SASKATOON,
SASKATCHEWAN,
CANADA,

TO

ALDERSHOT,
ENGLAND.

As told by
TAYLOR C. KNIGHT
or
PTE. J. H. SNIDER, No. L-1489,
"B" Coy. Saskatoon Light Infantry.

THAT the following composition, if you can call it that, is an inspiration to create some fine piece of literary Art, is not so. Neither is it an attempt, as a result of an idea of my own to commercialize on one of my experiences. On the contrary, it is born only of an attempt to fulfil a request of an English nurse at the Connaught Hospital, Aldershot, where, at the moment of writing, I am a patient, having fallen a victim of the "Flu." The particular nurse whose desire it is that I should make this attempt, is a member of the V.A.D. in London, and being a very attentive and kindly warden (in her capacity) there is no reason why I should not put forth this humble effort to fulfil a desire of hers in partial repayment of the kindness shown me at the hands of these English Sisters in this Military Hospital. The fact that I possess no definitely recorded data on our journey from Canada to England shall be responsible for any vagueness of detail that may occur in the construction of this manuscript. However, rest assured that I shall do my best, to the utmost of my knowledge and ability, to acquaint any and all who may chance to read, with the fascinating experiences of our journey from Canada to England.

BEING a member of the Saskatoon Light Infantry, from Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, that province which is the hub of Canada's mighty Prairie Empire, I shall seek to illustrate the journey from the view point of the S.L.I., as it was with that Battalion that I travelled the long distance across all of a Continent and thence over the broad Atlantic to Great Britain.

I shall begin at 2 p.m. on the afternoon of December 4th, 1939. At that moment a warm sun was bathing in its glory the snowless expanses of Saskatchewan's prairies, a very uncommon climatic condition for this section of Canada at this particular time of year. Usually, even in November, and as early as the latter days of October, the Prairie Provinces are tucked away for the winter months in a great white blanket of snow; a domain over which the great ice-king, Jack Frost, rules by divine right for the five or six months to follow.

As I have said, it was 2 p.m. At this particular moment the troops who were to perform the cargo for Canadian Pacific Railways Troop Train No. 1 across Canada were marching full pack on to the Station platform in Saskatoon. A few moments later, in single file, they were boarding their respective coaches of the train under the direction of Officers and N.C.O.'s in charge, while city and railway police fought to hold back the crowds of civilians who had gathered *en masse* to bid a last farewell and godspeed to the departing soldiers. Once inside their coaches, and in their seats, the soldiers sought to open coach windows and talk with friends and relatives who now swarmed along the train's side. Alas, here was the first mistake of Canadian officials in the transportation of their troops. The outside windows of C.P.R. Troop Train No. 1 were securely fastened down and could not be opened. Were these soldiers to be denied a last word with beloved ones, whom many may never return to see again? Were the tear-stained cheeks of these mothers, daughters, sisters, and sweethearts outside never again to feel the parting kiss of those so near and dear to them? Even in these last few fleeting moments before the dreadful departure were they to be denied this privilege? Were there men in the ranks of officialdom who were cold-hearted, ignorant, and inconsiderate enough to think this maniacal procedure to be tolerated? If there were, I can say only as did Puck—"What fools these mortals be."

Here we were, Canadians born and raised in a land of peace and liberty, staking our lives to fight against just such inhuman aggression as we found ourselves even then behind the sealed glass panels of our train. This thing could not be.

Outside, men cursed and grumbled; women, tears flowing from startled eyes, wrung their hands in pitiful and frantic despair. Inside, a great resentment arose in the hearts of the soldiers. In one seat, presently, a young Private drew back a tensed arm—crash! His elbow splintered a window, broken glass tinkled on the platform. Relatives pressed eagerly toward the broken window, where now a couple of soldiers pushed out head and shoulders to shake hands and wave good-bye.

The breaking of that first glass barrier marked the beginning of a fad which was immediately adopted by others, and became instantaniously popular. By now, like the beating of notes on the keys of a xylophone all the way down the length of the train, uniformed elbows, and feet clad in army boots, were crashing through glass to promote contact with smiling crowds of well-wishers outside.

After a few moments of hand-shaking, farewells and parting caresses, the toot-toot of a C.P.R. engine's highball broke the din of shouting and parting farewells.

