

HUSSARS AT SEA  
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It is fifty years now since the 8th Hussars moved from England to Italy and about time the adventures of the Advance Party were recorded.

August 31st, 1943 is indirectly a key date in the history of the 8th Hussars. That is the date on which the Prime Minister of Canada, William Lyon MacKenzie King, met with the Prime Minister of Great Britain, Sir Winston Churchill, and decided to send the 1st Canadian Corps Headquarters to Algeria and the 5th Canadian Armoured Division to Italy.

The Regiment was ready for a change in role and was well trained. It had gone through exercise after exercise while being available to defend Britain or become part of an invasion of Europe. Although the general public told us we were off to Italy, Brigade and Division H.Q. kept up the story that we were going to Ireland to join an American Army for the long-awaited invasion of Europe. This made some sense since we were turning in most of our tanks and wheeled vehicles. No one told us about a plan to exchange vehicles with the British 7th Armoured Division (The Desert Rats) which was slated to return to England. A great idea to cut the demand for shipping which was scarce at best.

The only real believer in the Ireland plan was Capt. A.G.(Sandy) Merritt, our Quartermaster, Bandmaster and believer in the practical approach. No way would "Sandy" give Capt. C.A. (Cliff) McEwen and his advance party mosquito netting and basic field kitchen utensils for a trip to Ireland. He reasoned that this was one of the most outrageous orders he had ever received from above. We all admired "Sandy", but several weeks later when we were dumped in a vineyard in Casoria, Italy with only raw bulk rations, no transportation, and plenty of mosquitoes, we questioned the system.

The move of the Corps to Italy began officially on October 13th under the code name "TIMBERWOLF". It was accomplished in several stages - 25,000 troops moved south in November, 10,000 more in December, and another 4,000 in January 1944.

While preparations were underway to move the 5th Armoured Division, changes were made to co-ordinate a strong fighting force to prove to Canadian leaders that the choice to go to Italy was a good one. The 5th Armoured Division included the 5th Armoured Brigade made up of the The Lord Strathcona Horse, The British Columbia Dragoons, and The 8th New Brunswick Hussars along with The 11th Infantry Brigade which included the Cape Breton Highlanders, The Perth Regiment and The Irish Regiment of Canada. The Brigades were supported by The Westminster Regiment, a motor Battalion and The Governor Generals Horse Guards, a reconnaissance Regiment and an armoured car unit, The Royal Canadian Dragoons.

The Advance Party of 1st Canadian Corps flew to Algiers on October 24th, followed by the main H.Q. and the Armoured Division which sailed from Scotland on the 27th October.

The Advance Party of our Regiment was commanded by Capt. C.A."Cliff" McEwen. He had Capt. C.F.A."Kit" Graham and Capt. T.A."Tom" Weir, and Lt. H.D."Fearless" Fearman and Lt. C.M."Jeff" Miller, along with 50 Other Ranks.

We left camp in Hove by train in the early hours of October 23rd en route to Liverpool where we boarded the S.S. Monterey. This ship was built for the Matson Line and was launched in Quincy, Mass. on October 10th, 1931 as an express liner to carry mail between San Francisco and Australia. This 18,000 grt. twin screw ship was officially chartered by the U.S. Maritime Commission in December, 1941. Her original capacity was 488 First Class and 240 cabin-class passengers. The capacity was increased to 4,150 for war-time accommodations. Before sailing on October 24th, S.S. Monterey had boarded The Irish Regiment of Canada from Toronto, two Nova Scotia Regiments - The Princess Louise Fusiliers of Halifax and the Cape Breton Highlanders, plus various others including the Advance Parties of the 4th Anti-Tank Regiment, 8007/14 RCASC and the 8th Hussars.

With a total of 3,914 troops aboard commanded by Lt. Col. J.S. Weir, E.D. of The Cape Breton Highlanders, we sailed north to Scotland, entered the Firth of Clyde and anchored off Gourock (near Greenoch). The next two days were spent in enjoying real food. With only two meals per day because of the numbers involved, each was a spectacle. I recall an item on the breakfast menu called "the works". It consisted of a slab of ham covered by two huge pancakes topped off with four eggs fried together, all washed down with coffee from a large pot left in the centre of the table.

Accommodations varied throughout the ship. I shared a cabin with eleven other officers. We slept in triple-decker bunks and shared a washroom and head. The porthole was sealed and painted over to prevent light from shining outside at night. There were many times when we all wished it could be kicked open. There was no air-conditioning installed at that time. During a post-war refit, the air-conditioning material was brought up from the bowels of the ship where it had been stored during war years because time was not available for its installation.

The food however, was something else - white bread, ice cream, the best coffee I can remember, and fruit! One of our boys came to me complaining about the food in the men's mess just to get me down there to see what they were eating. I remember clearly the fellow in a white apron and chef's hat with a huge cleaver. He was cutting chickens in two - half to you and half to the next in line.

