

THE TROOPS GO ABOARD

(By O.A.G.)

THE embarkation of units of the 2nd Echelon was a justification of military organisation and a monument to efficiency. There was not one hitch through the whole night. From the time the men began to climb the gangways after leaving their trains they were embarked at the average rate of 800 an hour. Old soldiers with hard memories of the last war stood in admiration and remarked of the organising officers as a whole: "Nice work, sir, nice work." Military praise can go no further.

From early evening until early the following morning (the day of departure) trains bearing the various units arrived from Palmerston North, Trentham and Papakura at their allotted times. Within minutes after the trains reached their destination on the wharves opposite the waiting troopships the men were aboard. Officers of each ship, accustomed to handling crowds quickly and without flurry, assisted the embarkation staff by meeting the men as they arrived on board and guiding them to their quarters by means of a helpful endless chain of stewards.

All through the day before embarkation began the public thronged the wharves where the troopships were berthed. Many people had waited from early morning in the hope that they might see relatives and friends as they marched to the ships. But there was no marching; no chance for a last-minute handshake or hurriedly whispered farewell message. At 4.30 p.m. the wharf gates closed, excluding the public from all embarkation areas. It was a necessary and essential measure if the work, planned long beforehand, was to be executed smoothly. Not until after midnight did the crowds cease fluttering their flags and handkerchiefs between the formidable barrier of iron railings. The moving material rose and fell like the wheeling of giant moths in the wan light. Just before dawn people were still there, vainly trying to win over the sentries who guarded the gates—but those sentries remained adamant.

Arrival of Maoris

First came the Maoris. Just before 5 o'clock cheers in the distance announced their approach. As the train bearing them came to rest beside the ship they drowned the noise of all activity by their singing. Those who heard it were inspired by the rich voices joined in harmony as night came down over the scene—their last night in New Zealand, lit now by arc lamps about the wharf, sheds and ships. Along the sides of each railway carriage the wits had chalked their grandiose threats and challenges — "Hitler's Palbearers," "Ready for Berlin," "Hitler, We're After You," and others more startling in their frankness.

The Maoris contributed to one of many memorable pictures that night as they disembarked on to the wharf. Dusk

had fallen over the calm harbour. Up and down the hills of the city lights sprinkled the gloaming with stars. High overhead searchlights were feeling about the sky with long, quick fingers. Every light whose reflection was held by the still waters became an orange flame dancing into infinity about the ships. Such scenes are not easily forgotten.

Many of those young Maoris stilled their singing to gaze in awe at the great ship in which they were to travel. Few of them had ever looked on one of such magnitude. Then, their wonder satisfied, they took up the thread of their song again or laughed at some companionable joke.

Farewelled by Ministers

In a few minutes all preliminary arrangements were completed by the waiting embarkation staff. Then, at the word of command, they mounted the gangway in single file, still singing as they disappeared into the entrance lobby of the largest ship of the convoy. Near the foot of the gangway stood the Prime Minister, the Hon. P. Fraser, and the Minister of Defence, the Hon. F. Jones, who wished the men farewell and chatted with them as they went by. Flashing lights revealed that the camera men were busy, recording the scene for posterity.

As soon as they reached their quarters the men stowed their kits and proceeded to enjoy the first shipboard meal. Two hours later I went through the ship. Nobody was gazing mournfully into the night and dwelling on the beauty of the scene. In a large and comfortable lounge hundreds of Maoris were seated round small tables. Piles of the matches and the flutter of innumerable packs of cards seemed to indicate that some game of stern importance was in progress. Others were busy reading or writing letters. A musician played one of the pianos, round which a group sang choruses. The air was heavy with smoke; the room echoed with laughter. Here and there young men in naval uniform were already making new friends or joining in the games.

That story of efficiency and the laughter born of content was repeated on the other ships throughout the night. By 9 o'clock more singing and cheering told us that the Trentham men were coming. I watched them from the upper deck of another great liner. Carriages emptied swiftly to order as the men took up their positions in platoons on the wharf, moving to the accompaniment of gales of laughter and a stream of banter. A few minutes later they, too, were mounting the gangway, each man answering the roll and receiving an embarkation ticket as he filed past the responsible officers. There were no irritating waits, no grumbling and no cause for the usual army grouch of "fiddling" about, for the organisation was complete to the last detail. And how the men appreciated that swift action; they called for cheers for one officer just before they marched on board.

