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WAR DIARY

FOR THE SECOND TIME, FAREWELL

(By O. A. Gillespie)

HOW still the harbour was; how warm the air. No waves, but just a brimming lake under a silver cocoon of mist. Hills and harbour and city wore the colours of opal and amethyst, and in that soft light, under lowering clouds, all harsh outlines were lost in gentleness.

Such was the miracle of autumn on the morning of farewell to ships of the 2nd Echelon. When the mist strengthened to gentle rain, those ships became opaque shapes on the water, like something from a painting by Whistler.

Once more we were witness of a day to remember—only one day in the cycle of 365 days, but a day to add to the calendar of New Zealand's history. Once again our men were leaving us to join their brothers in Egypt in the greatest of all adventures which Fate holds for man when his liberty is imperilled.

Through the long night men and materials had gone on board; between six and seven o'clock in the morning, while most of the men slept from weariness or the fatigue born of excitement, the great ships moved out into the stream. And through that long night people had watched, waiting behind the giant iron grill which barred them from the wharves, sustained by the hope of seeing, if only for one fleeting moment, the men so near to them.

When the ships pulled away, and the wharf gates were opened, they threw off their weariness like a discarded cloak and lined the quays, waving to faces in the frame of every porthole. But distance soon erased all character as the ships moved gently out on the sleeping waters, there to wait until time and tide should send them across the ocean's blue plain on a long journey destined to end at a port in the Homeland.

Each departure now must become a twice-told tale, but each has its separate memories. I thought, as I stood on the quayside with the gathering men and women from the city, of that January morning when the 1st Echelon sailed, and how the summer sun had painted the scene with sparkling light. Now, four months later, summer had slipped into autumn and another armada of courage was leaving this land to take a road not of its own seeking, but along which their high courage would take them unafraid. In January I had watched from a hill-top midway between sea and sky. This time, with the same steadfast companion, I would skirt the coast road to Island Bay and beyond until the rugged coast hid the ships from our sight.

Few among us knew the exact hour of departure, but such is the way of the telephone and the whispered word, we sensed that mid-day would be the hour. Soon after 11 o'clock we reached Point Halswell. Here, said my companion, we will wait until they begin to move.

Many waited there before us, straining to glimpse some movement against the grey bulk of the liners—their hope

born of faith that even at such a distance they might recognise someone they knew. The mist had lifted, but there was no sun. Here and there a soft breeze stirred long ribbons on the untroubled surface round and about the ships, making the solid reflections dance. Moving miniatures, which were in reality tugs taking out last minute mails and messages, slipped from ship to ship. A ferry steamer threaded itself among the convoy, crowded with those eager for one last wave to their soldiers—their own kin.

Among the rocks at our feet the flow of the tide busied itself in a gentle washing to and fro; only when the wake of a passing tug came blustering against them were we conscious of sound or disturbing movement. Sky and sea, the very air itself, were soft as a caress.

Far over the water, through the opal light, a long grey form, so low on the surface that one looked twice to see if it were really moving, slipped from behind the massive bulk of the largest troopship. At the same moment, the first ships of the line turned their bows to the Heads—turned so slowly that their swing might have been caused by the tide. But move they did, gathering speed as smoke began to stream from their stacks. Now the comforting shape of the warship was creeping up the line, faster and faster into her position at the head of the convoy. Close in she came, throwing up foam as her pace increased; her gleaming brasses lighting up her slim guns. Sailors waved as they went about their duties; cheers went over the water to them from grateful watchers on the shore. With such an escort their men would be in safe keeping.

Beyond her the first troopship, a study in black and gold, slipped forward like a huge yacht, her stacks set back jauntily as though for a race, her stern cut under as was the way with designers in her heyday. Soon all the ships lying in the harbour's basin were moving to the open sea.

We sped through the bays to Seatoun, there to stay awhile as the first transport took the narrow passage between the rocks at the harbour mouth. School children lined the fences, beflagged and cheering. Here about the waterfront and adjacent streets cars and people were massed, some silent, some lifting their voices that the men might hear them and be glad. Fort Dorset was crested with clumps of dark figures, cheering soldiers among them, and as the ships passed through the narrow seaway, swelling answers rolled back as each transport went by. Though they would watch the coastline all day until it became a long blue shadow behind them, this was their good-bye to New Zealand—their long farewell.

Beyond Fort Dorset we halted again. A continuous line of cars almost touched each other along the winding road above the beaches. Then on again, where we might watch to better advantage.

High above us on the right, making a swiftly-moving pattern against the sky, figures were running, bent forward as though to storm the ridge. Only schoolboys; but for that brief moment it might have been Gallipoli! Below them, in all their magnificence stretch, the coast and the sea, the Heads and the circling hills and the slow line of splendid ships they have climbed so high to farewell.

Fantastically ahead of us looms a pillar of rock crowned by a shag with outstretched wings, like a memorial to victory. Only a moving head, turning slowly to watch us, tells us that the bird is alive.

On and on, through each tiny bay where people wait and watch and wave. Cars line the route almost continuously. Beyond Island Bay the pageant spreads before us until the clouds seem to drop into the sea, bringing the horizon closer to us.

Beyond the giant bastion of Sinclair Head smudges of smoke tell us that the ships from the South Island will soon join the convoy. Away in front of us, under the heavy aluminium sky, the leading warship has turned into the Strait. The wind has risen, flecking the sea with dancing white crests. Like toys the stately ships move on their way against a curtain of cloud which threatens to blot them from sight.

We left them then, a long, majestic line on a great grey sea, growing smaller and smaller, soon to disappear into the mists of the afternoon of the first of many days at sea.

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