Abandon-ship drills were part of the daily routine. The ship's officers who had transported thousands of troops, sold us on the idea that we were better than any they had seen so far and capable of breaking records in the time required to clear the ship with every man at his assigned station ready to abandon ship if necessary. To qualify for the record, each man had to have a pair of socks to protect his hands should he have to slide down a rope.

On the evening of October 27th we sailed down the Clyde past the protective boom. As the convoy organized into sailing positions, we headed to the open sea and the unknown destination.

The Irish Sea was not kind and many good men stayed close to their bunks. Many missed meals. We were in very rough water for about thirty-six hours.

The next few days the convoy zigzagged in a southerly direction. Everyone received enough typhus shots to last six months and started taking mepacrine pills. All enjoyed the temperature which got warmer as each day passed. The abandon-ship record was broken on November 1st. All troops were on deck in three minutes and thirty-six seconds.



One day some of the boys saw a destroyer escort turn from it's course and drop depth charges. When the coast of Africa came up on our starboard side and then Spain on the port side, we knew for sure that we were on our way to Italy.

By five-thirty in the afternoon of November 4th, we were passing through the Strait of Gibraltar with three grey naval vessels on each side. I recall standing at the after-rail of the Monterey watching the sunset and wondering what lay ahead for the thousands of men and women in the twenty-three passenger ships and the fourteen naval escorts. We knew that we had to travel at the safest speed of the slowest ship, but why in such perfect formation? There were three lines of ships about 1,000 yards apart.

The bands of the Irish Regiment and the Cape Breton Highlanders continued to play regular concerts while we ate, watched boxing matches, or went through the abandon-ship drill once again.

Although we had a 3" gun forward and aft, and Oerlicon anti-aircraft guns on the boat deck, it was decided that a thirty-man team with Bren guns could operate from the tennis court which was located between the funnels. These men came from C Company of the Irish and probably from the Cape Breton Highlanders.

One of the ships in the convoy was the Santa Elena of the Grace Line. Along with other troops and some very valuable 2 Echelon records from London, she carried the personnel of 14 Canadian General Hospital from Montreal.

At 6:11 P.M. on November 6th while those at the first sitting for supper were enjoying their evening meal, there was a loud crash and the ship leaned to one side. Two waves of German planes were attacking the convoy. The first group carried radio-guided glide bombs, and the second, torpedoes. The Santa Elena was hit by one of the bombs at the waterline knocking out the engines and flooding the engine room. Two other ships were hit - a Dutch ship carrying British troops, and H.M.S. Beatty, one of the escorts.

Six planes were shot down - one by the gunners on the Monterey. Our boys reported seeing daylight through a hole in the fuselage after a blast from their 30 Bren guns firing together at point blank range. The aircraft broke our ship's antenna as it went out of control into the sea. The Santa Elena also reported shooting a plane down.

The S.S. Monterey was designated the rescue ship shortly after action stations was sounded at 6:11 P.M. Preparations were made to bring survivors aboard in total darkness. This was rough for so many smokers who would not dare light up for fear of attracting more trouble. Scramble nets went over the side, life boats were dispatched, and all those who had not been assigned specific jobs waited on a big grey ship stopped in a very dangerous sea.

The first survivors to come aboard were nurses. They were exhausted from the fifty-five foot climb up the nets, and less than complimentary to the lifeboat crew members who made them row the life boats. We might well wonder today who else there was out there to help with the rowing. On the other hand, they had high praise for the bashful young orderly who raided the ship's dispensary and found enough prophylactics to protect each nurse's watch from moisture and salt water,

Regulations stated that a nurse had to be twenty-five years old before she could go overseas. This is one good reason why the term "Sister" fitted so well for many of us who were several years younger. One sister, very tired from the long climb in the dark, thought someone was speaking to her when he said "I've got her". She let go and fell

the 55 feet back into the sea. Fortunately the life boat went out with the swell and she fell between it and the ship. When she hit the deck the second time, many young soldiers heard language they had never heard from a sister before.

The officers of the ship, and I'm sure some military officers aboard, were embarrassed when they realized that they could not offer the nursing sisters a change of clothing, a lipstick, or even a bobby pin. However the oversized men's underwear tops made for some light-hearted remarks when modeled by our new-found sisters.

Dr. Bert Oja of Winnipeg was one of some sixty-five dentists under the command of Dr. Jack Edgecombe of Rothesay, N.B., who were aboard the Santa Elena. Bert was with our Regiment at one time in England and was the first of the survivors that I recognized. Although he had dislocated a shoulder when he jumped from the ship, his first request on our ship was "Get me a cigar".

At about 3:30 A.M. on November 7th, Monterey received word from the destroyer which was standing by, that an enemy submarine was in the area. We were underway and soon at full speed in a southerly direction. We rescued 1,644 Canadians from the Santa Elena and 31 from the Dutch ship, plus 322 crew members. That meant the Monterey had about 6,000 bodies aboard. Her wartime maximum accommodation is listed as 4,150. Only four lives were lost in the action.