No matter what hour of the night the men arrived on board there was a meal of some kind ready for them. As soon as they had stowed away their gear and exchanged their boots for deck shoes, they were free to find their way about the ships and admire the comfort of their homes for the next few weeks.

Troops Filmed

The men from Trentham were also filmed, this time by cameras from the Government Film Studios whose Kleig lights made the night more brilliant than the beams of any sun. It was a great opportunity for the lads to exploit their wit and "wisecracks" as they came opposite the cameras—the stage was theirs, and they took full advantage of the moment.

From the top deck of this huge liner, towering above the roofs of the sheds, the wharf itself made a futurist picture. Pools of garish light swam among deep shadows where groups of officers and officials walked and talked and waited for the arrival of the next trains. Cranes spread their powerful mechanical arms

into the pools, grasping goods and equipment and swinging them aboard with inhuman ease. The wharves were cleared as if by magic. Strains of music issuing from the public rooms of the ship lent further magic to this eventful night. Down below, on deck after deck, the men were busy showing each other their cabins, testing the beds, peering into cavernous wardrobes, joking at their reflections in full-length mirrors. No passenger ship was ever filled with a happier cargo of tourists.

Not until the early hours of the morning of departure did the Papakura men arrive, tired after their long train journey. But they still sang and jested, jolly-ing each other as the ship gathered them to its comfortable interior. Soon they were asleep, but the stowing of gear and supplies went on until dawn.

And then, as alarm clocks roused Wellington workers to another day in the city, the great ships severed their links with New Zealand and pulled out into the stream to await the hour of departure. The 2nd Echelon was definitely on its way.

DEPARTURE JOTTINGS

Vice-Regal

Quietly and unobtrusively, the Governor-General, Lord Galway, walked on to the troopship on which the Maoris had embarked. He wished to see for himself how they were faring before the voyage began. After spending some time looking at the various appointments of the ship, His Excellency went below to see the men having their first meal on the giant troopship. The following morning, accompanied by Colonel O. H. Mead, D.S.O., Lord Galway went round the troopships by launch.

Then—Now

At the foot of the gangway to one troopship a soldier stood on guard, an elderly man. One glance at his tunic told its tale of the last war. His gallant show of ribbons began with the Military Cross, a tiny silver star revealed that he had received a bar to that cross. Thus an officer of the last war plays his part in this on the home front — as a private soldier.

Superlative

Old lady, proudly pointing to the largest of the transports, explains to her grand-child: "There's the great big ship. Doesn't it make a tiny little boy feel like a very, very tiny little boy?"

Parcels

Piles of parcels and letters were delivered to the office of the Embarkation Staff on the day the units went abroad. There they were sorted into groups for each transport and safely delivered. Many people were afraid that their last-minute parcels would not be delivered. There was no need to worry. Any parcels left at the Embarkation Office are put on the right ships. This will apply to all future departures of convoys.

Proof

Here is proof of how parcels were delivered in the last-minute rush. One girl

had flown from Picton to deliver a parcel to a friend, thinking that she would be allowed on the wharf, or would see him as he marched to the ship. When she found that the trains ran close to the ship, and that she would be lucky if she saw her soldier even in the distance, she was on the verge of tears. A few minutes later she saw an officer on the wharf, told him her story, and gave him the parcel. Her soldier received it ten minutes later, and she was placed where she could wave to him.

Tears

Another girl, this one in tears, did not arrive until the troopships had pulled out into the stream. Then, because worry had taken such possession of her, she missed sending it out by the Harbour Board's tug. After listening to her story, an officer from headquarters despatched the parcel in a swift launch.

Courage

At midnight a soldier walked on to the wharf to rejoin his unit, already embarked. His daughter had died a week previously and he had been given leave of absence until midnight on the night of the embarkation. The authorities wished to delay his departure until a future echelon, but he felt that he would rather go with the unit to which he was attached and with which he had been training. That, also, was the wish of his brave wife.

"Oil"

Army expressions are very much to the point. Nothing could be more apt than phrases which describe activities both great and small. One of the greater activities was the embarkation of units of the 2nd Echelon, the organisation of which was the work of the Quartermaster General's branch at Army Headquarters. "Running in a bath of oil" was how the army described the embarkation.