

BROKEN UP

(Concluded from page 11.)

talking earnestly together. It appeared that we were not to be "put through our paces." We wondered if this was a good or a bad omen. Away off in the shade of a clump of trees a little group of regimental officers in trench coats were watching the proceedings closely. None of our officers had affected trench coats yet. This fact gave the group of watchers the air of superior beings. We wondered if they had been to France. . . .

Do you know, when I think back over it now, the effect of those officers in trench coats, their critical and expectant eyes scanning our ranks, is that of a flock of vultures anticipating their prey. Of course, it was not their doing, and we did not realize why they were there till later, but that is how it seems to me now.

We marched back to camp in a state of uneasy suspense. The officers in trench coats were there awaiting us, having preceded us in a car. Some of them we knew. Their battalion had come over from our own military district several months before, and was now in the Xth Division. Suddenly it dawned on us that it was the battalion to which we had been ordered to send the bulk of our men.

Then was it all true? After the compliments that the G. O. C. had paid us (it soon got round that his words were "a splendid appearance—one of the best battalions I've seen")—was that slaughterous order to be carried out. The C. O. soon set our minds at rest. Our fate had nothing to do with the "splendid appearance." That fate had been settled before we arrived in England—before we left Canada. The Xth Division was still under strength, had to be filled up. We, in common with the battalions that had preceded us and had crossed with us, were to be the material. This, then, was to be the end of all our months of careful organization and hard work together as a battalion. Associations that had become rooted in our hearts were to be torn up. We were not to fight shoulder to shoulder, officers and men together, in united strength. We were to be "broken up"!

WELL, old man, no matter what I may go through at the front, I'll never forget that afternoon and evening. The C. O. of the Blankth Battalion, and the officers who had watched us with such hungry eyes in the morning, came down with their own M. O. They were to have their pick—so the authorities had ruled. Can you imagine how it felt to look on while those men—men we had toiled with and toiled over, whom we had come to regard as our children, almost jealous of their shining merits, understanding their little faults and peculiarities—while those men were picked over and counted off, like a shipment of apples, to be "material" for another battalion? No distinctions were made except those of physique and smartness. Even the specialists—the signallers and scouts and machine gunners, the darlings of their respective officers—were grist for the mill. The N. C. O.'s had no assurance of keeping their rank in the new battalion. Most of them would be just privates along with the rank and file they had been in authority over for months. The last consolation we had as officers was the fine appearance they made, standing up there like the

soldiers they were, scorning to show their bitter disappointment, true to the last to the traditions of the old Nth.

But when the time for good-byes came—it was almost sundown, and a soft summer evening with a rosy glow in the West—it was too much to ask of human nature to be stolid and stoical. Remember, it was not saying good-bye to men we had met but recently, and knew only as chance acquaintances. It was saying good-bye to brothers in the great game we had entered together. We might meet them again—we were all going eventually to face the same dangers and fight the same battles. But we would not be fighting shoulder to shoulder as we had counted on doing all along. It was the breaking up of a family.

WE passed along, shaking hands with the men and offering what words of encouragement came automatically to our lips. Perhaps you won't understand me when I say there were wet eyes and bodies shaken with emotion. I don't believe I had fully realized till then what bonds had grown up between us as officers and men. It was partly disappointment, mixed with a little bit of resentment towards the Powers that Be; but there was genuine feeling in the voices of those men that could not be mistaken, as when brothers part. Each company had its little scene of parting. There were cheers for their officers given by those men with a heartiness that brought an ache to the throat of those who listened. I remember Tommy Patterson, our machine gun officer, specially. I found Tommy off in a corner of the parade ground near his section with his face turned away from the cheering men. "I—I like those men—" he began. His voice broke; the tears were rolling. . . .

Well, it was growing dark and they had eight miles to march to the camp where the Blankth were quartered. The C. O. called them to attention and made a little speech. He spoke of the formation of the Nth, of our pleasant days of training together, of his pride in the battalion. It was a keen disappointment that we were not going to France as a unit. No one felt it more than himself. But we had to remember that we were soldiers, and that it was our duty to go where we were ordered without question or complaint. He called on them to be true to the traditions of the Nth, and he knew they would accord to their new C. O. the same loyalty and support they had always given himself. When the Sergeant-Major called for three cheers for the C. O., those men put every ounce of breath in their bodies into that response.

Well, they cheered the new C. O., too, when he told them that he knew how they felt, and that he was only carrying out an order which must be obeyed in the true soldierly spirit. But it was with hearts sore and a trifle bitter that those 750 men—the flower of the Nth—came to attention behind the company commanders of the Blankth Battalion to march away for good from the dear old Nth. As the column moved off, with our band in front playing "Auld Lang Syne"—playing it as I think it has never been played before—those who were left behind lined the road, cheering their good-byes in voices that faltered with emotion.

The C. O. and the Second in Command and the Adjutant marched at their head as they swung out of the camp and along the road, and when they fell out and stood waving a last farewell, the men crowded to the curb as they passed for a last hand-shake. Tears were rolling down the cheeks of many of those fellows—many who were "old soldiers" and had seen service in India and Africa. I'll never forget that night, never. . . .

Bob stopped speaking; his voice seemed to give out. He was kicking mechanically at a hummock, with his shoulders dropped forward and his hands between his knees.

"And what became of the rest of you?" I asked, breaking the silence through which bird-sounds came to us out of the wood.

"Drafted to other battalions, some here, some there," replied Bob lugubriously. "The C. O. and the staff are still hanging round waiting for something to turn up. I'm in a British Columbia battalion myself—supernumerary. I see some of our old Nth boys occasionally round camp, and ask them how they like their new battalion. They shake their heads with wry smiles and mutter, 'It's not like the old Nth, sir.' . . . Tell me, old man, why do they do such things?" There was a note of querulousness in his voice.

"Military necessity," I quoted.

"Well, all I can say is, that it's damned hard on us. And here they are off in Canada talking about the 'flocks of idle officers hanging around England,' as if it were our fault. I came over here to go to France, not to 'hang around England,' and yet here I am, with the pleasant prospect of getting jockeyed into a 'base' job when this B. C. battalion pulls out. Where there's a string of supernumeraries like the tail of a kite a C. O. isn't going to consider his own original officers last, is he? Not by a long sight. And, of course, they'll only authorize a certain number of supernumeraries to go over with the battalion.

"The trouble is, you can't realize what it's like. It's a matter of psychology. You've got to go through an experience like that to feel it properly." It was evident that Bob was only irritated by my mildness.

"My dear fellow," I said, for I saw it was time to enlighten him. "I have been through that experience. My battalion was broken up just as yours was. At present I am a supernumerary office in a battalion I'd never seen before two weeks ago, with the same chance as yourself of being left behind as a superfluous item of the personnel."

Bob looked at me with a new expression in his eyes.

"By Jove, a fellow-sufferer!" he exclaimed, and held out his hand. We shook.

Air-Man's Dream

(Continued from page 21.)

of 1967 as I connoted it in my dream, uncle, was pretty well organized along right lines for the democracies. But, of course, I'm not vouching for the accuracy of all this if it's a case of handing out a Delphine oracle.

And of course—Canada. Did I see any different colour on that map, you ask me, beginning at Montreal and ending at the Gulf? No, uncle. It was all one colour, except that it had a

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faint suggestion of the fleur-de-lis that trickled away in various parts of the Canada and got lost in the grand overplus of other peoples; mainly British—but a lot of people from Europe, too. Anyway, the race feud was over, and we sang the new song over a glad big land—a great land—Head Nation of the British Confederacy.

That's all I remember. Please don't show this to any editor.



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