

A LETTER FROM OVERSEAS

Italy, Jan. 8, 1944.

It is a miserable October day with cold, driving rain and a bitter, penetrating wind. Low, driving clouds hasten the short day to an early close as we enter a new and strange camp area somewhere in southern England. We meet some officers of the camp and are shown an area allotted to the new battalion about to concentrate. It is a restless night, fraught with suspense, uncertainty, and a fair amount of anxiety, as we ponder on the work ahead. Here are all the elements of drama—a new formation, strange officers, new men, an unknown assignment, a mysterious destination, and the urgency of speed, for we are given but a few short days to muster a full battalion. We are proceeding overseas—Where? How?

The morning dawns clear and bright. We meet the officers of this huge staging camp and are gratified beyond measure to know that every facility they can produce is at our disposal. The splendid cooperation of fellow-Canadian officers cheers and heartens us in the responsibilities so suddenly thrust upon us.

Our own battalion officers begin to arrive. Introductions are made and there begins a series of remarkable friendships, forged in the haste and hurry of the crowded days ahead. Our men pour in, offices are set up, enrolment and the checking of documents begin. Medical and dental officers are working twenty-four hours a day. Equipment is checked; kits are weighed, packed, and labelled; boxes are packed and stamped. Finally we are ready. Transport arrives and in the short space of five days we are entrained and on our way. Crowded into compartments, we get no chance to sleep and finally in broad daylight we arrive at a famous English port. We are drawn up on the quay, each laden with full equipment and ready for the real journey by sea. The huge ship towers above the wharf, and up the steeply sloping gang plank there is a constant stream of hurrying officials, racing against time, for this ship must keep her appointed rendezvous with others similarly laden. As we look up the steel grey sides we see the gun crews busily cleaning

and servicing their charges as they prepare for future eventualities. Where is this proud liner to carry us? What are our adventures to be? How long shall we, who have roamed for three years or more the green fields and rolling downs of England, be cooped up in this confined space? Our turn comes and we struggle up the gang plank under the burden of full packs and extra luggage. We are assigned space aboard, and amidst a welter of kits and men, we find a strange orderliness about the great ship. Within a few hours all are aboard, all luggage is stored, the hatches are battened down, and amid the hooting of tiny, fussing tugs, our ship moves slowly out to sea. Our voyage has begun.

This is an American ship. Hers is a polyglot crew, drawn from all corners of the allied world—from Ceylon, Siam, Philippine Islands, etc. Men from Cuba and Argentina mingle with the soft spoken citizens of Georgia and nasal voiced youths from the United States. The troops are Canadian and many services are represented—doctors, nursing sisters, dentists, engineers, men from all walks of life, all in khaki, all linked by one common bond.

We meet the swell of the Irish Sea and many are missing from meals, the air is cold and biting, and a low fog often obscures the other ships in our mighty convoy. Sleek destroyers, grayhounds of the sea, knife through the water as they dart and turn like busy sheep dogs guarding their flock. Overhead is the drone of escorting planes, and here and there one sees the great cruisers proudly showing a broad white wake as they majestically move along with all the proud assurance of the Royal Navy. We study them and our sister ships through our binoculars reading here and there strange names—Dutch ships keeping in line with American ships, French ships following in the wake of British ships—beautiful liners, not on a pleasure cruise, for this is a wartime convoy.

We head north and soon the bite of the Atlantic wind is on our faces, while the cold, driving spray lashes relentlessly as the mighty ships heave and roll. A day or two and we have found our sea-legs, appetites are restored, and full justice is done to the overwhelming supply of almost forgotten American cooking—eggs, steak, pie, all become commonplace, and we are even able to consider calmly a dish of real ice-cream!

We swing south, the weather warms up, and summer drill appears on deck. Although we shed much of our clothing, we are never without, day or night, eating or sleeping, our Mae West life jackets. We have many drills with them so that the wearing of them soon becomes automatic. There is much speculation as to our destination, and bets are laid between the men for different places—North Africa, Sicily, Italy, etc.

Early one afternoon we sight land and soon the majestic Rock of Gibraltar is plainly seen. We approach the Strait in the early evening and behold Gibraltar in all its strength and splendor. Spanish towns to the north are ablaze with light. It is strange to see such a display for many of us have forgotten peacetime illumination.

