

The Canadian Armada's Voyage Across The Atlantic to England

An Interesting Story of the Unique Voyage of the the Thirty-two
Transports That Conveyed Canada's Expeditionary Force
to England--Formation of the Fleet.

The following, written by John A. MacLaren, one of The Toronto World's correspondents with the Canadian Expeditionary Force, may be of interest to our readers.

ON BOARD H. M. TRANSPORT FRANCONIA, near England, Oct. 15.—Fifteen days on the water and now the shores of England may be seen in the distance. In 24 hours we will arrive in Southampton, or Plymouth, and then Canada's fighting force will disembark for Salisbury Plain to undergo stiff training before leaving for the front. The most remarkable feat in the history of navigation has been performed. There was no accident or mishap of any nature. There was no interference on the part of the enemy. In three columns 32 transports conveyed the contingent across the Atlantic, escorted by a fleet of cruisers and battleships. The boats plowed through the Atlantic at a rate of speed not exceeding ten miles per hour. Some of the troops ships at full steam ahead could have traveled in any wind of weather at 17 to 23 knots, but the slowness of the passage was a concession to the smaller boats, which were utilized for carrying stores and field guns.

It was a unique voyage in many respects. The weather was phenomenal, especially for October, and except for one or two days there was very little roll to any of the ships. There was a constant expectation of interference by German cruisers, which were supposed to be prowling about the Atlantic, but nothing of this character happened. The transports traveled in three straight columns, about one mile apart, and there was an interval of half a mile between each boat. A cruiser headed each line while another brought up the rear. On either flank was a dreadnought. In all, 32 transports, four cruisers and two battleships steamed along the south of England. Before the boats reached their destination the cruisers and dreadnoughts abandoned their position which they had held for two weeks and left the transports unknown.

Loaded in a Week

It had taken over a week to load the boats with munitions of war at the Quebec docks. First all the horses were taken from the camp to the river, then the artillery was moved and last of all the men. As each ship was loaded she weighed anchor and started down the river. On Wednesday morning, Sept. 30, the last transport drew away from the wharf. This was the Franconia, heavily loaded with ammunition and carrying the headquarters staff and nurses and the eighth battalion of the 90th Regiment of Winnipeg. All that day the wooded shores of the St. Lawrence slipped by. When Thursday came we were far down the river towards the gulf. Near Rimouski we left two horse boats in the distance. It was the general impression that all the transports would meet somewhere in the gulf, but no one knew what plans had been made. At Rimouski the pilot left with the mail.

The Rendezvous

On looking out of the cabin port holes on Friday morning we discovered that we had reached the rendezvous. The great fleet had gathered. The greatest force that ever crossed the ocean was collected there in placid Gaspe Basin, a little jut in the shore of Gaspe, not very far from Newfoundland. Four small cruisers, grim and gray, were anchored in the east end, and scattered over the sea were 32 transports, including the "Canada," carrying a regiment of English regulars from Bermuda, which had been relieved by the Royal Canada Regiment. For 24 hours the boats were anchored in the basin, awaiting the arrival of the two stragglers—the horse boats, which were making slow time on the river.

Last Word of Farewell

A government yacht poked her nose in the basin early Saturday morning and passed up and down the lines. On the bow stood Colonel the Hon. Sam. Hughes waving farewell to the Canadian troops. "Good-bye boys," he shouted as the yacht steamed by each transport, and there followed cheers from many thousand throats and singing of "It's a Long, Long Way to Tipperary," and patriotic airs. The yacht came to a standstill beside the Franconia, where the minister of militia held a conference with Colonel Victor Williams, commander of the contingent as far as England. While this conference was under way Lieutenant K. A. Murray, O. C. of the Postal Corps, performed a task that has never before taken place at sea. Thousands of letters, newspapers and parcels which had arrived late at Valcartier, and had been thrown on the headquarters boat at Quebec, were sorted and distributed to every ship, and in this way all men had a last word from home before starting across the ocean.

