

The Red Cross Parcels Crisis in WWII - David Gray

A Crisis in 1940-41

The POW parcel crisis of 1940–1941, occurring in the months following the fall of France (June 1940), was a critical logistical failure where the British government and the Red Cross failed to supply food and relief to tens of thousands of British soldiers captured by Germany. The crisis, primarily driven by the collapse of European transport networks and a massive underestimation of the number of prisoners, left POWs at risk of starvation during their first, most difficult winter in captivity.

Key Aspects of the 1940/41 Crisis

The rapid defeat of France resulted in an unexpectedly high number of British prisoners—rising from a few hundred to over 40,000 by late 1940—overwhelming the German army's (OKW) rudimentary planning and the British Red Cross's preparations.

The German occupation of France and the Low Countries, followed by Italy's entry into the war, shut down traditional shipping and rail routes. Parcels, which were essential to supplement meagre German rations, could not reach the camps in Germany. Attempts to send supplies through neutral Portugal and Spain failed due to blocked transport networks, lack of shipping capacity, and the immense difficulty of moving large quantities of goods through Vichy France.

Newly captured prisoners faced long marches, 400-km journeys in cattle trucks, and inadequate food. By late 1940, British prisoners were surviving on approximately two-thirds of the calories they required, with many suffering from malnutrition. Letters from prisoners detailing their hunger, sent via the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), created a public scandal in Britain, forcing the government to address the failure.

Resolution of the Crisis:



By December 1940, a solution was reached to ship parcels from Britain to Lisbon, then by smaller, ICRC-chartered vessels such as the SS Vega (*left*), and SS Embla, to the port of Marseille in unoccupied France, before transporting them by road to Geneva for distribution. To supplement the British Joint War Organisation (JWO) efforts, the Canadian Red Cross increased its production, providing 5,000 parcels a week

in early 1941, rising to 30,000 by April.

In early 1941, the British government intervened to appoint an expert in European transport (Stanley Adams) to manage the Red Cross parcel operations, which finally cleared the backlog of parcels in Lisbon by April 1941. By the summer of 1941, a steady, although not perfect, flow of parcels was established, providing a parcel-a-week to many camps and averting a catastrophe for British prisoners.

Stanley Adams was appointed managing director of the Prisoners of War Parcels Department of the British Red Cross Society in **early February 1941**. His appointment was announced by the Secretary of State for War, David Margesson, in the House of Commons on **February 4, 1941**, to address the 'parcels crisis'.

Stanley Adams was the chairman of the travel company Thomas Cook & Son, Ltd., His appointment was a response to public criticism of the British Red Cross Society (BRCS) and the need for professional, business-oriented management over what was previously considered "amateur" handling. His main job was to speed up the shipment of parcels to prisoners in Europe, particularly through Lisbon. The Red Cross's managerial competence regarding Prisoners of War relief, had been heavily criticized in the press and Parliament. By February 21, 1941, he was documented in his role as director, overseeing the preparation of thousands of parcels for British prisoners of war and establishing a reserve of 300,000 packages to ensure a smooth flow of aid.

In February 1941, this report appeared in the British press:

'HIS OFFER TO THE WAR OFFICE – MR. ADAMS, HEAD OF THOMAS COOK



New steps to see that parcels for British prisoners of war in Germany are satisfactorily dealt with were announced in the Commons today by Captain David Margesson (War Secretary). Mr. Stanley Adams (*left*), Chairman of Thomas Cook and Sons, has given his services without remuneration as managing director for the Parcels Department of the British Red Cross Society.

Captain Margesson, announcing that Field Marshal Sir Phillip Chetwode had told him of this appointment, added that Mr. Adams was a most experienced administrator and had an unrivalled knowledge of European transport problems.

Government Anxious

"I would like to assure the House that the War Office and the British Red Cross Society are ready and anxious at all times to consider with the utmost sympathy any suggestions designed to promote the welfare of our prisoners of war, whether they come from members of the public or from this House," said Captain Margesson.

"From my own personal observation, I am satisfied that the British Red Cross Society is doing everything possible. The Society has a very difficult task to perform, and has from time to time come in for criticism, in my view, often unmerited."

