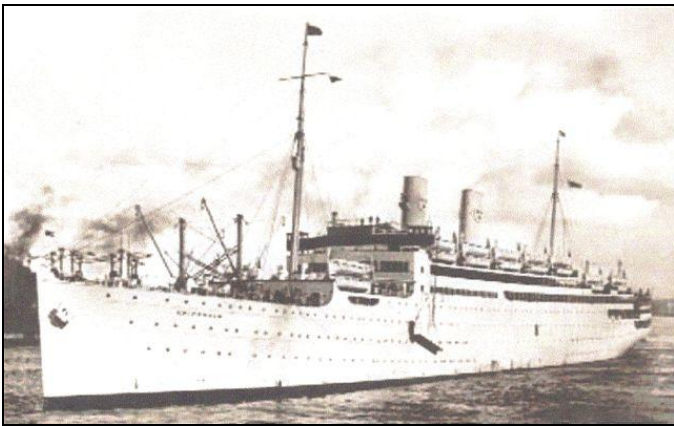
John Burnett

Last month's article focused on the difficulty Japanese POW's had in communicating to Canada and other Allied Nations.

Well, communicating with internees from Canada and the POW's of Allied countries was equally difficult.

I had mentioned in the first article that many civilians were made internees of both sides at the outbreak of the war with Japan. These included wives of servicemen stationed in the Far East, diplomats and their families, news reporters, missionaries and a number of other non combatants.

In 1942 negotiations (by the International Red Cross) finally resulted in an agreement to allow a neutral ship to carry food, medicine, clothing, mail and civilian internees to a neutral post and exchange these internees and cargo with a like group carried on a Japanese vessel.



*MS Gripsholm*, a passenger liner, pictured above, of the Swedish American Line (Sweden was a neutral country) was outfitted for the task. To identify its peaceful mission and avoid torpedoes of the belligerents, the ship carried large illuminated lettering on her side that spelled out "DIPLOMAT – GRIPSHOLM SVERIGE" and was also lit up by hundreds of light bulbs during the night.

The ship traveled without any escorts and radioed its position at regular intervals. The *Gripsholm* was guaranteed safe passage by all the warring parties.

In June 1942 relatives of POW's were told they could send mail via *Gripsholm*. A total of three sacks were put onboard marked "Montreal to Tokyo". Also onboard were approximately 1500 Japanese internees from the USA and from the ships one stop at Rio de Janeiro.

The ship sailed from New York on its first voyage June 10, 1942 and rendezvoused with ships from Japan at the Portuguese colony of Lourenco Marques, Mozambique, on July 24.

At the same time that the *Asama Maru* departed Yokohama, calling at Hong Kong, Saigon, and Singapore, another Japanese ship, the *Conte Verde*, left Shanghai and joined the *Asama Maru* at Singapore. Both of these ships arrived at Lourenco Marques July 23.

*MS Gripsholm* sailed for New York July 29 and arrived there August 25, 1942.

In the end only 650 items of mail were received from Canadian POW's and questions about whether or not the incoming three bags of mail were ever received by the POW's delayed *Gripsholm's* second sailing. The picture of the letter from Salmon Arm, British Columbia was sent to pick up the second sailing of the *Gripsholm*.

Now a true but sad story as concerns the first transfer of internees. While enroute a Japanese internee committed suicide, upon arriving at Lourenco Marques the Japanese insisted on a one for one exchange of internees. With one short because of the suicide an American Diplomat volunteered to be returned to Japan so the transfer could be completed, he was never heard from again!

I have often said if you don't understand a cover, and you can afford, buy it! This innocuous cover had strange markings I didn't understand (nor did the dealer) so I bought it and did some research. Once again I'm glad I took my own advice because this cover is scarce and valuable

