

Some Hard Fights in the Wilderness

By Aubrey Fullerton

SINCE the war began there has been a perceptible slackening in adventure stories from the Canadian West. Usually the West is full of thrills made within its own borders, but for more than a year and a half now, like all the rest of the Empire, it has been thrilling with war-talk. Tales of strange escapades, exciting deeds, and narrow escapes in its own wilderness places have been largely lacking, and after a time one notices it. The biggest adventure in the West and Western North in the past year or two was that of Vilhjalmar Stefansson, away up in the Arctic, and that, indeed, made a story good enough to put beside the war news when it came down from the North last fall.

It is not that things haven't happened. Survey parties, prospectors, mounted police and random adventurers have had much the same experiences as usual, and have found the wilderness to be as thrill-producing as ever it was. Nevertheless, the stories have not got out. It may be because, as a result of the war, there has not been as much work done in the wilds as in former years; or it may be that the men who have been there do not consider their feats worthy of talking about in war-time; but the fact

Anderson, and the five Eskimos with them had nothing to eat but skins and snowshoe thongs. For three weeks at a stretch, while on the Arctic coast East of Mackenzie river, they lived on a diet of deerskin, which the Eskimos varied a little by eating up the whole collection of zoological specimens. To the dangers of food shortage was added that of sickness, Dr. Anderson and two of the men developing pneumonia. So great were the extremities to which the party was reduced that even the dogs gave out, and ten of them died. For real suffering and anxiety it is unlikely that his present party in the still further North has had many, if any, harder times than those which Stefansson went through in the winter of 1910. He learned a lesson then for all sojourns in Arctic parts.

To run short of food is the great disaster of the wilderness, where one must eat if he would live. Not even at the war-front is an adequate commissariat more important, and for lack of it many have come to grief. All other mishaps in the wilds seem more or less closely connected with the food question.

When the Grand Trunk Pacific was building through British Columbia, in the spring of 1913, five men left one of

through a failure of their periodic supplies. They were working near Fort St. John, and supplies came from Edmonton by steamer and pack-horse. The Peace River boat missed a trip for some reason, and the provisions in camp were reduced to only oatmeal and rice, which forty men fed upon, in pasty cakes, till they were sick of it. With such poor nourishment they could not work, although there were twenty-one hours of light every day.

After some distressful days, during which several of the men fell ill, a promise of relief came in the arrival of the first pack-load from the belated steamer. The load was quickly opened up, and was found to consist of nothing but soap and baking-powder. When the second horse came a little later, it carried lard on one side and candles on the other, and the ravenously hungry men were inclined to lynch the Indian drivers for practical jokers. A third load came, and the first half of it opened up as matches—enough of them to last a year. It began to look as though there was nothing to eat in the whole lot. But the rest of that load and the whole of the two remaining loads proved to be good food-stuff, and the situation was saved.

Vernon Brewster, a prospector in Alaska, went through an experience of the kind that tests a man's endurance



A Battalion of Senegalese Tirailleurs assembling at arms. These strange fighters have been a great help to the Allies campaigns

remains that there is a comparative dearth of new, home-grown adventure stories of the kind that the West likes to pass around.

So it is that when Western folk have quite exhausted the meagre information that comes from the war zone, they sometimes make good talk out of things that happened in the wilds recently enough to be newsy, but before the war began. In most cases these happenings were never heralded abroad, but they and their like very well illustrate the kind of wilderness training that makes good recruiting material for any service.

Just what Stefansson has gone through in the far North, for instance, is yet to be learned, but it is safe to say that some of his adventures have measured up tolerably well with those of the average soldier in France. At the same time it is doubtful if the plucky explorer, despite his narrow escape on the ice, has had a more really serious experience on this present expedition than in that of 1910, the second trip he made North from Edmonton. The perils that then befell him gave him perhaps as close a call as a man ever gets out of alive.

It was an unusually severe winter in the North, and in the face of that discomfort the food supplies ran out. At times Stefansson, his companion, Dr.

the camps to walk along the shore ice of the Fraser River to Prince George. At a certain point on the way they came to some rotten ice, a large piece of which broke off from the rest of the pack and carried them out into the river. They thought at first that it was good luck, supposing that the current would take them down river on the ice-craft, and save them the walking; but instead it carried them well out, and then piled their ice-floe hard against a rock in the centre of the river. They were marooned as surely as ever a man was; the ice held tight, and to attempt to swim ashore through a Fraser river current in April would have been about the same as suicide. In their packs they had food for two or three days, but it came to an end, and still they were prisoners. Days more they stayed there—how many they never knew, for they grew so weak, and suffered so from cold and hunger, that they lost track of the time. Little by little their ice-cake wore off at the edges, and they huddled close together in the centre in common misery. Thus were they found after a time, pretty close to death, by the first passing motor boat of the season.

Three summers ago two government survey parties in the Peace River country came almost to the verge of starvation

to very nearly the breaking point. He set out alone to drive down the Koyukuk river to Nome with a dog-team, carrying three days' provisions. Thinking to save time, he took a short cut, but missed his way, and for three days more wandered about helplessly. By the sixth day his condition was desperate, for not only was his food gone, but he was tiring out, fearing to sleep lest he should freeze to death. He was presently compelled to kill one of his dogs, which he himself shared with the rest of the team.

For another five days he struggled on, and sacrificed a second dog, and then, when death seemed almost at his elbow, a third one. On the sixteenth day he reached the mouth of the river, and staggered into the telegraph station, as near the end of his endurance as a man could well be.

As she stood on the windy beach, gazing dreamily out over the vast blue expanse of tumbling water, a friend said to her:

"So this is the first time you've ever seen the sea, eh?"

"Yes, the very first time," she answered.

"And what do you think of it?"

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