GASPÉ OF YESTERDAY

THE CANADIAN ARMADA
****
OCTOBER 1914
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CANADA'S FIRST CONTINGENT FOR WORLD WAR I ASSEMBLED IN GASPÉ BAY AND SAILED THENCE FOR ENGLAND IN 1914.

KEN ANNETT

THE CANADIAN ARMADA

SEPTEMBER 1914

FOREWORD

In many a home about Gaspé Bay in the era of World War I (1914-1918) could be found a framed picture of the great armada of passenger liners and warships that assembled in Gaspe's magnificent harbour before proceeding to England with the first Canadian contingent. This armada bore some 32,000 officers and men, together with their equipment, in support of the Allied cause. The title of this picture read - "CANADA'S RALLY TO THE EMPIRE - ANSWERING THE CALL OF THE MOTHERLAND", together with the following inscription - "Canadian Army setting sail October 1914 to join the British Forces operating in Europe against Germany in the War of the Nations commenced Aug.4th., 1914. Thirty one Transports, Twenty Battleships, with 32,000 officers and men. An event arousing admiration and enthusiasm throughout the British Empire and described by the British Press as "Unparalleled since William the Conqueror."

"GASPÉ OF YESTERDAY" recalls below some aspects of this unique event of eighty years ago - once vivid in the memory of the many Gaspesians who witnessed it .

As background, beyond the scope of this article, was the remarkable creation of Camp Valcartier during the month of August, 1914 through the efforts of the Hon.Sam Hughes, Canadian Minister of Militia and Defence and Lieut.-Colonel William Price of Quebec. Equally remarkable was the enlistment, transport and training at Camp Valcartier of some 35,000 men from all parts of Canada. By September 21st movement of these troops and their equipment towards the transports assembling in the Quebec harbour began. The contingent

International Press Photo
LIEUTENANT-GENERAL THE HON. SIR SAM HUGHES, K. C. B.
Minister of Militia and Defence, October, 1911, to November, 1916

comprised eleven batteries of artillery, 7500 horses and 31, 200 men, nineteen battalions of infantry and the Princess Patricia Regiment.

Most of the men marched the sixteen miles from Camp Valcartier to Quebec during the night and going on board one or other of the thirty assembled ships.

With this as background we turn to a contemporary account provided by VOL.II, CANADA IN THE GREAT WAR on THE CANADIAN ARMADA.

THE CANADIAN ARMADA

IT was no light task to move an army of 33,000 men from Valcartier Camp to Quebec, where the ships that were to transport it overseas had assembled. But the work was done magnificently during the last week in September, 1914. While the movement of troops and supplies was taking place severe rainstorms somewhat hampered the operations. The wagons and guns were brought to the point of embarkation over the muddy roads, but the men for the most part made the journey by train. As the troops arrived they could see, from points of vantage on the heights of Quebec, at the docks and in the broad river, the greatest fleet that ever assembled in the St. Lawrence.

As the troops arrived from Valcartier they were hurried with all possible speed on board the transports, and as each was loaded it pulled out into the stream to await orders to proceed to the place of rendezvous, Gaspé Bay. The transporting of troops overseas was a new business for the Department of Militia and Defence, and the loading of the vessels was inefficiently performed. Someone blundered badly. At the last moment a radical change was made in the control of the work; carefully laid plans were cast aside, and the embarkation of troops and the loading of supplies were done in a most haphazard manner. It took a full month after the arrival of the Contingent in England to straighten out the tangles occasioned by ignorant and inexperienced officials at Quebec. In the case of the 15th Battalion (48th Highlanders), to give only one instance, and it was not singular: "The horses were put on board one ship, the harness on another, the wagons on another, the wheels on another, etc. It took weeks to sort everything out, and all the work done at Valcartier had been wasted."[1]

The Duke of Connaught, during his whole term of office as Governor-General of Canada, took a deep personal interest in the country's affairs. The sending of a strong volunteer army to help the sorely-pressed forces of Great Britain was the crowning act in the history of the Dominion. To mark the occasion he sent a message to be read to the men on each vessel as they were about to sail. The following is the message:

"On the eve of your departure from Canada, I wish to congratulate you on having the privilege of taking part, with the other forces of the Crown, in fighting for the the honour of the King and Empire. You have nobly responded to the call of duty, and Canada will know how to appreciate the patriotic spirit that animates you. I have complete confidence that you will do your duty, and that Canada will have every reason to be proud of you. You leave these shores with the knowledge that all Canadian hearts beat with you, and that our prayers and best wishes will ever attend you. May God bless you and bring you back victorious."

