

# A LONG JOURNEY TO THE SOMME, 1917

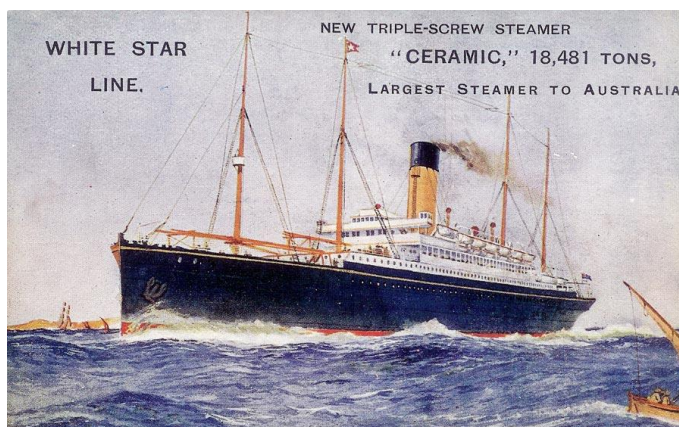
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*A further extract from the diary of a Darwen man who volunteered for the Fourth East Lancashire Regiment during the First World War.*

*Mrs Nellie Garner unearthed her late husband Albert's diaries of his wartime service while looking through a drawer of old papers in 1982. Mr Garner had died in May 1968 when he was 72. Their daughter, Connie, transcribed the diaries before passing them on to the Imperial War Museum. The directness and simplicity of his writing is particularly impressive as he had left school at 12 ½ years old and (in Connie's words) 'never pretended to be clever but he had learned how to write'. The only alterations she made were the placing of some full stops and paragraphing.*

“On Wednesday the 10<sup>th</sup> of January we left Ripon at 11.30am and arrived at Devonport on the 11<sup>th</sup> of January at 2.30a.m. I was then put on as a baggage guard, having to load the transport with the men's kit-bags. The men then proceeded to the rest camp and I went to the Docks as a guard over the kit-bags. We were on guard till 11.30 on the 11<sup>th</sup> January and we were wet through as it was raining hard all through the morning. At about 6 o'clock we were told to go and shelter on the training ship *Impregnable*<sup>1</sup> and here we got an excellent breakfast. The lads on here were only about 15 to 18 years of age and they had to rush about. They were up and doing at five o'clock in the morning, scrubbing the decks down. It was the old kind of ship used in the time of Nelson in the Trafalgar battle.

Well at 10 o'clock on the 11<sup>th</sup> our Company came marching up and we embarked on the H.M.T.S. Ceramic. She is a fine boat and belongs to the White Star Line. She is the largest boat that goes to Australia and she is going to Australia when she leaves us at Alexandria. There are three



thousand troops on board so you can tell how we were packed together. When all the troops were on board she was tugged out into the midstream ready to leave any time.

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<sup>1</sup> [Circe](#), launched in 1827, was *Impregnable IV* from 1916–1922.

She did not leave till 8.30a.m. on the 12<sup>th</sup> of January when as we sailed out of dock we received a great ovation from the men employed there. After about twelve hours sailing I began to feel very sick then I started vomiting. I vomited twice then got into my hammock for the night. When I awoke the next morning I felt a lot better and was able to knock about and eat a little, for after my previous experience I knew that it was better to eat and then I should not strain myself, so I got my food down alright and it kept down all the day and today when I am writing this, the 14<sup>th</sup>, I am feeling in the pink. We have done nothing yet but lounge about the deck but every man has to wear his life-belt as there is a danger of being torpedoed at any time. At about six o'clock this afternoon our Naval men who were on board looking after the six inch gun had a little bit of practice. They dropped 4 barrels overboard and when they were about two miles away they fired at them and broke them to bits. They were expert gunners and were reckoned to hit twice out of three times and by jove, they were crack gunners without a doubt.

