

Joy on a Dock



The heroes of Cabanatuan come home to a frenzied welcome in San Francisco

Washington issued orders that the reception was to be the "biggest thing ever"—and San Francisco was more than willing to oblige. Steaming through the Golden Gate last week, the shipload of gaunt men in ill-fitting uniforms sensed an excitement matching their own. Army and Navy bands aboard the transport struck up "California, Here I Come." Flag-decked harbor craft—one bearing a 75-foot sign with 5-foot letters spelling out "Welcome Home"—responded with a shrilling of whistles. Horns blew; fireboats played streams of water, and blimps and bombers lingered overhead.

At a two-gun naval salute, the Ferry Building's siren broke the silence it had kept since Pearl Harbor (except for air-raid alerts early in the war). To the thousands jammed near an Embarcadero pier, the sound was a signal: the Cabanatuan captives were home.

Keys to the City: Some laughed. Some wept. Some cheered. Some were suddenly speechless. Some waggishly struck heroic poses and MacArthuresquely intoned: "I have returned." In all, 275 officers and men freed by the daring Ranger raid on the Luzon prison camp (NEWSWEEK, Feb. 12) stepped on home land once again. Their three years in the disease and squalor of Jap captivity seemed thousands of miles away in space and time—and none would have it otherwise. Few cared to reminisce about their grim experience, except to vow that they would like another crack at the enemy.

Ambulances and buses took the men to Letterman General Hospital for check-up before San Francisco could turn loose on its jubilant program for a parade and welcoming ceremonies (other municipal plans for the men: free transportation in the city, passes to theaters, etc.). Among the onlookers at the giant reception were several hundred combat troops returning home under the rotation plan after three years of service overseas. Debarking from the same transport that had brought the prisoner group, the soldiers willingly stood aside.

Asked if they didn't feel that they, too, were entitled to parades and cheers, they gave a simple response: "Hell no, those guys are from Cabanatuan. We just went through hell—they lived in it."