

THE OFFICIALLY AUTHORIZED STORY OF 52 FIFTY-SECOND BATTALION 52 ITS RECORD IN FRANCE, BELGIUM AND CANADA

Published Exclusively in The News-Chronicle by Arrangement

The men were much worried at this time as to the prospect of not being sent overseas as a Battalion. As a matter of fact, it looked as though it were going to remain in Port Arthur all winter. The Colonel promised to do everything in his power to have us sent across to the other side. He was informed, however, that it was impossible to send the Battalion over at present, but that he could have his choice as to which town the unit should winter in. He explained to the men that if the Battalion were sent to the seacoast it would in all probability be the first to go overseas, should a sudden call for more troops come, as it would be very handy for transportation. Accordingly, with the consent of all, he asked for the Battalion to be sent to St. John, New Brunswick, and within a very short time the order came back authorizing the Battalion to proceed to that place.

On November 3rd, 1915, camp was struck and the entire unit moved into the Armoury at Port Arthur, where it remained all day, and that night, in the midst of a snow storm, the 52nd Battalion of Port Arthur and Fort William, marched aboard two trains, and left its depot town to answer the call of the Colours.

CHAPTER III.

OUTWARD BOUND.

How many of you people who braved the rigours of that stormy night in November, 1915, will ever forget the scene of what was, for many, the last leave taking. Oh! you brave hearted mothers and wives and sisters and sweet-hearts. You smiled and cheered and tried to radiate the pride you felt in the boys who were marching away to unknown dangers, with your gerbions next to their hearts. Do you think there were many who failed to guess the ache and pain that tugged at your heartstrings as you wondered would "he" come back? All honor to you who made the great venture worth the undertaking.

In the memorable march to the entraining point, every "four" in that living column became a "six." The hardest moment came when the Battalion reached the station. When the last kiss had been exchanged, and the last handshake given, the Battalion marched aboard the two trains, ready for the plunge into the great conflict. As the trains slowly pulled out of the station, an immense wave of cheering rose from young and old, and every car window was crowded with men looking back for a last glimpse of those they were leaving behind. Well may they have taken their fill of loving and yearning glances, for within the short space of a few months, many of these healthy, red blooded men were to consecrate the soil of Europe with the noblest blood Democracy had to offer.

As the trains rushed on with gathering momentum, the men tried to relieve the strain of parting by assuming a light-hearted unconcern that few of them felt. Much speculation was indulged in as to when the Battalion would arrive in St. John, how long it would be before orders would come for Overseas, and a few thousand and one other things that helped to keep their minds off the picture of the station back at Port Arthur.

Accommodations were very good, indeed. There was no complaint as to either the quantity or quality of food. Plenty of reading material, cards and snooks were available, and everyone settled down to the routine of train life. At various stops that were made enroute, the Battalion fell in for slight exercise, to prevent stagnation and loss of appetite. At Ottawa the Battalion was formed up and prepared for a parade to the Parliament Buildings, where the Duke of Connaught and Sir Sam Hughes were to inspect it. With the band playing a stirring military air, heads up and shoulders thrown back the Battalion swung up the avenue with that famous "greyhound stride" that ate up distance, and in front of the imposing buildings of Parliament the Battalion lined up for inspection. His Highness was very much pleased with the military bearing of the unit, and told the men that he had great hopes of what they would do. He also stated to the officers that this was the first time a Canadian Battalion had been taken off the train at Ottawa for inspection by himself. After a few more words of advice and commendation, the Battalion was marched back to the trains and once again the journey towards St. John was resumed. While enroute to this city, Hon. Captain Allison, of Dryden, Ontario, chaplain, joined the Battalion. He immediately began making the acquaintance of all the men, and made a very favorable impression on all with whom he came in contact.

The only incident that marred the trip was the death of Private James Brown, "D" Company, who contracted pneumonia, and although every effort was made to pull him through, he succumbed before the Battalion reached St. John. He was buried there with full military honours, Captain Allison performing the ceremony, and Sergeants Head and D. Gordon conducting the firing party. Both of these Non-commissioned Officers were fated to meet their deaths on the field shortly afterward.

