

Convoy: The Journey Itself Reveals a “New” World

by Jack Keelan, 397-I

My memory of the convoy starts with the train ride from Camp Kilmer up to Jersey City in a passenger car of the Pennsylvania Railroad. It was late and I remember how tired I was and thinking that the Army planned it this way so that the troops wouldn't have enough energy to be troublesome. We passed through Elizabeth, my home town, and I imagined how great it would be if someone recognized me and called my mother to tell her that they had seen me going off to war!

I had traveled on the PRR from Elizabeth to New York many times as a kid. For some strange reason, my mother would only buy Coward Shoes for my brother and me, and we had to go to New York City to get them. We changed trains at a station called Exchange Place where the switch from the steam locomotive to the electric cars capable of using the tubes under the Hudson was made. I was terrified of the noisy black ride under the river and kept my face pressed to the window as I looked for signs of rising water while I rattled off Hail Marys. One time a cruel passenger in the seat behind me, sensing my fear, pointed out the window and shouted “Look! There's a fish!” I almost wet my pants.

The Army had cleared all traffic so that the troop train had direct access to the Jersey City terminal on the Hudson River. I shared a seat with a 2d Platoon soldier who had a sniper rifle, a 1903 bolt-action Springfield with a telescopic sight. I was fascinated. He told me that snipers stayed back from the line of advance so that they could pick off the enemy without getting into the line of fire themselves. It was a warm night and the train window was fully opened. Somehow or other this guy's pack fell out. I remember him saying, “Well, I can't be going over without my pack and equipment!” I was so naive, I believed him and expected that he would be sent back somewhere to get another pack issued. However, I did learn that sniper rifles were available. That piece of information was to almost cost me my life. The next time I encountered the sniper, he was being helped back to the chow jeep from our first position on the line. The story I got was that he had been issued an M-1 and had shot himself in the left forearm.

We arrived in the Jersey City terminal, passing some civilians who had been shunted to one side. I remember an older woman looking at us with a sad expression on her face. She knew more of what we were getting into than we did. We were packed into elevators which discharged us on the lower level where we were herded into a ferry boat. A quick ride across the Hudson and we landed on the dock next to a huge ship.

We lined up, were checked off, and were handed a mattress cover as we stepped through the steel hull. My father had a book in his meager library entitled *Nations at War*, a history of World War I. I used to pour over the pictures. One came to mind to explain the mattress cover handout. It was a picture of British infantrymen sleeping on the straw-covered floor of a church with their rifles stacked neatly nearby. “The Army thinks of everything!” I thought, “when we get off the ship, the Army will have straw there to stuff into these mattress covers so that we can sleep comfortably.” I was naive. Only much later, after the unused, neatly-folded mattress covers had been returned to the Army as we got off the ship, did I realize that this process simply insured that there would be a burial shroud for each infantry soldier when the time came. The Army thinks of everything!

The long line of troopers snaked down into the bowels of the huge ship. Finally my squad peeled off at our assigned deck. With our equipment, we struggled to get through the narrow aisle between rows of tiered bunks. It was well after 2 a.m. before I could throw my pack and rifle on the narrow canvas bunk, catch my breath, and assess my situation. It didn't take me long to come to the conclusion that if a torpedo blew a six-foot hole in the side and green water started pouring through, I wouldn't have a Chinaman's chance in hell of getting out before the ship rolled over and sank! I made a mental note of my location and went up to the open deck to smoke a cigarette. I sat on the deck and watched the lights on the shore slide by. It was warm and I decided then and there that I wasn't going to spend five minutes more than I had to

below decks. I slept every night in a corner of the open deck wrapped up in two GI blankets, going below only for cigarettes and chow.

Memories of the long voyage are few because the routine of one day ran into the next and became a blur. There was some excitement when word got loose that a ship in the convoy had been torpedoed. A crowd gathered on the starboard side to look at a dark smudge on the horizon. There was no clarifying announcement on the loudspeakers. The Army doesn't want the troops to know what is going on! Albert T. Klett told me he had been grabbed for KP and spent hours dumping garbage off the stern. He said it was a thrill to stand on the stern and be high above the waves one instant and then level with the water the next as the ship rose and fell.