That mighty monster of steel ahead was ready to begin her trek across a nation with her share of the first Canadian contingent for overseas. A couple of forceful blasts from the smokestack of that giant-like iron horse, sent her little pony trucks out in front, slowly nosing their way out over the long ribbon of steel ahead for the great Atlantic seaboard, as her big driver spun on sanded steel, then hit the rails. We were on our way! The first lap of our long journey had begun. The crowd hurried along the side of the train until its gathering speed became too fast for human pace. As we sped on through the city and its outskirts, hundreds of school children lined the railroad right-of-way, gleefully waving and cheering our cause. Saskatoon had certainly done its duty in "seeing us off."

We were away! Ahead of us lay the open prairies of Saskatchewan and Manitoba, the hills and dales of the Riding mountains, the thousand and more miles of Northern Ontario's great outdoors, rocks and mountains, virgin forests, lakes and streams, the French settlements of old Quebec, the wooded slopes of New Brunswick, the rich and fertile valleys of Nova Scotia (Queen of the Maritime), and finally Halifax and the Atlantic Ocean. All of this ahead of us—behind us, treasured memories of our native land.

At small Stations within the remainder of the afternoon's passing, small crowds had gathered from the rural communities for miles around to witness the beginning of this troop move-to the East. The lonely prairielands had coughed up their inhabitants in little groups all along the line to see these soldiers's specials—Trans-Continental Fliers—and to show their appreciation of the response to the call, and to cheer these soldiers on their way.

By the following morning at 8 a.m. we had crossed the Manitoba prairies and the Riding mountains and arrived in Winnipeg, capital city of its province, the gateway to the Golden West, and the farthest inland capital city in the British Empire.

Winnipeg was quiet. No greeting awaited us here. Our movement across the country was enveloped in as much of a shroud of secrecy as was humanly possible. Authorities had seen to this. It was a measure of precaution taken to safeguard troops against the possibilities of Nazi circles inside Canada attempting to disturb the movement. Consequently no one (except in exceptions to the rule) was aware of the fact that movement of troops had begun. Even we, ourselves, did not know definitely whither we were bound. Therefore there was little of reception from this point onward, except in odd cases where, apparently, news had "leaked out."

At 2.30 p.m. in the afternoon we had arrived at Kenora, Ontario, at the head of "The Lake of the Woods." Apparently from some source of information many of the people in Kenora were aware of our coming, as there were hundreds lining the Station platform to greet us. The spirit of the people of this important railroad and tourist centre might well be mentioned, as they showered us with candy, cigarettes and fruits. As we were leaving Kenora there was shouted to our ears the phrase that touched our hearts perhaps more than any other spoken throughout the course of our journey, and it came from the lips of a child. Fired with a keen feeling of patriotism I guess, she ran along our train as it left Kenora, shouting: "Soldiers! Soldiers! Save our Country."

The next town of any size we passed through was Dryden, at approximately 4 p.m., which I must at least mention, in view of the fact it is the home town of the writer. A few stations west of Dryden, where our train stopped, I had the pleasure of my father, mother, sister and two cousins meeting me. This I think I well can count from my personal point of view the highlight of my journey.

By the evening of December 5th we were in Fort William and Port Arthur, twin cities at the head of Lake Superior, which is the inner terminal lake of the Great Lakes Waterways, the greatest inland waterways system in the world. Throughout the night and following day, on we sped, still in

the rockbound vastness of Northern Ontario, rich in minerals, furs and game, studded with tens of thousands of fresh-water lakes and swift currented rivers.

By 8 p.m. the next evening we were at North Bay (still Northern Ontario). The city, an important railway centre, is the nearest city of importance to the woodland home and birthplace of the world-famed Dionne Quintuplets.

Next morning, at dawn, we were in Canada's oldest and largest city, Montreal. Situated on the fertile banks of the mighty St. Lawrence River, Montreal is a city rich in historical interests, a thriving and important inland sea-port, sprung from the little colony of Mount Royal, where, decades ago, Jacques Cartier raised the Fler-de-les and Cross.

