

ACROSS THE ATLANTIC

LONG before daylight the troops were called and served sandwiches and coffee. The First Battalion, Headquarters Company, and Supply Company slipped out of camp unnoticed before four o'clock, and the Third followed soon after. Just before leaving, the order to furl tents had been given. Many of the stoves were still red-hot, and the inevitable happened. As the troops marched out in the darkness their way was lighted by a succession of burning tents. This display was the cause for a lengthy investigation some months later in France; but as there seemed at the time to be a general ignorance of the matter, the investigating officer, who had traveled all the way from Chaumont to Jeanménil, was forced to drop the matter. In all cases where responsibility and accountability for government property was in question, a convenient memory was the easiest and most economical solution.

Again the regiment entrained for Long Island City, transferring there to ferries and sailing around the tip of Manhattan. But this time it made for the Chelsea docks on the New York side of the river, the first detachment debarking at the Cunard piers where they boarded the *R. M. S. Aurania*, and the Third Battalion making for Pier 60 and the *R. M. S. Celtic* of the White Star Line. In the middle of the afternoon both boats left their docks, sailed down the river past Liberty again, and anchored

in the lower bay. After dark they headed out into the ocean.

These vessels were far superior to the *Grant* in every respect. The men were not packed in like sardines, they were allowed the freedom of the decks, and they had all the fresh air they wanted. But soldiers have to kick at something; so on this trip they kicked at the food, which really wasn't very appetizing and not prepared in the manner in which they would have had it. But one could not expect everything; compared with the previous experience, we were traveling de luxe.

About noon on the second day out land was sighted, and the ships soon pulled into the mine-protected harbor of Halifax, Nova Scotia. Past the giant camouflaged *Olympic*, which was loading Canadian troops, they moved on up into the inner harbor, Bedford Basin. Here they were to wait until the convoy of which they were to be a part assembled. As it was very cold, no one was permitted ashore, so the chief diversion was exercising briskly on the deck and wishing to land.

At midday on Sunday, the 18th of November — a clear, beautiful day — the convoy, consisting of the *Celtic*, *Cedric*, *Aurania*, several freighters, and a British armored cruiser, moved slowly down the Basin and out of the harbor in single file, the *Celtic* last. On the north shore an American flag flying from a cabin on the water's edge caught the eye, and as we steamed past, quite close, it seemed, a young woman climbed to the roof and signaled by semaphore, "Good Luck; God Bless you" — the last message we had from any of our countrymen. Some three thousand pairs of hands waved back in appreciation and farewell.

Still gliding slowly out, the convoy neared two British

men-of-war whose crews were dressed up along the rail, and who gave three mighty cheers for the American Army as the outgoing vessels came abreast. Then a band on one of them broke out into *The Star Spangled Banner*. Every one in the convoy stiffened to attention, and thrills chased each other up and down the back as they moved silently past. Some even admitted to a bulge in the throat. Farther out, as the convoy began to gather speed, the band changed its tune, and the faint strains of *Over There* sounded out across the water. It was a wonderful, inspiring send-off that left us all with a warm spot in our hearts for the English. It made us feel as if we were something more than just allies joined together to fight a common enemy — that we were brothers after all. For an hour or so all stayed on deck, straining to catch the last glimpse of America and wondering if we should ever see it again.

For ten days the convoy headed eastward. Every afternoon there was a period of physical drill on the deck, and aside from an occasional "Abandon Ship" drill and the details for submarine lookout, the men had much of the time to themselves. The Band, which was with the Headquarters Company on the *Aurania*, gave daily concerts — a pleasure that was denied the men on the outward-bound voyage of the *Grant*.

On the 22nd the convoy ran into a gale which caused the boats to roll and pitch so that during physical drill the men were unable to keep their footing and tumbled all over the deck. No one got very sick, and the majority enjoyed the experience. Viewed from the *Celtic*, the *Aurania* seemed to bob up and down like a cork, but her own passengers were too busy holding on to support to give much time to the oscillations and gyrations of the rest.