When sailing orders were issued, the transports steamed slowly down the St. Lawrence. Picturesque villages, each clustered about its little church; long narrow farms,

now browned by the autumn frosts; whitewashed cottages, in which dwelt a peasant people, who for over a century had lived remote from the thoughts of war and bloodshed,—were continually in view on either side of the river during the day-light hours. To many on board the vessels the St. Lawrence was a revelation; its deep gorges, its stretches of muddy flats being vastly different from the scenery of Ontario and the Prairie Provinces, whence the greater portion of the Contingent had come. Gradually the vessels reached Gaspé Bay, where a convoy of British warships awaited them.

By the 3rd of October the whole fleet of transports had assembled and was ready to begin the voyage across the Atlantic. This Canadian Armada was composed of the following vessels: *Adania, Athenia, Alaunia, Arcadian, Bermudian, Cassandra, Caribbean, Corinthian, Franconia, Grampian, Ivernia, Lapland, Laurentic, Lakonia, Manitou, Monmouth, Montreal, Montezuma, Megantic, Scotian, Sicilian, Scandinavian, Saxonia, Royal George, Royal Edward, Tyrolia, Tunisian, Ruthenia, Virginia, Zealand.* As the fleet steamed out into the Gulf of St. Lawrence it was to be joined by the sealing-ship *Florizel* with the Newfoundland Regiment on board.

Gaspé Bay, apart from its natural advantages, was a suitable place for the assembling of the Canadian Armada. It was historic ground. Here the first naval battle fought in North America had taken place. In the spring of 1628 a fleet of eighteen ships under command of Claude de Roquement had sailed from Dieppe, France, for Quebec, bringing building material, implements, guns, and ammunition. The One Hundred Associates, a company having a monopoly of Canadian trade, had resolved to strengthen the little colony struggling for its very existence on the banks of the St. Lawrence. The fleet reached Gaspé Bay safely, but while it lay there in fancied security three British ships under the command of Captain David Kirke swept down upon it. The British ships were vastly superior in size and armament to any in the French fleet. A short sharp battle took place, ending in the capture or destruction of all of de Roquemont's vessels. In this bay French power in America had sustained a check by the British; from this bay a British fleet was now about to sail to help save the existence of France.

On the morning of the 3rd of October the last of the transports reached Gaspé Bay. As the fleet waited for orders to sail it received a visit from the Hon, Sam Hughes, who had been mainly responsible for the rapid and efficient manner in which the Canadian Expeditionary Force came into being. When all was ready, anchors were weighed and the vessels steamed slowly out of the harbour. As they reached the open sea, they were formed into three columns and taken in charge by four British warships. The left column was headed by H.M.S. *Eclipse*, the centre by H.M.S. *Charybdis*, the right by H.M.S. *Diana*, while H.M.S. *Talbot* acted as a rearguard. The *Charybdis* flew the flag of Rear-Admiral

Rosslyn E. Wemyss, C.M.G., D.S.O. (afterwards Vice-Admiral Sir Rosslyn Wemyss, First Sea Lord of the British Admiralty), who was in charge of the convoy.

COLONEL GEORGE NASMITH RECALLS

One of the Canadian Army Officers on board recalled his impressions of leaving Canada as Follows:

"OUR LAST PICTURE OF CANADA

At midnight, the FRANCONIA slipped slowly and silently away from the (Quebec) dock. Only three were there to bid us farewell - a man and two women, and though they sang with great enthusiasm "It's a Long, Long way to Tipperary", the effect was melancholy. Imperceptibly the pier and the lights of the city receded and we steamed on down the mighty St.Lawrence to our trysting place on the sea. The second morning afterwards we woke to find ourselves riding quietly at anchor in the sunny harbour of Gaspé, with all the other transports anchored about us, together with four long grey gun-boats - our escort upon the road to our great adventure.

The brilliant afternoon sun of a typical Autumn day shone down upon Gaspé basin. Idly we lounged about the decks, gazing at the shores with their little white fishermen's cottages, or at the thirty-odd troopships, and the four grey gunboats which studded the harbour. The surface of the water was rippled by a light breeze and all was quiet and peaceful in the shelter of that sunny haven. Even the gulls, gorged with the waste food from the ships, swam lazily about or flapped idly hither and thither.

My gaze had fixed itself upon the nearest of the lean, grey gunboats. As I watched, the sleeping greyhound seemed to move; in another moment the seeming illusion have way to certainty -it was moving; gradually its pace accelerated and it slipped quietly out towards the open sea. A second gunboat followed, then a third, all making for the open. Immediately we were all excitement, for the rumour had been current that we might be there for several days. But the rumour was speedily disproved as the rattle of anchor chains became audible from the transports nearest the harbour mouth, and one by one they followed their little grey guides; and so at three of the clock on October

the third,1914, the First Canadian Contingent with guns, ammunition,horeses and equipment, left Gaspé en route to the Great War.

