

RECOLLECTIONS OF AN OLD TROOPER

As one of the men who left British Columbia 15 years ago for service in South Africa, I thought it might be of interest to the boys to hear how the troops had been enlisted and dispatched at that time. The B.C. of that period was very far from being the B.C. of the present. Those were the days before emigration enlarged the coast cities and populated the fruit valleys. You can see the difference in the personnel of the men.

The old fellows, especially from the Kootenays, where "I hailed from," were of a different stamp. They were mostly frontiersmen, a type that we can hardly recognize now, unless we happen to run across an old silver tip with a pocket full of samples and a hole in the ground somewhere in the Findlay River country or some other spot equally accessible.

However, they could ride and shoot, take a long hike, or make a camp or a bannock with equal facility. I happened to be the tenderfoot of the bunch, having been in the country only about 18 months. Of course at that time conditions were entirely different. I mean as far as this war is concerned. It was practically the first time that Colonial troops had participated in Britain's wars, except a few French Canadian voyageurs whom Lord Wolsley had enlisted for the Soudan campaign in 1885 for the purpose of running the Nile rapids. It was the day when Imperial federation or unity was first talked about and taken seriously. Although the need was not so apparent as now, the colonies were determined to show the Mother Country that in time of need their services were hers to command. The results of that policy has borne fruit and now when the very existence of the British Empire is at stake, you find the Oversea Dominions where they belong, as witness our own Western Scots and the Canadian troops who have preceded us.

Sometime about Christmas, 1900, I made an application to join the Canadian contingent of the South African Constabulary then being raised and commanded by Major-General R. S. S. Baden-Powell. Owing to the number of applications it was decided to limit the number of recruits from each locality. As far as I can remember it was as follows: Nelson 15, Rossland 10, Grand Forks 4, Greenwood 4, Phoenix 3, and so forth, all the Crow's Nest towns as far as the Alberta border being also represented.

On the appointed day we were medically examined at Rossland, that city being the rendezvous for the boundary country. Next in order was the shooting test. We shot with an ordinary Winchester sporting rifle at a target at about 250 yards. As a blinding snowstorm was raging at the time it was some test. The wind-driven snow gave the target an appearance of moving. The successful shots were then marched down to a local livery stable, where the riding test was to come off. Some test again. Everyone in Rossland knew this horse, a big rangy grey. The hostlers in this stable used to make bets whenever some venturesome tenderfoot hired this horse as to whether he would come back with his hat on or not. One of the Greenwood chaps mounted first and the grey promptly bolted. The Greenwood fellow is going yet as far as I know. I never saw him again. Then a pony was brought out and everyone passed with honors.

The successful men left for Nelson that night escorted by the Rocky Mountain Rangers under Capt. Forin and the whole town. On arrival at Nelson we were marched to the boat and sworn in to Her Majesty's service. Some time about midnight we reached Robson, and were on our way across the continent. We picked up men for my troop at Fernie, Cranbrook, in fact all the villages in the Crow's Nest, so that when we reached Medicine Hat we had our full complement and proceeded to get acquainted.

Of the monotonous trip in mid-winter I won't write. I remember it was about 50 degrees below in Winnipeg. On arrival at Ottawa we were marched out to the Fair Grounds, a place that somewhat resembles the Willows, but as I remember it not nearly so well appointed. There was about three feet of snow all over the place, and cold was no name for it. There we settled down to see what was going to happen next. I had the best of most of the boys as I had the advantage of a few months' service in Florida with the First Ohio Volunteer Cavalry in the Spanish war days, only two years previous to the time I am writing about.

In the morning our troop C.O. showed up in the person of Capt. C. C. Bennett of Vancouver, he and Capt. Geo. Beer of Nelson having traded commands overnight. The next two weeks we spent in keeping warm, mixed in with a little company drill in one of the buildings. It was this experience that taught me the value of the training we are getting now.

We all knew what we needed and lacked and were a little apprehensive in consequence.

The boys may think the same old drill everlastingly monotonous. They may think they know it. Well, they don't. The day will come when they will appreciate every day of it. It all makes for efficiency. I've got three morals for a soldier: Know your work, have stamina enough to get there, and have guts enough to stay there. Here was our position. A body of a thousand men designed for mounted service, dispatched to the front with not a day's adequate training, to handle a rifle we were not familiar with, and to be brigaded with veteran troops who had been at the front over a year already.

It speaks volumes for the adaptability of the Canadian soldier when I think how quickly we broke in and how the bunch handled themselves when the occasion came, as it soon did. The S.A.C. was technically not a Canadian outfit at all. Although raised in Canada we were paid by the Imperial authorities and eventually by the two new colonies, the Transvaal and the Orange Free State. We were not even equipped in Canada. We were issued a sea kit consisting of a pair of blue jeans, a blue sweater and a blue tuque, one of those snowshoe things familiar in the East. We looked like "ten cents' worth of God help us," as the fellow said at Pantages.

After an inspection by Sir Wilfrid Laurier and Sir Frederick Borden, then Minister of Militia, and who had already lost a son at the front, we found ourselves on the way to Halifax. No man could have more than 30 pounds of kit. Sandy Steele of Nelson had 30 pounds of McDonald's chewing.

On arrival at Halifax we found our transport waiting, an old Elder-Dempster cattle boat called the Montfort. Her main deck had been covered over with a wooden false deck and the whole show was littered up with temporary galleys and bakehouses. The troops were all accommodated between decks. Hammocks were dished out, and off we sailed.

Although the weather was cold when we left Halifax, our course east by south soon took us into warm weather. Then our troubles began. After the customary mal de mer period was over we bumped into the real thing. The boat must have been in a shocking state sanitarily speaking. All the diseases in the world broke out. Measles, mumps, scarlet fever, in fact all the common childhood plagues were there with bells on. They may be harmless enough in a child's case, but when they attack an adult look out! I had the mumps, so I know what I am talking about. Not only did the glands in my neck swell up, but every gland I knew about and some I did not know I possessed all worked overtime. We lost quite a few men and buried them at sea.

I believe the Montfort was the last vessel at that time in which the owners contracted to carry troops. After that the Imperial Government chartered the vessels and handled and fed the men themselves. We only made one port, Las Palmas, but were not allowed to land. Finally after a long 32-day voyage we woke up to find Table Mountain towering over us. We in this country do not appreciate mountains. We see enough of them. In fact the only two mountains that ever appealed to me were the Peak of Teneriffe and Table Mountain. There is something about the former, isolated and rising as it does from a small island, and raising its snow-crowned head in a waste of waters, that fascinates one.

As for Table Mountain, what has it not stood for. The door of the once dark continent. And looking at it one can visualize Dr. Livingstone, Stanley, Cecil Rhodes, Oom Paul Kruger, General Botha, down to Rider Haggard and dozens of others, good and bad, who have had an influence in shaping that great country. After nine years' residence in South Africa I know the country well, and I believe I could have become an Afriander had I not been a Canadian first.

But to resume, we landed in Cape Town sometime about the end of March, which is just the beginning of the African winter. We marched to a quartermaster's store and were issued with clothing, rifle, ammunition, in fact all necessary equipment. At that time Cape Town was the main source of supply for over half a million of men. The docks and every available space were covered with mountains of all kinds of supplies. Thousands of bales of hay, oats, bully beef, wagons and every imaginable commodity you could think of.

The A.S.C. at that time were doing the biggest business of any organization in the world. You can imagine what it must be like at the front now. Meanwhile our train was