The danger zone was reached on the 25th, and from then on neither lights nor music were permitted, and all were forbidden to undress at night or to lose sight of their life-preservers, which became as omnipresent as one's shadow. At this time the undersea boats were unusually active in northern waters, and the submarine guard was doubled. There was little desire to be *spurlos versenkt*, and therefore a vigilant watch was maintained. The next day, because the escort had failed to appear, the convoy changed its course and headed almost due north, and it was reported the following afternoon that we were not far from Iceland. It was drizzling and the sea was running high, and when at four o'clock the escort had not yet arrived, the fleet separated, the transports going ahead full speed and leaving the slower boats behind to take their chances with the submarines.

All night long the ships raced toward port. There was such a heavy fog the next morning that it was difficult to make out the other vessels, and that lessened the chances of attack. Toward noon the fog lifted, and shortly after lunch a loud cheer announced the arrival of the belated convoy of four swift, lean destroyers — three English and one American. Within an hour land was sighted.

There was considerable excitement coming through the mine barrage into the narrow northern entrance to the Irish Sea. What appeared to be a periscope bobbed up between the *Celtic* and the *Aurania*, which were running abreast not more than five hundred yards apart. The *Aurania* immediately opened fire, and for the moment those in the *Celtic* felt more in danger of her shells than of a torpedo. But on the whole the soldiers displayed more interest in the submarine than fear of it, for instead of rushing to their life-boat positions they gathered at

the rail to see what was going to happen. One youth expressed his unconcern with "Let 'em sink the ship. It ain't mine." Whatever the supposed U-boat really was, it disappeared instantly. The convoy, in the meantime having been warned of the presence of submarines in the Irish Sea, instead of making for Liverpool, put on all steam for Belfast, the nearest harbor, where we dropped anchor at seven o'clock that evening.

It was in this Ulster harbor that the *Celtic* and *Aurania* lay until the 30th, and it was aboard English boats in Irish waters that the men from Iowa spent the great American feast day of Thanksgiving in the year 1917. In the morning a freighter from our convoy limped into port, mast and funnel gone, stern low in the water, but withal a victor in an unequal battle with a submarine. That gave the men something to be thankful for. The spirit of the day, however, was somewhat dampened by the quality of the alleged banquet that was set before the soldiers. According to the men of the Third Battalion, sea gull was the chief article on the menu; while on the *Aurania* the soldiers vehemently protested against the fare of spoiled meat and rabbit, and in mob formation marched upon the mess hall demanding something fit to eat. In no time a well-formed mutiny against the English officers and crew was raging away in the lower decks. The American officers, who at the time were at their own dinner, rushed to the scene of the disorder and quieted their men, after insisting that they be given a palatable meal.

The two ships left Belfast harbor about one o'clock on the afternoon of the 30th in a mist and a choppy sea, which by night became as smooth as a mirror. And then a brilliant moon made matters more interesting. There

were wild rumors of floating mines and of submarines at large, and the dash across the Channel was made at full speed — a roaring trip.

It was a great relief to see the blinking lights of the Mersey heave into view, and to cross the bar and mine barrage just about midnight. We anchored in the river about two o'clock of the morning of December 1st.

There had been an outbreak of scarlet fever on the *Celtic* a few days previous, and while we were in mid-channel, racing for the safety of Liverpool, Private Earl Coons of Company K died. When the sanitary inspectors boarded the boat early in the morning, they were dubious about permitting the battalion to land, and the prospect of a long period of quarantine on shipboard stared us in the face. However, the inspectors relented, agreeing to send all the affected men to hospitals in the city. And it was here that Private Coons, the first man of the 168th to die in Europe, was buried with all military honors.



The Iowans making up the 168th arrived in England on December 1. Nine days later they were ferried across the channel to Le Havre, where they entrained on cold, unheated coaches and were carried up the Seine Valley through Rouen, Mantes and Versailles. Then, instead of turning into Paris, the trains headed almost due south, discharging the 168th Infantry at Rimaucourt, a little French village 23 kilometers north of Chaumont, the seat of American General Headquarters. Here they remained, drilling daily in bitter cold weather in preparation for the time when they would engage in actual combat up front. [The Editor].