With nothing to do, I went back to the garbage dumping location and was impressed with the ride. I watched the trail the propellers left in the ocean. When the convoy passed through the Straits of Gibraltar, I looked at the shore lights shimmering on the water and wondered if German spies could see the dark shapes of the ships gliding by in the night. I can remember being startled at the absolute blue color of the Mediterranean. Going down to my bunk to get supplies, I encountered round-the-clock card games taking place on each stair landing. These were the only available clear areas. The Army overlooked this activity. With thousands of idle soldiers with dollars in their pockets jammed into a ship, it is not surprising that card games started up wherever there was room to deal.

As time went on, the games became fewer and the players more intense. These were big-time gamblers and the stakes were high. Each of the remaining players had a retinue to take care of his every need. Coffee and sandwiches, obtained from the ship's galley, were brought by one. Hot towels and ice in buckets were kept on hand to refresh the participants. Each player had one guy who raked in the pots as he won them and made orderly piles of each denomination. This was the ready money the gamblers played with hand-to-hand. Behind each were barracks bags stuffed with cash, the accumulated winnings from other games. Each player's hoard was guarded by a minimum of two burly soldiers. There were always several spectators silently observing the action. I was just a kid of nineteen. I had never dreamt or seen anything like these poker games in my life. The lesson I learned is that money talks. Money gets fancy sandwiches with the crusts cut off and hot coffee out of a troopship galley whenever you order it any time of the day or the night. Money gets hot towels and freshly laundered clothes on demand in a wartime convoy in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean. And money gets tens of thousands of dollars stuffed into three or four army barrack bags delivered safely home.

The heavy rattle of the ship's anchor chain passing through the hawsepipe gave notice that our voyage was over. Inside the USS *George Washington* we had been working for hours at assembling our full field packs in the cramped aisles between the bunks and helping each other put them on. Then we stood waiting for hours. We couldn't get the packs off so we used our rifles as props against our stomachs to hold us up. Then slowly the line wound through the troop area and up the stairway with its many landings, now devoid of card players, and past a fresh-faced young officer endlessly repeating "No smoking past this point." I observed that he had Transportation Corps insignia on his neat uniform and wondered if this was the full extent of his job. Finally, I pushed through multi-layers of blackout curtains and out onto the pitch-black deck. Immediately, I was grabbed by the arm and guided into the line of troopers shuffling towards the ship's rail. Once there another dark figure instructed me to climb onto the heavy landing net then down into the waiting boats. "Don't look down!" warned the figure. I did as I was told and slowly climbed down the rungs of the heavy net until I could make out the shape of a small boat rising and failing in the waves alongside the hull. The Army had neglected to have me practice this maneuver. As the dark boat rose up as far as it could a dark figure standing in it grabbed me and ordered, "Jump." I was pushed into the mass of soldiers standing in the little vessel about the size of a six-by-six truck. Each of us had their full field pack on and a rifle over one shoulder. We were jammed so tight that it was impossible to fall over. The engine roared, our little boat moved around the huge hulk of the troopship and headed for the dark shore. As we got closer we could make out that there were many little boats jammed with soldiers heading towards the beach.

As we got closer the guy who was driving blew his horn several times. It went "Quack! Quack!" We laughed and a knowledgeable soldier announced that we were riding in an amphibious vehicle called a

“Duck.” Sure enough! It hit the edge of the sandy beach and with a clash of gears and a couple of proud “Quacks,” it waddled away from the water and stopped. I marveled that the Army would thoughtfully specify a horn that sounded “quack” for a piece of equipment called a “duck.”

I climbed over the side, jumped to the sand, and had to steady myself because the land was heaving to the same rhythm as the deck of the ship. “Welcome to France!” said a friendly voice. I looked and could make out the white dress scarf, armband, and teeth of a huge black MP silhouetted against the night sky. Far off to his rear, there were flashes of light on the horizon accompanied by a low rumble. He waved his baton in the general direction of the noise. “Jerry knew you were coming,” he said with a laugh, “he just didn’t know exactly where!”

April 2001 Association Newsletter