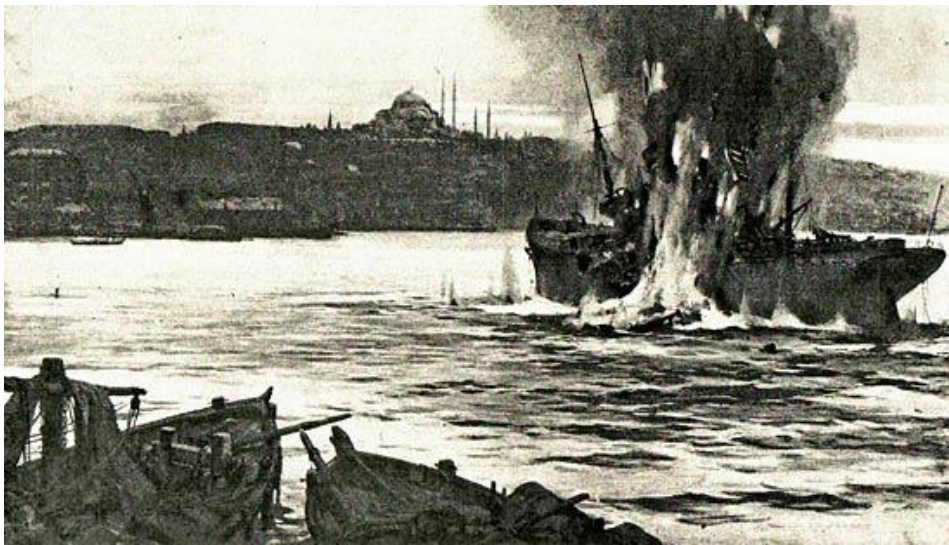
On the 15<sup>th</sup> of January everything went on as usual, nothing doing, no land in sight and sailing along steadily.

On the morning of the 16<sup>th</sup> at about 8 o'clock we sighted land which I found out to be the coast of Spain. We sailed along up the coast till we landed at Gibraltar at 12.30. We stayed in harbour till 2.a.m on the morning of the 17<sup>th</sup> and set sail for Malta.

While at Gibraltar I saw the sight of a lifetime. It is splendid to see the barracks at night all lit up and to see the Rock towering up in the darkness and the powerful searchlights shining right across the Straits on the coast of Spain at the other side. It must be seen to be believed. Words cannot describe the beautiful picture it presented. One would think when looking at it in the dark that it was a quiet little village nestling at the foot of a mountain instead of the finest fortified place in the world.

We went sailing along up the coast of Spain all the day on 17<sup>th</sup> and at night we made a dash for the coast of Africa and on the 18<sup>th</sup> we sailed along the coast of Algeria all the day and we were never within more than three miles from the coast all the time. Then on the 19<sup>th</sup> we hugged the coast of Africa all day and at about 3 o'clock in the afternoon we passed a convoy of French troops going to Salonika. We have had three alarms today. We landed here at Malta at 11 o'clock on the 20<sup>th</sup> and stayed in harbour till the 24<sup>th</sup>.

While in harbour we had some splendid concerts given by the sailors who were in dock, their boat being in for repairs. It was just alongside us and we did have some fine times. On the 23<sup>rd</sup> the submarine E2 came in for repairs but was called out again on the 24<sup>th</sup> and the submarine that did such a great deed at Gallipoli which we all heard about and whose commander won the V.C., the E11. She dived under 5 rows of mines and proceeded up the Straits and sank a Turkish transport. The crew of this boat got over a thousand pounds per man as prize-money.<sup>2</sup> This boat came right alongside us.



This is an artist's impression of the torpedoing of the Turkish transport steamer *Stamboul* by the Royal Navy's submarine E11 on 25 May 1915 at Istanbul.

