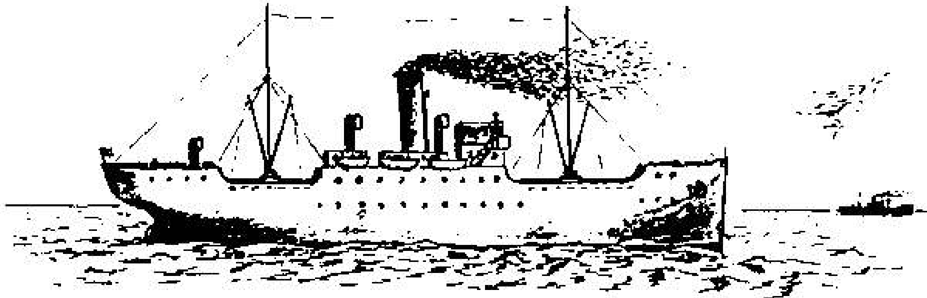
GETTING THERE IS HALF THE FUN!

(OVERSEAS TRAVEL - W.W.1 STYLE)



BY ALEX GRIFFITHS

Quite recently, I was looking back through some of the earlier issues of the Society Journal and came across the article, entitled "Airman Without Wings" (1970 edition), which told the story of my World War I experiences as a ground-wireless operator in the Australian Flying Corps. After re-reading it, I began recalling to mind some of the details of my voyage to England, aboard a troopship, in late 1916. As I feel that these might be of some interest to the members, I will relate them for you now.

After volunteering for service with the A.F.C., I was sent off to a camp at Laverton, in Victoria. We were there about a month. The troops were housed in bell-tents, each of which accommodated eight men, all sleeping in a circle, with our feet towards the centre pole.

The daily routine there consisted of drill, route-marches and then more drill, which soon became very monotonous. One of the "wags" in our outfit suggested that the letters of the word "AUSTRALIA", on our shoulder badges, stood for - "Are You Satisfied To Remain At Laverton In Agony?".

One of my mates was the camp bugler and it was his responsibility to get up at 6 am. each morning, go out onto the parade-ground and sound "reveille" - the signal for everyone to get out of bed. One day, in late November 1916, we were instructed to prepare for overseas embarkation the following morning. My mate got us of to a flying start because, instead of waiting until 6 am and going out onto the parade-ground, he simply poked his bugle outside the tent-flap and blew "reveille" an hour early! It didn't matter a great deal, however, as we were all pretty excited and just about everyone was already up, anyway.

With all of our worldly goods packed into our kit-bags, we climbed aboard big Leyland trucks, fitted with solid-rubber tyres, and set off on the first stage of our long journey. Everyone was in a happy mood and we sang "Baby Doll" and other popular tunes of the day as we drove from Laverton to the wharf at Port Melbourne. Upon our arrival, we found that we were to embark on the steamship "Hororata", but we were not informed of our final destination.

I had considerable difficulty in getting permission to go aboard the ship, because my army papers listed my age as 18 (In truth, I was only 16). Anyone under the age of 19 years was required to have parental consent before going on overseas service. The ship's departure time was postponed while the military authorities sent off to Laverton to try and get a replacement for me. I spent the next four hours desperately pleading with the boarding officer to let me go aboard. He finally handed me my papers and wished me the best of luck. I scrambled up the gangplank just as it was being removed from the ship's side.

The "Hororata" was an old cargo steamer with four holds, each of which had two lower decks. By the time I got on board, the rest of my section had already been allocated their positions in the ship, so I had to be shown where to go. From the main deck, we descended a temporary wooden staircase to A Deck and then down another flight of steps to B Deck, which was to be our home for the next several weeks.

Our "mess" consisted of a large number of wooden tables and benches, extending out from each side of the ship. Each of these tables sat approximately twelve men. At mealtimes, a couple of us had to take our turn as mess orderlies. We would carry two large "dixies" up to the open deck, collect the food for our table and return with it; ensuring that it was equally distributed amongst our companions. Discipline in the mess was quite strict and the orderlies were also responsible for scrubbing down the tables after use and replacing all of the eating utensils in storm-proof racks, ready for the Duty Officer's daily inspection.

Around 10 o'clock each morning, we went to the storeroom to collect what were known as "dry rations". These consisted of bread, butter, cheese and jam, which were in relatively plentiful supply. This, however, constituted our principal diet for the entire voyage, so it soon became rather monotonous. We tried various combinations, including sandwiches made with butter, cheese and jam, all mixed together!