The trans-Atlantic voyage began in the afternoon. One ship after another left Gaspe Basin for the sea.

Just before dusk, when only a dim outline of Gaspe could be distinguished, the convoy was formed. Three cruisers started out bow to bow and stretched out a mile from each other and then three columns were formed with eleven boats on the left, ten in the centre and eleven on the right. A mile or so in the rear of the last troopship in the centre line could be seen another cruiser. The boats were half a mile apart, and this formation was adhered to for the whole journey until the channel was reached and then a gale sprang up and tossed the smaller ships out of their course.

The Dreadnoughts Appear

After two days had passed we saw a huge battleship loom on the horizon. It was H. M. S. Glory, which ultimately turned and took up a position on the right flank. Five days later another battleship was seen, one of the greatest dreadnoughts of the British fleet, H. M. S. Queen Mary which occupied a position on the left flank. And thus splendidly guarded against any attack during day or night the convoy headed for some destination that was unknown to any passenger. Finally when the south shore of England was seen we knew.

A Gale the Last Day

Shortly after the great adventure had begun, when many of the soldiers had had their last glimpse of Canada, the Royal George and Laurotic, with guns mounted on their decks, advanced to the front on either flanks. And during every day they occupied this position, but when darkness set in they returned to the lines. The monotony of the voyage was caused only by the length of time on board the ships. The weather was delightful, almost unprecedented. The sea was as calm as the lake. But there was that last awful day when the gale lashed the water into a foam and threw waves over the decks. And with this there was a heavy curtain of fog hanging over the channel.

This is being written on the last night on board. On looking out of a cabin window one may see dotted here and there for miles around boats which are struggling against tremendous odds to keep their course. The Canada, which should be half a mile behind our vessel, is twice that distance and away to one side. The Royal Edward, which should be ahead, is out of the procession and away in the rear, because of trouble with her steering gear. In the distance are the lowest cruisers being buffeted and tossed. The signaling lamps are winking messages from the bridges.

Nearly a Collision

Just an hour ago the greatest excitement of the journey was caused by a near collision. Three times the whistle of the Franconia sounded and we heard the engine sending the signal astern. Something unusual had happened and everybody rushed for the decks. Members of the crew dashed for a lifeboat and awaited the order to lower. Just a few yards away could be seen a green light on the side of a cruiser. Suddenly the lights on her masts blinked for a moment and just then we knew how close we were to danger. The cruiser had turned from her course and was going to the rear to pick up the small boats held back by the storm and had almost run into the Franconia. The look-out noticed the danger and gave the signal. It was a moment tense with excitement, but it lasted only a moment. Shortly after a lance was in progress in the lounge, the last dance, and down in the sergeants' mess the most successful concert of the trip was being held.

Worked the Men Hard

From the day the long trip began the men were worked hard. Every soldier got in good condition at the camp and no one was allowed to become soft during the voyage. Reville sounded at 5.30 a. m., and from then until dinner time every man had to stay on deck for physical exercises under instruction of Y. M. C. A. workers. For hours daily there was marching and running around the decks. All this helped to break up the monotony. At nine o'clock every man had to be in his bed. Upstairs on "A" deck there were dancing and concerts nightly.

One of the novel features was lifeboat drill. This was ordered on the first day out. A bugle sounded from the bridge and every officer, man and nurse, ran for their cabins to get life belts and then back to the decks. Drills were held on several afternoons and very soon they were done with splendid discipline and speed. Every man and woman on board was standing alongside his or her lifeboat, with a life belt tied on properly, on the last occasion within five minutes. This drill brought quickly to the mind the chances being taken on such a voyage, the possibility of attack.

"Man Overboard!"

