BLACK PRISONERS AND THEIR CHAINS

Neck System Claimed To Be More Humanitarian

Tommy, a police tracker, demonstrates the neck chain.

By Our Special Correspondent

DARWIN Thursday.

AMONG the men on the job—that splendid body of mounted police who daily risk their lives in patrols in Northern Territory districts, where all whites are still regarded by the wild blacks as their natural enemies, there is only one opinion on the question of handcuffs or chains for native prisoners.

After having given handcuffs a fair trial the troopers unanimously favor reverting to neck chains. Their reasons seem unchallengeable, both from the points of view of humanitarianism and efficiency. Territory people were glad to hear that the ban on neck chains might be reconsidered at Canberra.

Since the outcry in southern capitals against chains and the edict by the Minister for the Interior (Mr Perkins), prohibiting their use the patrolling police have had a sorry record.

Thirteen aboriginal prisoners, captured after months of hard chasing and at great personal risk by the police, have escaped while being escorted to Darwin. Five of them are still at large. All got away while handcuffed by the special manacles with a two-foot chain between each wrist clip, issued to the police when the chains were withdrawn from service.

To these 13 escapees may be added the notorious Nemarluck who, but for the ban, would have been chained to his fellow-prisoners in the fatigue gang when he dashed to freedom outside the gates of Fanny Bay gaol last September. Before the ban on chains, escapes of aborigines were practically unknown.

Although Nemarluck is behind gaol walls once more his escape and long defiance of the police cost them much time and trouble and often involved danger.

WHEN chains were banned the only method the police had of securing their prisoners was by ordinary handcuffs, which pinioned the natives wrists close together. A few weeks' experience showed that this method was shockingly inhuman. Instead of covering the miles to Darwin on foot with their police escort in their normal free swinging stride, the natives were forced to walk with arms taut and their shoulders hunched forward.

This unnatural movement quickly tired them, and they became exhausted after a few miles. They suffered agonies with their feet through the disturbance of their natural body balance. At nights the natives, accustomed to sleep face downward with legs and arms sprawled wide, got little rest even when the handcuffs were taken from their wrists and clipped round their ankles.

On the march they could not brush away the flies and myriads of biting insects that swarm everywhere in the north, nor could they protect themselves properly from saw-edged grasses and branches in their path.

While his prisoners were fresh the policeman could not relax his vigilance for a moment, day or night, for fear they would break for freedom. This meant sleeping within touch of them at night—if he could get to sleep at all—or if he had his regulation two trackers with him, taking a three-hour shift at mounting guard, waking at intervals during his term for a spell to make sure that the tracker on guard was awake, too.

With sore-footed prisoners his anxious journeys back to civilisation out of hostile country often took two and three times as long as they should have.

Tommy, posing with the new chain handcuff

Tommy with ordinary handcuffs, which have been discarded.

WHEN the chain handcuffs, in use now, were introduced to overcome the hardships the ordinary handcuffs inflicted. These are ideal (from the natives' point of view, for, with the long light chain, they can swing their arms or brush away flies while walking, and sleep without discomfort.

Life for the patrolling policeman with a few prisoners handcuffed in this way is one long nightmare. Every minute of the night and day he has to pit his wits against the cunning of the prisoners watching a chance to escape. How nerve-racking such an experience can be may be gauged from the experience of a policeman who recently lost two stone in weight through anxiety and lack of sleep on a six weeks' trip to Darwin with prisoners.

"It was the worst experience I have had," he said. "I spent months chasing these blacks and when I finally got them the only thought in my mind for six weeks was, 'How can I keep them?' Every mile of the way in I could see their eyes flitting from me to the bush on each side of the track and then back to me. They were just waiting for me to take my eyes off them so that they could make a break. I simply could not sleep at night. Every time I dozed I would wake with a start and listen and concentrate on listening with such intensity that I could not doze off again.

"On my previous trip I lost a bunch of prisoners after getting them 200 miles, and was fined for neglect of duty. They slipped away while I was within a few yards of them bending my head over a stream for a wash—the only wash I had dared allow myself for days.

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I SUPPOSE that experience preyed on my mind, for, though I slept among them and chained them with the handcuffs to each others' legs or to saplings, I often woke with a fright six or eight times a night after a dream that they had gone, and go up to count them all by torchlight to reassure myself it was only a dream. Scores of times I heard them feeling round for a stone to break the chains when they thought I was asleep.

I would rather risk a dozen trips into bad country than go through an experience like that again. The tension told on me so much that when I got back to Darwin I was shaky with 'nerves.' Even though my prisoners were safe in Fanny Bay gaol I could not sleep well for three weeks after I arrived. I still kept waking up and jumping out of bed to count them, thinking I was back on the track with them."

Since the fining of the constable, who lost the five prisoners, other Northern Territory police have adopted the practice of handcuffing all their prisoners together to minimise risk of escape. This means that the prisoners' plight is very little better than it was when their wrists were pinioned. When more than two are coupled with the long chain handcuffs they cannot follow in single file along the narrow pads or tracks, and are forced to walk abreast over the hard and stony ground at the sides of the pads. On rough going they become footsore very quickly, and if forced marches are imperative to get clear of hostile tribes the prisoners may have to walk miles with bleeding feet.

The only solution to the problem of marching prisoners in comfort and without risk of escape is the chain, the police maintain.

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WHEN chaining was permitted the practice was to allow each prisoner about eight feet of chain, which gave him plenty of room to walk in comfort. The chain was looped round the neck of each man and a padlock snapped between two links in such a position that the chain was not tight, yet could not be passed over the aborigine's head. This method allowed each man to adopt a normal walk, protect himself from flies and obstructions, and permitted all to follow a pad in single file.

At night the prisoners could sleep in normal postures and be secured by padlocking one end of the chain around a tree, giving their guardian policeman a chance to rest, too.

Experienced policemen state that natives prefer the chain because of its comfort in travelling and grumble and fret when they are handcuffed together at night or on the march.

But the point which rankles deepest with the men of the "mounted" was summed up in one sentence by one of them recently. "As long as we are not allowed to chain our prisoners we cannot help thinking that our work and our lives are counted as less value than the dignity of a renegade black murderer," he said.