For our midday meal, we received a plate of mutton stew and boiled potatoes - provided the weather was reasonably fine. As the "Hororata" was only a small ship, her engine-room boilers were not capable of supplying sufficient steam for general cooking purposes. The cooking boilers were very similar to ordinary household wash-boilers and were heated by coal fires. As they were located out on the open deck, they were almost totally useless in rough weather, because the sea spray, being constantly blown over the deck, made it impossible to keep the fires alight. Fortunately however, we were always assured of a hot cup of tea, because the water for this was heated by steam from the ship's own boilers.

The Christmas Dinner, served up to us on that voyage, is one that I shall always remember. It consisted of the usual mutton stew and boiled spuds cut, because of the rough weather that we were experiencing that day, it was only half-cooked and practically stone cold. We all decided that it vas quite unfit for human consumption and assembled on the upper deck to dispose of it in a fitting manner. One of the lads solemnly read the Burial Service and we then tipped the whole lot over the side, into the sea, as we sang "Nearer my God, to Thee".

For sleeping accommodations, each man was supplied with a canvas hammock, a blanket and a kapok-filled life-jacket, to be used as a pillow. At night, these hammocks were slung from steel hooks, attached to the deck-head, which were fixed so close together that the hammocks touched each other! If you were a bit slow in getting to bed, it was extremely difficult to climb into your hammock in the confined space between each of your neighbours.

Incidentally, each of the hammock hooks was numbered and every man was allocated a particular hammock space, which he was to occupy each night of the voyage. If you were unlucky enough to have a neighbour who snored, then that was just too bad! As if these sleeping arrangements were not bad enough, the steel rings, on each end of our hammocks, incessantly rubbed against the hooks, from which they were slung. Even in the calmest seas the horrible squeaking noises went on all night. As there was about sixty men sleeping in our particular hold, you can imagine what it sounded like - I shall never forget those long, sleepless nights!

Sometimes, if the weather was fine, I would take my hammock and go up on deck, to sleep under the stars. This procedure had one notable disadvantage, however. The ship's crew, who were Indians, were instructed to hose down the decks each morning at daybreak. One of them would come along singing out "Wash deck, Johnnie" and you had to be mighty quick to wake up and get well out of the way if you wanted to avoid a good soaking.

One of the duties, for which we were responsible during the voyage, was the mounting of guards on the various storerooms and other places, on board the ship, that were out-of-bounds to the troops. Also, during daylight hours, a number of men were always stationed along both sides of the ship, on the look-out for enemy submarines. Each one was supplied with a loaded rifle and ordered to fire on any periscope that appeared!

We also took our rostered turns at cookhouse fatigue (mainly peeling spuds) and latrine duty. The toilet facilities were a bit on the primitive side; consisting of a narrow wooden plank, built out over the side of the ship. A number of holes were cut in this plank, at about 3-foot intervals, and the sewerage dropped straight down into the ocean. We were also required to do regular physical exercises, which proved rather difficult in the confined space available to us on the rolling and pitching deck. Then, of course, there were the inevitable games of "two-up" and, on Sundays, the church services conducted up on the open deck.

Our first port-of-call, after leaving Melbourne, was Albany, in Western Australia. We anchored in the bay, while fresh water and other supplies were brought out to the ship in barges. No shore leave was granted to the troops, but a few of the lads managed to stow away on these barges in order to get ashore and see what the place was like. I remember one chap returning to the ship and boasting about what a great time he had whilst ashore. He had met a girl who gave him some of her clothes to wear, in order to avoid the military police. Unfortunately for him, that was not all that she gave him! I saw him, some weeks later, when he was a patient in the ship's hospital cabin. By that time, he was not quite so enthusiastic about the pleasures of Albany.

After a couple of days, we left Albany and sailed off, in a westerly direction, into the Indian Ocean. Because of the threat of enemy surface-raiders and submarines, the ship was totally blacked-out every night. All portholes were covered and no lights were allowed on deck; not even the glow of a cigarette. We had still not been informed of our ultimate destination and were uncertain as to our next port-of-call for the next couple of weeks. Eventually however, we sighted land and, as we drew closer, we could make out the unmistakeable shape of Table Mountain, overlooking Capetown, South Africa. As the ship approached the harbour entrance, we were welcomed by a young girl, who stood right Cut at the end of the breakwater, waving a flag. We later learnt that she was the Harbour Master's daughter, who made a point of welcoming all inbound troopships in the same manner.