We left Malta at 4 o'clock on the afternoon of the 24<sup>th</sup> and landed in Alexandria at 10 a.m. on the 27<sup>th</sup>. We disembarked the same day and proceeded to the rest camp at Mustapha. There we stayed about 4 days and then I, along with 11 others of the 14<sup>th</sup> E. Lincs. was picked out to proceed up the lines to join the boys in the desert. We left Mustapha at 9 o'clock and arrived at a place called Kantara at 6 o'clock in the morning, but bear in mind the carriages were not like they are in England. They are like cattle trucks and you are packed like cattle in them. Well we were in Kantara about 3 days when the Battalion came down from the desert and joined us on the 3<sup>rd</sup> Feb. 1917. And as you can guess I was busy talking all the time for a day or two. Billy<sup>3</sup> and I nearly went mad when we saw one another again. I saw all the boys I knew and I can tell you it was worth coming out for if it was only to see the old pals again. I saw E. Thompson, W. Bibby, D.R. Whittaker, J. Kerr, J. Ashworth and others who I knew in the second line. It **was** a day, and J. Waring is with our regiment now.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.rnsubmus.co.uk/nasmith/nasmith.htm>

<sup>3</sup> Billy Greenwood (C.G.)

The Battalion stayed here at Kantara<sup>4</sup> for about 3 days and then we set out on a 28 mile route march to a place called Ismailia. It was to be a two days march so we stayed for the night at a place called Eliferdam and then proceeded to Ismailia<sup>5</sup> the next day and arrived there at about



six o'clock at night. We then stayed here for a fortnight and handed in all our clothes, and we got winter clothes for France.

We set sail from Alexandria on the 23/2/17 and landed at Marseilles on the 2/3/17 and then we had a 50 hours train ride across France till we arrived at a place called Huppy<sup>6</sup> somewhere in France. I found out later that we were only about 40 miles behind the Somme front.

Today everything has been the same, nothing to do. We are stationed in a barn here, 56 of us in one place with the rats all over the place in swarms. We have heard the Guns all day today on the Somme. Today everything the same up to dinner time when after dinner we went to the nearest station which is about 6 miles from the village and we drew our steel helmets and the new short rifle and long bayonet so that we are ready for the trenches any time now.

Today the 11<sup>th</sup> of March is a Sunday and the lads have all gone on church parade but I have to stand by my billet ready to be called upon any time as I have been chosen for a splendid billet as orderly at the Brigade headquarters which means that I shall have to leave the Battalion and stay at headquarters. I shall have to take messages to and fro from the Brigadier General. If the division moves up to the trenches I shall have to stay behind where the General stays so that I shall always get a good night's sleep and I shall not have to do guards all the night through so I think myself very lucky indeed. They called me and he asked me if I could read and write well. I told him I could and that I did clerking with the Battalion at

<sup>4</sup> **Kantara** had been transformed from a small canal village into an important railway and water terminus, with wharves and cranes and a railway ferry; and the desert, till then almost destitute of human habitation, showed the successive marks of our advance in the shape of strong positions firmly entrenched and protected by hundreds of miles of barbed wire, of standing camps where troops could shelter in comfortable huts, of tanks and reservoirs, of railway stations and sidings, of aerodromes and of signal stations and wireless installations, by all of which the desert was subdued and made habitable, and adequate lines of communication established between the advancing troops and their ever receding base.

<sup>5</sup> **Ismailia** [a position on the Suez Canal]

<sup>6</sup> geographical location: **Abbeville**, Somme, Picardie, France, Europe (original name: **Huppy**). Abbeville is located on the [Somme River](#), 20 kilometres from its modern mouth in the [English Channel](#), and 30 miles northwest of [Amiens](#).

Southport so that he put my name down for the job. Of course it will be no easy job as I shall be up and down all the day carrying messages to and fro to all the battalions in our Brigade and they include the 4<sup>th</sup> and the 5<sup>th</sup> East Lancs. and the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> Manchester regiments so that I shall have some work to do but it is a jolly sight better than the trenches all day and night.

We left Huppy on the 27<sup>th</sup> March and marched to a place called Pont Remy<sup>7</sup> and we stayed there for about 6 days. While we were at Huppy, Billy got his first stripe. He is in command of a Lewis Gun Section.”

*(Part 2 of the Diary ends here)*

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<sup>7</sup> Pont Remy – 6 miles SE of Abbeville