'Staffed by Amateurs'

Mr. G. M. Garro-Jones (Lab, Aberdeen North): "The public complaint is that the department has been staffed by amateurs who have no knowledge of affairs. Is not this feeling confirmed by the very late appointment of a business man?"

Captain Margesson: "Sir Phillip Chetwoded, by this appointment, has shown that he is conscious of the value of professional help as opposed to amateur help, although that is very valuable."

Belated Move

The appointment of a leading business man of international repute to control the British Red Cross parcel's department is a belated attempt by the War Office and all other Government departments concerned to bring to an end the months-long muddle which has characterised the transmission of food and clothing to the 44,000 British prisoners of war in Germany.

Every prisoner of war is supposed to receive a weekly parcel of food from England. Few have done so hitherto. The War Office and the British Red Cross have blamed transport delays between Lisbon and Switzerland for the breakdown.

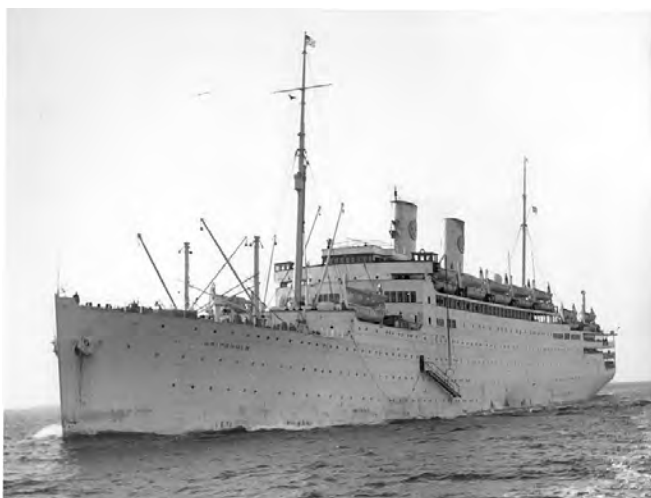
Ships Chartered

Recently efforts have been made to relieve the congestion at Lisbon by chartering several small ships to take parcels to Marseilles by sea. Mr. Adams, who is 47, has been chairman of Thomas Cook and Son since 1938. He is also a director of the Midland Bank and a number of other industrial and financial undertakings. As a director of the International Sleeping Car Company for many years he has an unrivalled knowledge of Continental transport facilities.'

Another Crisis in 1942

There was another POW parcel crisis in 1942, created by the severe disruption of Red Cross aid shipments, particularly to the Far East, following Japan's decision in August 1942 to ban neutral ships from entering Japanese waters. This, combined with the rapid fall of Singapore in February 1942, led to massive stockpiles of food and medical supplies being held in neutral ports (such as Vladivostok) while Allied prisoners of war faced widespread starvation and disease.

Key Aspects of the 1942 Crisis:



In August 1942, the Japanese government announced that no neutral ships, including those carrying International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) relief, would be allowed to enter Japanese-controlled waters. This effectively cut off vital food, medicine, and vitamins for tens of thousands of Allied POWs captured earlier that year during the fall of Singapore and the Philippines. Relief parcels intended for these prisoners were diverted and stockpiled in locations like Vladivostok and various warehouses, to be forwarded on later in the war.

A single neutral Swedish vessel, the **MS Gripsholm** (above), was eventually permitted to deliver a limited shipment of 20,000 parcels in 1942, but Japan refused to allow any subsequent voyages.

Most Allied POWs depended on Red Cross parcels to supplement meagre Axis rations, which were often below starvation levels. Due to the 1942 supply shortages, it became common for two or even four prisoners to share a single parcel. When parcels did arrive, items like cigarettes and chocolate became a "camp currency" used to bribe guards or barter for extra food.

While the Red Cross and Allied organizations continued to pack over 163,000 parcels per week in Europe, the 1942 restrictions in the Pacific created a "starving time" scenario for Allied POWs. To manage the scarcity, POW camps developed organized systems to share the contents of the limited parcels, ensuring that every prisoner received a portion. While these measures helped alleviate the crisis, logistical difficulties in delivering parcels persisted throughout the war, particularly in the Far East, where many prisoners only received a fraction of the intended supplies.