More destroyers, more escort ships, a re-shuffling of the convoy, and we continue in several lines of ships under the eagle eyes of the Royal Navy. We study the shore of North Africa through our binoculars, and note the barren ranges of hills that hug the shore for miles. The sun shines, the air is warm, and the dark blue waters of the Mediterranean sparkle in the reflection of the bright blue sky. At night the moon, so bright that one can read by its light, rides high in a cloud flecked sky. The phosphorescent waves churned up by our ship, slip quietly by and no sound save an occasional splash breaks the stillness.

The next day goes by with its routine of meals, drills, exercises, sun bathing, and a bit of quiet reading. Traveling with the C. O., we occupy a suite of rooms and are served with all the luxury of a peacetime pleasure cruise.

It is evening of the second day out of Gibraltar, and we are seated in the dining hall partaking of a meal such as we dreamed of in England. I had just finished my dessert of apple pie and cheese, when the alarm rang. Enemy aircraft approaching! A few seconds later the sound of A. A. fire can be heard from many of the ships. I went up on the after deck. Darkness had fallen, and the moon, partly obscured by clouds, did not give sufficient light to spot the enemy planes until they were right atop. The lurid tracers, red and orange, splash the sky with vivid colours, while the sharp rattle of Oerlikons mingles with the soft cough of Bofors and the deep roar of the

heavy calibres. Two of the Jerries are hit and fall in flames a short distance from our ship. They burn fiercely for long minutes on the surface of the water.

Black smoke is pouring from a ship nearby and we know that she must have received a direct hit. We are ordered to our action stations, mine being the well of "A" deck, where I stood talking to the chief steward. Suddenly every gun on our ship opened up and turning to the Steward I said, "This is our turn." Suddenly there is a terrific lurch, the ship heels over and then slowly and partially recovers. Two more terrific shocks and the ship stops, the lights go out, and the alarm system screams for lifeboat stations. Snatching a few small articles from my cabin, I go swiftly to my appointed place. The attack is over and we await orders "Abandon Ship!" The nurses are put aboard the lifeboats and lowered to the water. There is not a sound, not a word from these brave Canadian girls, as their boats slide drunkenly to the heaving water below. Rafts are cut adrift, scramble nets are lowered, and the troops take to the water, each man for himself, swimming to the rafts and boats. In the meantime a destroyer comes up and puts off some boats; a sister transport edges slowly in among the bobbing heads, picking up survivors.

Officers are busy organizing the men into groups to swim to certain boats. Finally all are off, the ship abandoned! The water is warm, and luckily the wind has died down so that, despite the swell, it is not too difficult to make one's way to the bobbing rafts.

At last we reach the side of the rescue ship, and now begins the long climb up the rope ladders—it seems endless miles!

On this ship are many of our friends from old units. We are given a royal welcome, wet clothing is shed, and a nondescript mixture of garments is supplied. Steaming cups of coffee, a cigarette, dry clothing, raise our spirits again.

We put in to a nearby port, and after a few days resume our trip. Finally we arrive in Naples, and are then sent to a camp for outfitting—with just the bare necessities. Empty tins as coffee mugs, wooden spoons,

clasp knives, make us ready for the meal line-up.

There was not a single loss on the whole trip. Everyone is glad the experience is over, but they wouldn't sell it for anything. There are many amusing stories told of what happened that memorable night. For instance—There are three fellows on the scramble net, one of whom is afraid to take the plunge into the dark, forbidding water. He is urged to jump by his two friends. "Let's go all together, we'll help you," they said. So they jump and bob up to the surface, upheld by their Mae West life-jackets. Said the one who couldn't swim—naturally expecting help from his two companions who had urged him in—"How do you swim?" "We don't know," replied the others, "We never swam before in our lives!" So the stories go with lots of laughs over the amusing happenings.

So this story ends. Your prayers saved me, I am sure, for a few moments after I left the deck, a bomb exploded a few feet away, and blew the rear gun sky-high.

This then is a brief description of our terrible adventure.

The above is taken from a letter written by Major L. F. Macdonald to his family in Charlottetown. Major Macdonald was graduated from St. Dunstan's in 1920 and before joining the active army was Principal of Queen Square School, Charlottetown. We are very grateful for the permission to publish this letter as it is the first real descriptive account of any personal experiences of the battle zone that we have received.

Editor of RED and WHITE