It might be well to mention here, that not far along the river from Montreal stands the city of Quebec, capital of Quebec Province. Quebec, too, stands on the St. Lawrence shore, against a background formed by the plains of Abraham, upon which stand together the monuments of the British General Wolfe and the French Montcalm, twin symbols of two great and worthy pioneers of the North American Continent, whose memories are well worthy of everlasting life. Our course did not take us through the city, but more or less through its outlying suburbs.

Very early the next morning we passed through Moncton, the capital city of New Brunswick, and by 9 a.m. were enjoying the exercise and fresh air of a short route march in Truro, Nova Scotia. Only a short run from Truro, and we were at Halifax, the Dominion's leading port on the Atlantic coast. By noon our entire trainload of men were aboard the S.S. "Duchess of Bedford," lying at anchor in Halifax Harbour.

We now had crossed a continent—a mighty ocean stretched ahead, an ocean in whose depths, perhaps, lurked death and destruction in the form of German submarines. We were soon to learn, however, that Great Britain had most certainly done everything in her power to preserve our safety on the seas, and to ensure our safe arrival on her shores.

After spending some time in the harbour, awaiting developments in the formation of the great convoy, at 2 p.m. on Sunday afternoon we put to sea. A few moments before the tugs came alongside to take us out into the harbour, five of England's fast Destroyers streaked out across the Bay. In their wake we followed out to the mouth of the harbour to take up our respective position in the great and impregnable convoy.

Out at that harbour's mouth there were ships—and more ships—Destroyers to left, to right, in front of, and behind us. The troopships, which in this particular convoy were "The Empress of Britain," "The Empress of Australia," "The Aquatania," "The Monarch of Bermuda," and "The Duchess of Bedford," formed the nucleus of that huge wheel of ocean vessel which was our briny escort.

Directly in front of that nucleus formed of troopships was the flag-ship, the leader or "big-shot" ship of the fleet, H.M.S. "Resolution." From this mighty man-of-war all others took their orders. To her they looked for signalled guidance. She was our vital spark of life; she was our guardian angel, the core around which the rest of the ships danced the "big apple" across the broad expanses of the Atlantic's briny depths. The big guns on her decks were ever ready to defend a leader's rights. The smaller and faster destroyers all around us were ready, anxious-by-ready to question the intention with deadly cross-examination of all and any who might seek to intrude upon our safety or stand in our path. Besides this, there was an aircraft-carrier, and, according to hearsay, submarines scanning the depths miles ahead of us. This was the huge group of ships which, that Sunday afternoon outside Halifax harbour, fell into position and pointed their noses toward the friendly shores of Great Britain.

This was a symbol of Britain's might upon the waters, significant of her supremacy on the seas, and when one realises that all this was only a drop in the bucket in comparison with the sea power she actually possesses on the far flung waters of the oceans of the world, one can readily realize why Britons are so proud of their country's might and power on the High Seas.

Of our journey across the ocean I cannot go into detail, for, as I have said before, I have no dated recordings. However, I shall attempt for the reader's benefit some of what may be termed the more outstanding events and incidents of the journey.

To begin with, we were a total of seven days crossing the "pond." Which days the following occurred I cannot definitely state, but for one night and two days we sailed continually through a dense fog. Visibility was very poor, one could not see the length of a ship, consequently all the other ships of the convoy were not visible to us, but nevertheless they were there like faithful phantom watchdogs of the mist, constantly watching over their charges.

During this fog, on one occasion, two ships ran into each other. I am not, however, in a position to give full particulars regarding this incident. Any views of the accident expressed here are purely deductions of rumours and hearsay surrounding the occurrence. It appears this mishap occurred around 1 a.m. in this heavy and eerie fog, somewhere in Mid-Atlantic. The inky blackness of the night, combined with the fog, and considering the time, which one must admit is somewhat of an ideal hour for murder (wholesale or individual), I do not wonder at the confessions of a fellow comrade I was talking to concerning the event later, and who had been on watch at the time, that for an instant he was sure that some mighty enemy sea-monster of the night was upon us, and with evil intentions in its mind. He said he was about ready to become an eleventh hour repenter, which is the fate of too many of us. He was very much relieved, I understand, when he could feel no immediate sinking sensation in the pit of the stomach, and did surely heave a deep and sincere sigh of relief when informed of the nature of the commotion.