On the second day the vessel came to a standstill at the cry of "Man Overboard!" A sailor had fallen from the Royal Edward and was being tossed about on a lifebuoy that had been thrown from the Franconia. Very soon a lifeboat had gone to his rescue and within twenty minutes he was back at his post. It was a thrilling rescue at sea, the first ever seen by the majority of those on board. A few days later we heard that a New York paper had published a story that the Royal Edward and Franconia had been torpedoed by a German cruiser and sunk in mid-Atlantic. This report caused considerable worry among the passengers because of the great anxiety that would prevail at home. However, everyone relied on the fact that the Canadian paper would not make mention of it until official word was received. The story, if printed in New York, was based on the finding of two lifebuoys from the Royal Edward and Franconia, which had been thrown to the drowned sailor and had been picked up by a steamer bound for New York. There was no way of denying this yarn, because wireless was not used except by the cruisers. We were entirely isolated. Any messages sent from England went to the flagship and if of any importance to any of the transports, they were signaled by a flag during the day or a lamp at night.

Lights Blanketed

Early every evening all the port-holes were closed and the "dead lights" pulled down. On the upper decks blankets were placed over windows of the smoking room, lounge and library, and when we were traveling through particularly dangerous waters the lights in the verandah were extinguished because a narrow streak of light shone through an opening between a blanket and the side of a window. At night the vessels were in total darkness except for a lamp on the stern of each, which acted as a guide to captains of the transports following half a mile in the rear. When darkness set in all that one could see from the Franconia, as well as other troopships, were the stern lights ahead and the occasional winking of messages from lamps on the cruisers.

As said before, the sea was calm practically all the way, but nevertheless, the small horse boats were tossed about considerably at times, and we who traveled with the "aristocracy" of the fleet, pitied those who had to look after the horses, which are proverbially bad sailors. According to regulations, one man should attend to four horses but it is a known fact that one of the boats at least one man had to look after as many as 20 horses. The voyage must have been a terrible hardship and anxiety for these men.

Nearing the Shore

There was constant speculation as to the length of time it would take to reach England and the probable destination. No one expected that we would be on the water for over two weeks. As to the destination, no one knew. We were without a port. Not until we were close to England did we know that we were going to Southampton. As a matter of fact, it is now said, and this is being written just before we are to land at Plymouth or Southampton, that on account of the great number of transports, they will be distributed to several ports. The Franconia, being the headquarters boat, has now left the convoy and is traveling at full speed, rather close to the shore, escorted by a cruiser and a small torpedo boat, which looks more or less like a gasoline speed launch from a distance of a few hundred yards.

We are now very close to a port, for we can see buildings in the distance. Everyone is relieved. Anxiety over possibility of a raid by German cruisers is over. There is great hilarity on board. Officers and nurses have crowded to the port deck and are gazing at the land. Down below we can hear the men singing: "It's a long, long way to Tipperary," whooping it up, so to speak, as it never has been whooped up before.

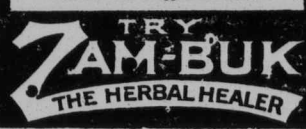
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All contributions will be acknowledged in The Union Advocate and North Shore Leader, who are also authorized to receive subscriptions.

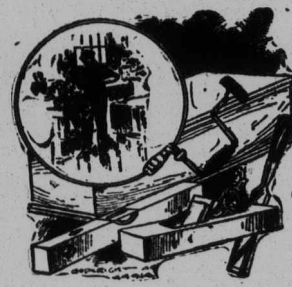
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The committee appeal to clergymen, churches and organizations of all kinds and to private individuals to co-operate with contributions and in organizing sales and entertainments.

A depot for receiving food and clothing has been opened in the new Pettigill warehouse, Water street. This committee will be glad to receive clothing of all description, new or old, for men, women and children, blankets of wool or cotton, and food of non-perishable nature that can be transported to Belgium.

Shipments from outside points to the Belgian Relief Committee will be handled by the railways free of charge. Information as to the plans of the committee will gladly be furnished any desiring to assist by the secretary, G. E. Barbour, St. John N. B. Telephone Main 216.

The local Branch of the Red Cross Society will receive all contributions the Belgian Fund at the Town Hall on Tuesday evenings.

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