By early morning on the 8th we were at anchor in the harbour at Phillipville (Skikda) Algeria. Space was reorganized and shipboard routine resumed. During the afternoon an American destroyer attempted to come along side to take off some of the survivors, but the swells were so strong and it's superstructure so tall, that there was great danger of collision. The thought of taking people off was abandoned.

While many of us were watching this procedure with great interest, we noticed tug boats towing a large grey ship toward the shore on our starboard side. It was the Santa Elena - her stern low in the water. It soon became apparent that an attempt was being made to beach her. That effort was thwarted when the aft bulkhead burst. With a great gusher of air and water the stern went down, struck the bottom and as the ship turned on it's side, we saw Capt. William Renout dive off the bridge into the sea. There were few dry eyes on our ship. But we were brought back to reality by a sudden blast from the bridge demanding at least half the troops go to the port side to help balance our ship.

Early the next morning, November 9th, Monterey was at sea again - alone except for two naval escorts. We sailed in a northerly pattern under clear skies. I'll always remember sailing past the Isle of Capri in full moonlight when suddenly the ship turned hard to starboard and fortunately for me, who was in an unprotected "out-of-bounds" area near the forward funnel, returned quickly to level. We later learned that a floating mine had been spotted dead ahead.

On November 10th Monterey worked her way through Naples' harbour which was full of sunken ships, to a large commercial pier where we disembarked for an eighteen-month visit to Italy. We later learned that S.S. Monterey, having completed her assignment, sailed in three hours - a remarkable turn-around time after such an unusual voyage. She sailed for New York where she embarked 4,082 soldiers for Honolulu. Captain Johanson, Master of the S.S. Monterey was given a commendation from the Commander of Destroyer Squadron 16, and later was awarded the Merchant Marine Distinguished Service Medal for the rescue operation.



Our little Advance Party had been part of the action but not responsible for much productivity until we reached Casoria, north of Naples, later that day. There we were dumped in a vineyard without wheels, kitchen equipment or shelter. Capt. McEwen demanded and received the full support from all of us as we scrounged tents and an old truck. To protect ourselves and our supplies, we had to mount a 24-man guard which was an unexpected drain on our work force. We made tent pegs from knocked out electric railway power cables. We put up enough tents to shelter a Regiment while taking over the wheeled vehicles of the 4th County of London Yeomanry of the British 7th Armoured Division. (The Desert Rats). To add insult to injury, it rained for eleven days and eleven nights. Only tracked vehicles could get the huge E.P.I. tents to their proper locations. All of the vehicles had been across the North African Desert - no horns, no brakes, very few spare parts, transmissions and rear ends full of sand. One day Sgt. Jim McRae told me he needed eight carburetors just to get the trucks started. That was before he could check to see if they were mobile.

Meanwhile "Rosa da Rose" wanted to wash our clothes for a few lira. Fraternization with the locals was very dangerous since a little friendship cost us anything that wasn't secured by an armed guard.

Just before the Regiment arrived, we had a visit from Major Gen. Guy Simonds, Commander, 5th Armoured Division. He congratulated us for a lot of hard work under difficult conditions but concluded his remarks by condemning the neat and orderly arrangement of the pup tents in the Sqn. lines. We often wondered which would have been worse - to get it from Simonds, or a blast from L/Col G.W. (George) Robinson if he had found the tents scattered all over the place to distract enemy air attackers. Fortunately we didn't have to find out since he arrived with the Regiment after dark. The Regiment arrived in Naples earlier that day, December 1st, on the "Cameronia". Even with a light meal and a cup of tea, not a kind word was heard about the Advance Party as the boys crawled into wet pup tents in the dark and the mud.

Regi<sup>ae</sup>~~s~~ Patrique Fidelis

P.S. S.S. Monterey sails on today as a<sup>u</sup> cruise ship. She has had several face lifts and names. She was launched as the S.S. Monterey in 1931, became the S.S. Matsonia in 1957, then the S.S. Lurline in 1963. In 1970 she was sold to a Greek line, Chandris, and was renamed S.S. Britanis. Her home port is Miami from where she runs three and five-day cruises. However, once each year she does a 50-day circumnavigation of South America. It was on this latter cruise in 1991 that I was honoured to participate at her 60th birthday party by presenting the Master, Captain Iakovos Korres, with a copy of my scrapbook. On the same occasion, my wife Margaret, presented a hand-drawn, framed birthday card which has been permanently mounted on the wall of the ship's library.

P.P.S. My special thanks to Ron Lisson who let me know that the S.S. Monterey was still sailing; to A.J. Paul LaPrairie for excerpts from the War Diary of the Irish Regiment; to the late Dr. Jack Edgecombe and the late Dr. Munroe Bourne and to Lincoln Nice for details about the Santa Elena; and to all others who provided pertinent information.