The two trains pulled into the station of the beautiful and historic city of St. John Sunday morning, November 8th, after five nights and four days continuous travel, and were greeted with a wave of enthusiastic cheering by an immense gathering of citizens; and the whole heartedness of this welcome was accentuated by the fact that the people had come out in the face of a very heavy storm.

It is a peculiar fact and coincidence that practically every big movement of the Battalion has taken place in a storm. Besides the occasions already mentioned, the unit had a very stormy trip across the ocean, reached England in a storm, encountered a blizzard at the French entry port, made its first trip into the line in a storm and arrived at LaHavre on its way back to Canada in a storm. Its final appearance as a Battalion, when it marched to St. Paul's Church, Fort William, was in the midst of a heavy snow-storm. It would appear from this that the Battalion was fated for a stormy time, but with that indomitable spirit that is the heritage of free-born men, it steered a straight course towards the goal of victory and successfully weathered every gale.

As the Battalion detrained, the Mayor and city officials of St. John, in the name of the people of the town, extended a hearty and cordial welcome to every member of the Battalion. A band was at the station to escort the unit, and amid continued cheering, the Fifty-Second started off for the Exhibition buildings and the Armouries. The "greyhound pace" of the Battalion soon "put the wind up" on the city band, and it had to stop for breath, but our own band took up the strain, and carried on. It is a peculiar fact that the rapid pace which was the result of Col. May's training in Port Arthur and Grestley Park has never been wholly overcome under succeeding Commanding Officers, and even in France and Belgium, when the men were marching fully equipped, that same rapid pace was an outstanding feature of the Battalion.

The quarters in the Exhibition Buildings and the Armouries were very comfortable, and the people of St. John extended themselves to make the men feel perfectly satisfied and at home. Besides the homes that were hospitably thrown open to the men, the Union Club extended its privileges to the Officers, and every effort was made to entertain and please all ranks. One of the many little kindnesses shown was the offer by Miss Hill, a local choir-pollster, to attend to the feet of all members of the Battalion without charge. Many of the men took advantage of this generous

offer and later, when long route marches were the order of the day, had good reason to be grateful for her kind, if prosaic ministrations.

It was while in St. John that the complete Oliver equipment and new Mark III Ross rifles were issued. Although this rifle was a splendid weapon for accurate firing, it was not constructed to meet the wet and muddy conditions that were met with in the trenches of Flanders and France, and was, subsequently changed for the famous and efficient Short Lee-Enfield. Here also, the warm-hearted people asked for the privilege of presenting the Battalion with a set of Colours, but Col. Hay, in a very touching address, told the city officials that although he would always cherish the splendid generosity that prompted this action, and felt that the Battalion was highly honored by the offer, he could not accept it, as the Twin Cities in which the Battalion had been raised, had already promised to present the unit with Colours.

Every one had settled down to hard work with the expectation of wintering in St. John, when the joyful news was received that the Battalion would embark for England on the 23rd of November. To say that the men were pleased would be putting it mildly. All ranks felt that at last they were to be given an opportunity to strike a blow for the cause. They could hardly wait for the 23rd to come.

Finally the order came for the Battalion to prepare for embarkation, to parade fully equipped for the field. Thousands of men, women and children lined the streets as the men marched down to the ship. The docks were packed with wildly cheering people. As the troops went up the gang plank of the S. S. California, one woman ran forward and thrust a beautiful black cat into the arms of Corporal Cox, saying "Keep it, it will bring the Battalion luck." (This mascot is still in the latter's possession, he having given it to his wife to care for, when the Battalion left England.)

That afternoon the hawsers were cast off the propellers began to churn and to the tunes of "Oh Canada," "The Maple Leaf Forever," and "Old Lang Syne," played by the Battalion band, the great steamer slowly and majestically moved off, and out of the ken of the people who had been very kind to the "strangers within their gates" and who will ever live in the hearts of those who tasted of their hospitality.