There was a rumour that the ship which struck the Aquatania of our convoy was an unknown vessel, and still others that it was a ship of our own group, so I can say nothing in regard to the night prowlers identity.

When this extended fog finally lifted it was wonderful to see all those twenty or more ships all still in perfect formation and proper position, especially so in view of the fact all ships were under complete black-out restrictions by night. Only a short whistle blast or a few flashes of code, throughout the duration of the fog, kept all these Crusaders of the Sea gathered around that vital care of the mighty wheel, H.M.S. "Resolution."

I said all the ships, but there were two missing, and the rumours that surrounded the disappearance of these vessels would fill a book, and if one attempted to believe half of them, one would end up wondering whether or not he himself were on a ship and who was lost.

The missing ships were the troopship Empress of Australia and a Destroyer, and according to the preposterous rumours that spread like wildfire—they had sunk, they had struck a mine, they were lost in the fog, they had gone back to Halifax, they had gone ahead to England, they had engine trouble, they had changed position and were still in the convoy somewhere. These flimsy suspected fates in the realm of rumour spread fast, and went on in endless numbers until you felt like shrieking at the one who voiced the news of a new theory of rumour. A couple of days off Great Britain's coast, and these lost vessels were with us again one morning, and sailing serenely along in their old positions. Where they came from, and where they were in absence, I do not know, and no one else I believe, with the exception of ship officials.

There is, perhaps, little more to relate in connection with incidents of outstanding importance during our journey, except for the fact that always, throughout the entire distance, we were under the thrill of being thus escorted. The great pains that were taken to ensure our safety, and the effort put forth to transport us thus is certainly worthy of sincere praise.

We were fortunate in encountering no rough seas throughout the journey, therefore there was little of sea-sickness. For the sake of those who would have been sufferers of this ailment I am glad the sea was smooth; however, for the sake of relating amusing experiences, it may have made possible the telling of some agonizing tales concerning the unfortunates in this regard.

I might, perhaps, conclude the relating of the ocean voyage by making what I know will be a feeble and unsuccessful attempt at conveying to you the beauty of Scotland and her heather clad hills, which was the first sight after our ocean voyage that met our eyes. I shall attempt (I know unsuccessfully) to explain to you how the first sight of it all, when I came on deck at dawn to witness this sceneic beauty for the first time, struck me.

Coming from below, up on deck, just after the darkness of night had blended away into the face of daybreak, was to have come from a dungeon of darkness into a brightness and warmth of a world of enchantment. As I stood on the deck and gazed as one spellbound at this grandeur before me, I seemed to have drifted into the stratosphere, to stand close on the brink of the haunts of God, as the soothing rise and fall of the ship on the swell of a lazy sea carried me still further into this paragoric hypnotism in this strange and heavenly environment. Here was beauty flung before me like some gigantic canvas on whose area some super-genius of Art had painted the masterpiece of his works. Often had I heard of Scotland's pride in her hills of heather, but until that morning, when first I saw her shores from the deck of a ship that rocked as the lilt of a lullaby in the cradle of the deep, and in the light of a virgin dawn, never had I realised what a sight they really were. Standing, enchanted in this spell, the thoughts of two geniuses filled my mind—God, genius of all creatures; and Bobbie Burns, genius of all poetical composition, Scotland's national poet. Little wonder that Burns was a famous poet, with a native land like

this. Who, with a talent such as was his, could have turned a deaf ear on this land in its plea for the expression of its splendour in verse.

All along the Clyde, where Scottish homes nestled cosily in the hills, women waved aprons from windows, men shouted greetings from the streets, and children ran along the shores cheering the khaki-clad "Kanucks," while we returned the greetings from the ships, where we had climbed masts, stood in lifeboats, lined the deck railings, or clung to any obstacle of advantage that would promote an unobstructed view of Scotland and her hills. Thus the great ocean convoy languidly drifted up the Clyde.

At Greenock the Aquatania, Empress of Australia, Empress of Britain and Monarch of Bermuda anchored while the Duchess of Bedford continued on to Glasgow.

After anchoring overnight in the harbour of Glasgow we once again entrained. This time on the London & North-Eastern Railway, and some 24 hours later we were at our destination in the Aldershot Command, where, at the time of writing, you still will find in the various barracks thereabouts the First Canadian Division Overseas.

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