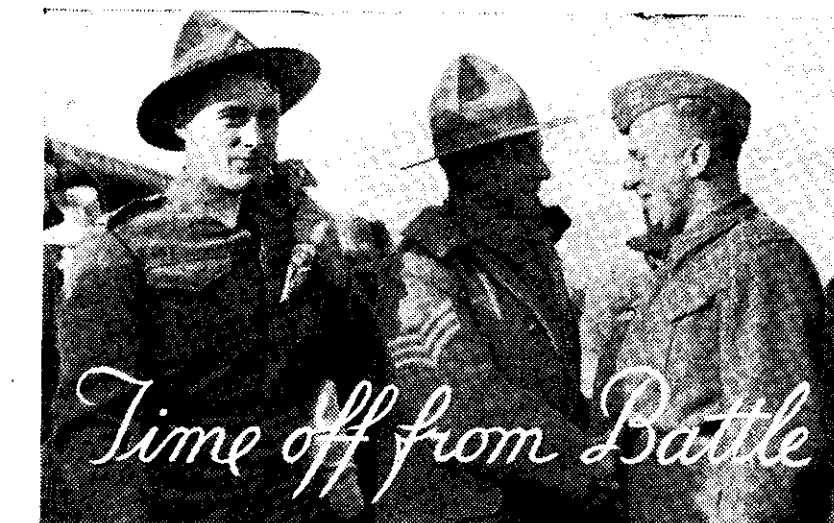


WHEN I found myself with a pass to the wharf, I was half afraid to go. It was not that I was one of the parents whose son would be missing. If he had been present, the strain would have been greater. Nor was it the ordinary embarrassment of meeting people whom one has not seen for years and who in the meantime have been through tribulation.

All those things counted—more perhaps than I realised. But the chief factor was a sense of sin. Since the war started, I had done nothing but keep myself comfortable. They had seldom been comfortable for 10 consecutive days and nights since they went away. I had done nothing but E.P.S. work, and even then found excuses for staying away when a parade was merely tiresome. They had sweated in dust and heat, shivered in the cold, gone hungry, thirsty, sleepless, endured boredom, loneliness, frustration, defeat, wounds, imprisonment, the loss of friends, and almost the loss of hope—all of them for three years and many for more than three. I had not been cold or hungry or thirsty or roofless one day since I saw them go; had given up nothing that I really needed; and even then had clung to it longer than was necessary. What face could I put on all that now?

THEN I passed round a shed and was among them, and it was not difficult at all. As the day wore on and I scrutinised them more closely, I saw signs of weariness and strain, but at first I saw no change in any of them. They could have been going away as easily as coming back: for they lie who say that war brutalises men or violently transforms them. I have seen armies return from three wars, and it has always been the same. Nine out of 10 are the men who went away—the jokers joking, the melancholy still gloomy, the dull unmoved, the sensitive exalted or distressed. Soldiers are, of course, the physical best of us—young, resilient, tough: but I have yet to see an army as worried looking as a Chamber of Commerce meeting or a Church Synod.

BUT by this time I was wandering about among them, exploring the long corridors, looking into the cabins,



A Civilian Looks At Some Soldiers — by "Home Front"

continually losing myself and being directed back to the places and people I was trying to find. On that great ship I set out to find three men—a private, a sergeant, and a high-ranking officer—and I found them (or had them found for me), in half an hour. No one was too busy to be bothered by me, no one too short of time. It struck me as odd when I entered the cabins to find so many men lying on their bunks with their blankets and kits still unpacked. Some were, of course, going off immediately, and most (but not all) of those, were ready. Others were staying till late afternoon, and the South Island men till the next morning — and it might easily have been till next week if one had judged by externals. It made me realise how much New Zealand had changed in 40 years. When the South African contingents returned, the first sight of New Zealand was to many quite overpowering; though most of us served for one year only, we were simple country lads who had never before left home. No one had seen an aeroplane or heard a voice across the waters or seen a sound film or conceived of it as a possibility that not only home news but the actual sights and sounds of home

should follow him round the world. To-day all those miracles are commonplace, and the world has shrunk as our vision has stretched. It is still possible to be home-sick, to be anchored to one house or farm or district and to be an alien anywhere else. But it is not common; and I did not know whether to envy or be sorry for men who had been three years on the other side of the world and could now play cards or read or sleep with home only a few hours away outside.

AT first it was a shock; after a little it was vastly consoling. It meant that Nature is kind and human nature tough. For three years these men had been exposed to all the horrors of which science is so far capable. Every day on land and most of their days and nights at sea they had risked the terror that lurked in the sand, that dropped out of the sky, that leapt at them out of the sea, that came whining across the horizon. There had been no safe place, and no silent place, and yet here they were back on their first furlough with most of their misery forgotten. I found it difficult to ask them about experiences which were already so far away.

I tried a young railway sapper, but he referred me to the infantry.

"They had the tough times. We just followed them up."

"What about Tobruk?"

"Yes, that was tough during the siege, but we were taken out after about four months."

"Benghazi, then?"

"Oh, that was a special stunt. We were flown there to get the Italian railway going, and got cut off. It scared me a bit getting away by sea, but the Navy chaps were doing things like that all the time."

When I tried the infantry, I was referred to the artillery, and so it went on. The only man who spoke freely and frankly was a brigadier, and he was answering a question about the Maoris. Were they really as good as report made them, or was that partly a romantic build-up?

They were better than the reports conveyed, he assured me.

"They are incredible. In battle they rise above themselves. It is a spirit of exaltation that it is not easy to explain. Their position in the Division is unassailable. I think they would beat any battalion in the world."

BUT no soldier looks like a fighter on the wet deck of a crowded transport. As I came away, it was not of battles I was thinking but of discipline. I have said that war had not changed these men. In the mass and as individuals they looked precisely as I had seen them when they sailed away. They were the same men. But I spent a half-day among them, and it suddenly dawned on me as I worked my way back to the gangway that I had never before heard so many men making so little noise. The explanation was that they were disciplined thousands—not a heel-clicking army, but men who had learnt to wait, to take their turn, to accept discomfort, to help, and not to talk. I recalled how little they had told me during those four crowded hours, how careful they were of their tongues even now that the journey and the dangers seemed over. They were, in short, an army—from the batmen to the brigadiers, disciplined soldiers—resting now, but not forgetting themselves, remembering the men who had not come home, and never losing sight of the fact that they were again going back.



SCENES THEY SAW: Reproductions of paintings by Captain Peter McIntyre, official war artist with the N.Z.E.F., who is among the men on furlough. (Left), New Zealanders in the famous long-range desert group. (Right), The wounded—New Zealanders and German prisoners lying together in a forward dressing station during the advance from Alamein