Before leaving the shores of Canada, a digression is necessary to mention the adoption of the Battalion badge. Being a new unit, no crest existed, and an effort was made to adopt a suitable insignia. There is no definite record of this, but it is believed that a committee was appointed which, after a considerable amount of discussion and wrangling, finally selected the present design. Messrs. D. R. Dingwall and Co., of Winnipeg, made the first lot. While the matter was in the first stages of discussion, Col. Hay originated a design to portray the alleged "backwoods" character of the Battalion. The central design was to be a cross canoe and rifle. The Commanding Officer made a little sketch and proudly exhibited it to the various officers, till one bright Sub guilelessly inquired if the design represented a crossed cigar and toothpick. This so dampened the Colonel's spirits that he sadly put away his sprouting idea and said no more about it.

The officer's shoulder badge was adopted after the Battalion arrived in England, and was, it must be admitted, shamelessly copied from the shoulder badge of the Fiftieth Battalion. The officers' button design did not develop till 1917, in France, and the first design was greatly improved upon through the efforts of Major E. R. C. Wilcox, D.S.O. The Battalion Colours will be dwelt on at a later date.

Up to the present incidents, the Battalion, with the exception of a few minor unpleasant incidents that make up the sun and substance of all organizations, had gone through a very enjoyable period. The trip across the ocean was one of the most disagreeable experiences it underwent. A heavy gale was encountered all the way over, and almost every one was seasick. Spasmodic attempts were made to induce the men to come on deck for exercise, but in most cases these attempts were attended with poor success. Major Young had one squad on deck which he tried to put through physical drill and whom he frequently checked for failure to stand steady; but on one occasion the ship lurched over to such a degree, that not only did it upset his equilibrium, but it gave him a thorough ducking, and from that time till the ship arrived in port he abstained from any further reference to the unsteadiness of his men.

Little of interest took place to break the monotony of ship-board life. By one of the ironies of military life, the food was excellent, but no one seemed to have much appetite. The quartering accommodations was very poor, due to the large number of troops on board.

A few days out, a very tragic incident was witnessed by the men. A sailor was cuning out of the crew's nest, after having completed his tour of watch, when a heavy sea almost threw the ship on its broadside. The man lost his hold and was thrown down on a winch below, where almost every bone in his body was broken. He was killed instantaneously. The "burial at sea" took place the following day.

As the ship neared the Irish Coast the spirits of all rose to a remarkable degree. After what had seemed like an interminable age, the "California" steamed into Plymouth Harbor and went alongside the dock. Disembarkation proceeded at a rapid rate, and when the last man had left the ship, all breathed a sigh of relief at being once more on solid ground. On one of her subsequent trips the "California" was sent to the bottom by a German submarine.

Little time was lost after the landing on December 3rd. The Battalion proceeded by rail for Witley Camp in Surrey, detraining at Milford. The march was taken up at Witley, and about half way the band of the Imperial Gloucester Regiment met the Fifty-Second and played it into camp. Here a magnificent welcome and reception was arranged for us by this Regiment. A big feed, lots of beer (undiluted), smokes and music were ready; and as every body was hungry and cold when they got into camp, ample justice was done to the generous fare provided by the "Tommys." The entire cost of the entertainment was defrayed by the rank and file of the Regiment, and when the extremely small pay of the Imperial troops is taken into consideration, the open-heartedness and generosity was doubly marked.

The Fifty-Second was the first Canadian Battalion to be brigaded with Imperial troops and consequently was the eye-bearer of all eyes. Most of the units at Witley were part of Kitchener's famous army, including the Sussex Regiment, King's Royal Rifles, Argyle and Sutherlanders, Royal Irish Fusiliers, Middlesex Regiment, Imperial Cyclist Corps, and others. On parade they impressed their Canadian cousins with their fine military bearing and discipline. Off parade they were just a bunch of good hearted chaps, who did their best to make things pleasant for their overseas brothers-in-arms.

(To Be Continued.)

NOTE—This story of the Fifty-Second Battalion, with illustrations, will be published shortly in book form and may be purchased at the usual price.