

HOW BRANTFORD MEN OF THE 125TH LEFT FOR THE FRONT

They Formed the Last Draft of Four Hundred From the 125th Battalion— An Intensely Interesting Letter Written by Major Jordan

The following very interesting letter has been received in the city from Major Jordan of the 125th Battalion:

On the 18th. of May 1917 orders came to us to prepare immediately to send 400 men to France. It was the hardest blow we had received yet for it would take almost every one of our home town boys and we were, as part of the 5th. Division, ready to move as a unit with every man trained in every particular way. They had been through gas, were drilled in the use of the box respirator, were expert with the rifle and bayonet and could take their place with any troops from any part of the Empire. No doubt this was one of the reasons which made their transfer to France expedient. Canadian casualties had been heavy and the best trained men must go. Of course every man wanted to go and when the draft was complete it included our very best men, Lewis gunners, Bombers, trench Mortar experts, Company Scouts and even some of the N.C.O.'s who had to revert to go. At last the draft was ready, then began a long wait. The men were instructed that they must remain within camp lines ready to move at a moment's notice. One day, two, three days passed by. The boys said the war is over. "The Kaiser has heard that the 125th is coming over and has called kamarrad." Finally instructions came to parade that night at 11.30 to march to Milford station and entrain at 2 a.m. of the great old day of the 24th. It was the blackest night I had seen for months. Everyone was snatching an hours sleep, everything quiet and all lights out, when "Press for Parade" was sounded. It was startling in the quietness of midnight, and in a moment the lads were up and hustling. The packs were buckled up, the equipment readjusted, at "Fall in" every man was ready. To fall in several hundred men, on the blackest night you can imagine, have them dressed and covered off and call the roll is no easy task. Hundreds of men who were unlucky enough to have to remain behind, N.C.O. instructors, officers and friends crowded around anxious to have a last hand shake and a good-bye. Lanterns, flash lights, candles and lamps helped to make a picture wonderfully fascinating. Laughing, singing, cheering, a thousand men moved through the long black shadows, forgetting for the moment that a few hours would separate most of them for a long time or forever.

We moved off and arrived at the station at the time arranged, to find a Brantford officer (Major Nelles) in charge of the entraining. We Canadians have to take our hats off to the English when it comes to organization. The perfection of every detail was strikingly exemplified all through our trip to France. The system of coaches enabled our party—some 600 in all, including a draft from another unit—to entrain in three or four minutes. There was no noise and no excitement. In less than 5 minutes we were off, destination unknown. The train, after passing over several lines, arrived at the point of embarkation at 5.30 a.m.—on time to the minute. The sun was shining, the earth was warm and moist after the night rain. The whole country was lovely. Oh! How beautiful England can be. We were taken to a rest camp. Think of calling five or six blocks of splendid houses, magnificent apartment blocks and private hotels a rest

camp. It was in one of the finest residential districts of a seaside town. The area was enclosed by a high metal fence and every building was turned over for the use of the army. When we entered to our men, was like a bit of heaven to our men, who had spent months in dark, brown huts, without a blade of grass between them and the sky. Here were lovely flowers, smooth green lawns, beautiful big trees and perhaps best of all, real houses. Parties were detailed to various houses, and after having a good hot breakfast, took advantage of the opportunity to rest. The town was not new to me, and I knew that just a few yards away was the sea. The officers were free to leave the camp, so we walked over to the Lees, which looked down on the sea. Sparkling, green, wonderful, and quiet, it lay, carrying a great fleet of fishing boats, trawlers, merchantmen and war craft. Never before had I fully realized the futile attempt of the Germans to blockade England. There seemed enough boats off this one spot to make a fair sized navy.

We had orders to leave the port at 9 a.m. so the men were paraded and marched to the boat, when again we saw the result of the splendid way England manages her army. A guide met us. No halt was made. Not a minute was lost, and everything arranged in the quietest manner with more courtesy than we expected. It took only the time necessary to march on the boat—in fours—to embark, and issue each one with a life-belt. Gang planks were drawn in and we started.

There were five transports, and one hospital ship in our fleet. A group of destroyers were out in front and to our flanks forming a screen for our protection. Overhead air craft flew, gradually leaving us as they sped toward France. Mine sweepers were all about, busily dragging for mines.

We might have been on a glorious picnic. Everyone was happy. War, for the time was forgotten, although every turn of the screw brought us nearer the front line. Trained eyes were on the watch for submarines. Our speed was terrific. In less than 90 minutes we were safely in the harbor of—

—was France. I think somehow the boys suspected it to be different. Many a lad said with surprise, "Why, it's just like England." We landed, and as we marched off I knew the boys realized that they had entered the last chapter of their "part in the great war." The people, whose language was so strange, smiled as we marched through the streets, and said, "bon jour monsieur." Dark-eyed, curly-headed children ran alongside our column and said the only three English words they know, "One penny, please." They caught you by the hand and showed the same persistence that is winning the war for France.

Over cobblestones, up high hills, past the old walled town and on to the rest camp we marched. Here the men were sent to tents, given blankets and food and advised to rest, for to-morrow they were ordered to march to—, 18 miles away.

The next morning we left— on our 18 mile march to—. The first seven were through old villages, up and down hills, through charming country and over fair roads. Oh, but the sun was hot. Our men marched like heroes. Not a man but intended to go the whole way. At 1 o'clock we stopped at a rest camp, an Imperial camp, which was managed with the same perfection we had met, in every case, since we left. After a rest of an hour and a half we resumed the march. Eleven miles to go and the sun like a huge burning glass. There was no shade, no breeze and considerable dust. On we went, mile after mile. Feet were tired, legs ached. The pack straps cut through the tunics. Blistered feet burned, but the men kept on. Jokes, songs, tunes whistled and chery words kept us all alert and determined to "stick it." Oh, the boys were splendid.

At last we saw—. We passed the great graveyard where acres of graves and a forest of small wooden crosses brought home to our boys perhaps seriously for the first time, what the war has required of many a man. Still they joked, but more quietly, a little more gently. I know most of them were thinking back to Canada and wondering. They were not afraid. Had they been given the chance, not a man would have turned back. On they went, past the endless hospitals. We could hear the soldiers and nurses saying "Canadians." I think I know why.

Sixteen miles, seventeen miles (nearly there), along the sandy road and through the camp, past the Australians, past the Imperials, up, up the sandy hill, so steep that many a man should have dropped but would not, they marched. After eighteen miles. After all they had stood that day, to finish with a song and a smile, was magnificent. We halted, and in a minute they were taken from us. Gone from us forever, as far as this war is concerned. We had worked with them for eighteen months, learned to trust and depend on them, but there is only one regulation in the army, expediency, and so we had to lose them.

All honor to the Brantford boys who marched from— to— that day. I have no fear that any one of them will fail when it comes his turn for duty in the front line.

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