

FROM a hill-top high above the blue basin of Wellington's harbour, where wind and sheep trim bushes of gorse and manuka to shapes quaint and fantastic, I saw the troopships pass out to sea on such a summer morning that only happiness should have been abroad. We had gone there because, from that peak over 800 feet above the water, the harbour, Cook Strait, the ocean's blue plain, and the Kaikoura Ranges contribute to the making of a superb view. From there we would see the ships when they began to move on the first stage of their long journey to Egypt; our eyes could follow their passage down the harbour; we would see them disappear into the grey mist which is the horizon and the sea. We were possessed by the feeling that there, above the immense pattern of land and water, we would have the silence worthy of a memorable hour.

No morning has been more lovely for a farewell; no scene or setting more majestic as we saw it. There were three of us, lying near to heaven, it seemed, in the warm sunshine of the summer morning. A lark hung fluttering above us, chanting an aria to the new day and the very air and the valleys all around us were made alive by that song.

"I could forgive you," said one companion, "if you quoted from Masfield's 'Gallipoli.'" I am forgiven, then, for this is how Masfield described the troopships leaving Mudros for Gallipoli on such a morning in April, 1915:

"Then the bay is like a blue jewel, and the hills lose their savagery and glow and are gentle, and the sun comes up from Troy and the peaks of Samothrace change colour and all the marvellous ships in the harbour are transfigured."

That might have been a description of Wellington Harbour only a few short weeks ago when our men set out once more on their long journey, the end of which no man knows nor yet presumes to foretell. I had risen at a quarter to four, glanced from my window on the heights of Kelburn to see the troopships far below me wrapped in the opal dust of early morning, their lights still winking like golden spangles. Half an hour later, I was skirting the harbour, the morning air sharp about my ears, the glad noise of singing birds louder than the droning of the engine. The harbour waters scarcely moved, save where the current eddied round the anchored ships. Beyond was the dented line of the Orongorongos, porcelain blue and soft against a softer sky, tinted now with the primrose of the rising sun. A few cars passed me, racing into the city. Along the Petone waterfront, the first watchers were gathering in the dawn.

I found my friends at Day's Bay and from there I watched the windows of Wellington trap the first rays of the sun, throwing them back until the hills took on the jewel-like quality of a huge spider's web, hung with dew. Then on through Eastbourne, to leave the car at the end of the road and climb the hills to our chosen vantage point. Only the

THE SHIPS GO BY

By O. A. Gillespie

birds seemed really alive. I remembered such a morning nearly a quarter of a century ago when I had been one of the men on such a ship as those which lay below. Now my memories were like a dream only half remembered.

The air was rich with the freshness of the morning — the scent of manuka, the pungency of sea-water, wet grass. We climbed almost silently, except for the crunch of shoes on loose rubble. Four

abreast of the Wahine. Salutes from the ferry steamer's siren rose up to us like a solemn cry and continued as she passed each troopship. Puffs of steam from her funnel hung in the air long before we heard the sound.

Soon the leading ship of the line had slipped behind the hill's gaunt shoulder to our left and the flagship was far below, moving in measured beauty as the other ship had done, scarcely leaving a



Last up the gangway

maggies made music in a grove of manuka, one hopping on the ground, the others an audience noisy with warbling. Up and up until we reached the summit, there to wait, in the increasing sunshine, for the ships to move away.

To our left the Wahine appeared, a smudge at first, then a moving toy. And almost at the same moment H.M.A.S. Canberra crept round Point Halswell. That was the beginning of a noble procession. Masfield describes such a scene far better than I can in his memorable and moving prose of "Gallipoli":

"Ship after ship, crammed with soldiers, moved slowly out of the harbour in the lovely day, and felt again the heave of the sea . . . and the beauty and the exultation of the youth upon them made them like sacred things as they moved away."

Soon the flagship of the convoy turned her bow towards the heads. By this time the Canberra was below us, coming

wake in the water. One by one the other transports followed, each in turn adding its grandeur to the leisurely line, and last, in paternal majesty, H.M.S. Ramillies, her great guns ominously powerful even at that distance. How slowly those ships moved! Not even the gentleness of the morning breeze turned the smoke from their stacks; behind them, running into infinity, followed only the vaguest line of broken water.

Tiny boats which had ventured from the shore to wave farewell were like seagulls. Two airplanes, silver gulls in the sun, droned in their own blue sea above, following the troopships out into the Strait. Sounds came up to us, magnified by the height. As each ship passed Fort Dorset, cheering broke out anew, the traditional three cheers of Britain, to be answered by New Zealand's manhood bound for unknown trials and ad-

venture. A long line of motor-cars, so small they looked like ants, crept along the coast road through Seatoun and the bays facing Cook Strait. We could see them, an endless chain, without the aid of field-glasses; hear the hooting of their horns as each ship passed through the Heads. From them, as from the neighbouring hills, thousands of eyes were watching, as many of them had watched a quarter of a century ago. Let me quote another passage of Masfield's beautiful prose, also from "Gallipoli":

"They left the harbour very, very slowly; this tumult of cheering lasted a long time; no one who heard it will ever forget it, or think of it unshaken. It broke the hearts of all there with pity and pride; it went beyond the guard of the English heart."

Soon we had moved forward to the crest of another hill. Now the line of ships stretched in a vast curve for miles out to sea. The Canberra had turned, headed into Cook Strait. Because we wished it, I think, we imagined we saw the grey shapes of the troopships coming from Lytton, escorted by H.M.S. Leander, crossing near the coast of the South Island to join the convoy off the Marlborough Sounds. Tapaeunuka, the snow-capped peak of the Kaikouras, rose in solitary splendour above a bank of sea mist which wrapped the South Island in a shroud.

So we lay there in the sun. Conversation came jerkily of everyday, trivial things, each of us, I think, with eyes that smarted. Flies droned out of the manuka warning us of the coming heat. Crickets began scratching all around us. We ate our sandwiches, drank tea hot from a flask. We talked of the lighthouse far below and guessed the distances as the ships, so much a part of us, turned in a long, long line and merged into the grey of distance and the sea. We stayed till they were lost to sight, all except the Ramillies. She seemed to have gathered speed and crept past the last ship of the line. As we walked down the hill again we saw her, like an aluminium toy, slowly moving behind the blunt tip of Cape Terewhiti.

Men of the 1st Echelon of the 2nd New Zealand Division had left us, proudly as many of their fathers had done a quarter of a century before them and, as Masfield wrote of the heroes of Gallipoli, "All they felt was a gladness of exultation that their young courage was to be used."

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