Whilst at Capetown, we were moored alongside a wharf, in order to take on more stores, water and coal. The coal was brought on board by & large contingent of native labourers, who carried it in baskets, on their heads. They came aboard in a seemingly-endless stream; up one gangplank, tipped the coal into the ship's bunker, and then descended back to the wharf down another gangplank. This went on, all day and night, until the bunkers were full.

Once again, no shore leave was granted to the troops, so we began to amuse ourselves by throwing scraps of food to the natives standing on the wharf. Sometimes we also threw pennies; for which there was always a mad scramble. When the novelty of this began to wear off, somebody came up with the idea of putting the pennies onto a stove and throwing them over while they were extremely hot. This resulted in some very humorous incidents until the natives tumbled to the idea of juggling the hot coins, from hand to hand, until they had cooled off. On another occasion, one of our "bright sparks" scooped the middle out of a loaf of bread and inserted a large "bunger". He then resealed the end of the loaf, leaving just the end of the wick protruding. This was then lit and the loaf thrown down onto the wharf. After the usual mad scramble, one fellow managed to establish sole possession of the loaf and tucked it under his arm. He stood, grinning up at us and asking for more when suddenly -"BOOM" - off it went and completely disappeared from under his arm - much to his amazement and our own hilarity!

Our stay in Capetown lasted only a few days and then we set off again for our next unknown port-of-call. This time, we were part of a convoy of eight ships, formed up in two columns of four, with the British cruiser HMS "Glasgow" acting as our armed escort.

When my turn came to be rostered for guard duty, I was given a rifle, with fixed bayonet, and ordered to stand guard over a storeroom at the end of one of the ship's passageways. On the door of this storeroom was a notice reading "STRICTLY NO ADMISSION WITHOUT AUTHORITY" and I was instructed to let no one inside. While I was on duty, an Infantry officer came along the passageway and approached the door. I did not say anything, but simply pointed to the notice. That did not deter him from continuing, so I raised my rifle and pointed the bayonet at his ribs. Without saying a word, he turned on his heels and went off back down the passageway. A few minutes later, he returned, accompanied by a Sergeant of the Guard and a replacement for my post. I was marched away and confined to the guardroom overnight.

The following morning, I was escorted, under guard, to the Disciplinary Court, conducted by the Captain on the ship's bridge. He said - "You are charged with dumb insolence. What have you to say?" I told him that I had been given strict orders to let no one into the storeroom. He then turned to the Duty Officer and asked if that was correct. When he received an affirmative answer, the Captain dismissed the case and I was released from Custody.

Shortly afterwards, I was again approached by the Duty Officer and told to report to the Captain once more. Naturally, I was curious as to the reason for this summons. I was again taken to the bridge, where the Captain dismissed my escort. Then he said to me - "I understand that you know Morse Code. Are you also familiar with the operation of the Aldis Lamp for signalling?" I replied that I was and he then said - "If you are agreeable, I will try and get permission for you to assist my officers in navigating the ship". This he did, and the

following day I was detailed for duty on the ship's bridge.

My work there consisted of standing a regular watch with one of the ship's officers and undertaking Morse signalling between our vessel and other ships in the convoy. Apparently the Captain was pleased with the standard of my work, because I was able to arrange for my mate, who also knew Morse Code, to serve with me on the bridge. From then on, we had a much more enjoyable trip. Instead of sleeping in the hot, noisy hold, we were permitted to take our hammocks and bunk down on the chartroom floor. We were also treated to some excellent food from the Officers' Mess.

After calling in at Sierra Leone for more fresh water and supplies (but again, no shore leave), we steamed up the west coast of Africa to the island of St. Helena. There, we were told what most of us had already guessed - that our final destination was to be England. We continued to sail northward until one morning, just on daybreak, we observed a long line of disturbed water, away ahead of us. At first we were uncertain as to what this was, but soon we were able to make out a flotilla of British torpedo-boats, coming at full speed to escort us into Plymouth.

Each of these torpedo-boats circled its allotted ship before taking up position ahead of it. Then we received the signal -"Every ship for itself" and the convoy broke up, with the faster ships forging ahead through those dangerous waters. As the poor old "Hororata" was very slow, I think that we were the last to arrive safely in port.

Quite often, nowadays, I hear people talking about their overseas trips in jet airliners and I can't help comparing their experiences with our overseas voyage, on that slow, overcrowded troopship more than seventy years ago. Our boys enjoyed none of the modern-day comforts - and a lot of them paid a very high price for their fare.

This article is dedicated to the memory of my mate, Bob Lauchland, who was killed in action within two weeks of his arrival in France.

A.W.G.