Gradually method evolved itself out of apparent chaos. The three gunboats took the lead and the transports fell into line about a thousand yards from one another, so that eventually three lines were formed of about a dozen in each and the whole fleet moved forward into the Atlantic. The shores of Gaspé, dotted with white cottages; yellow stubble fields; hills red and purple with autumn foliage: these were our last pictures of Canada - truly the last that many of us were ever to see, and we looked upon them, our hearts filled with emotions that these scenes had never given rise before. Our ruddy Canadian emblem, the maple leaf, gave its characteristic tinge to the receding shores - a colour to be seen often on the field of battle, but never in the foliage of a Eupopean landscape.."

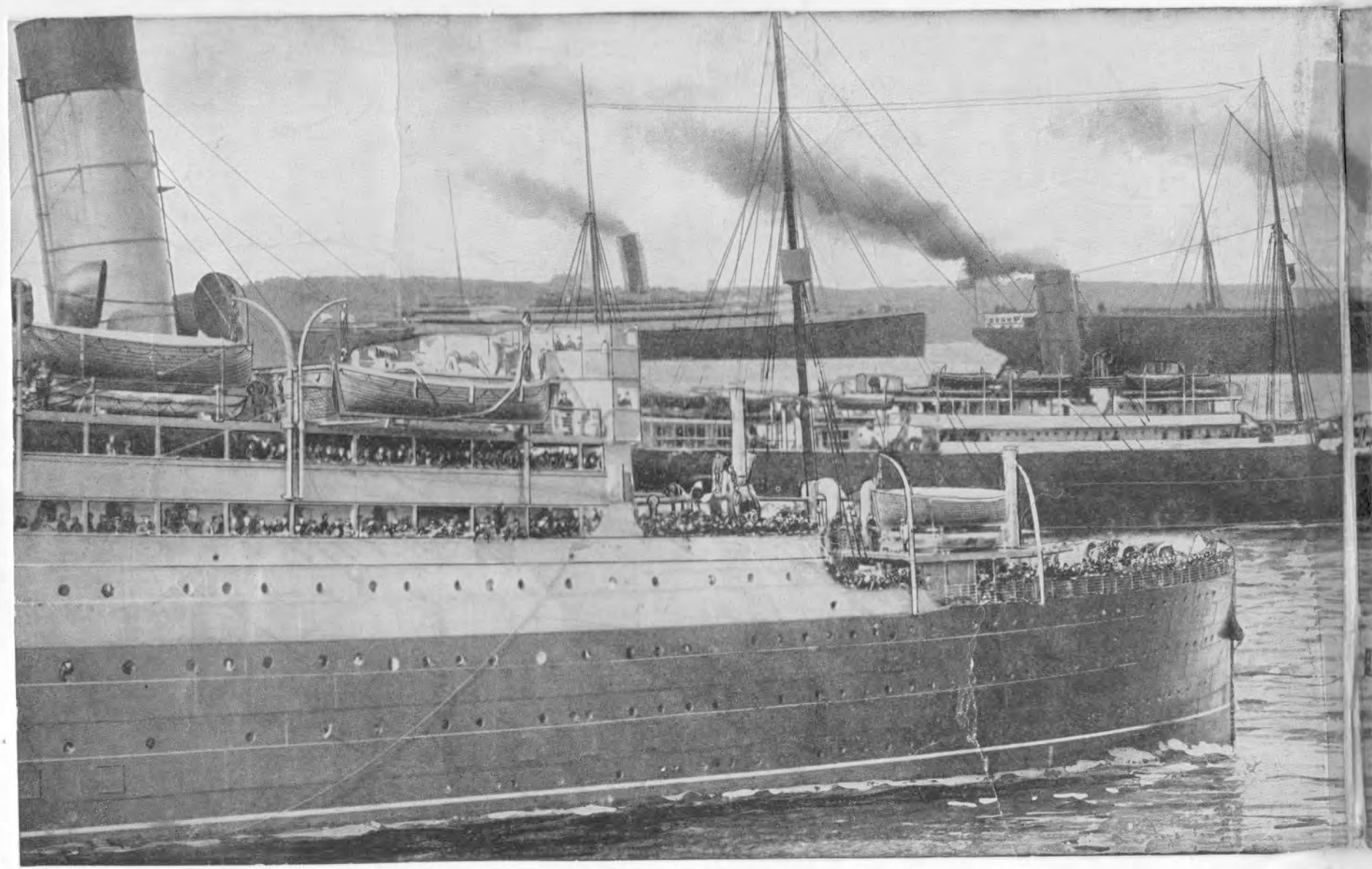
Three parallel columns had been formed, the ships arranged in the following order:

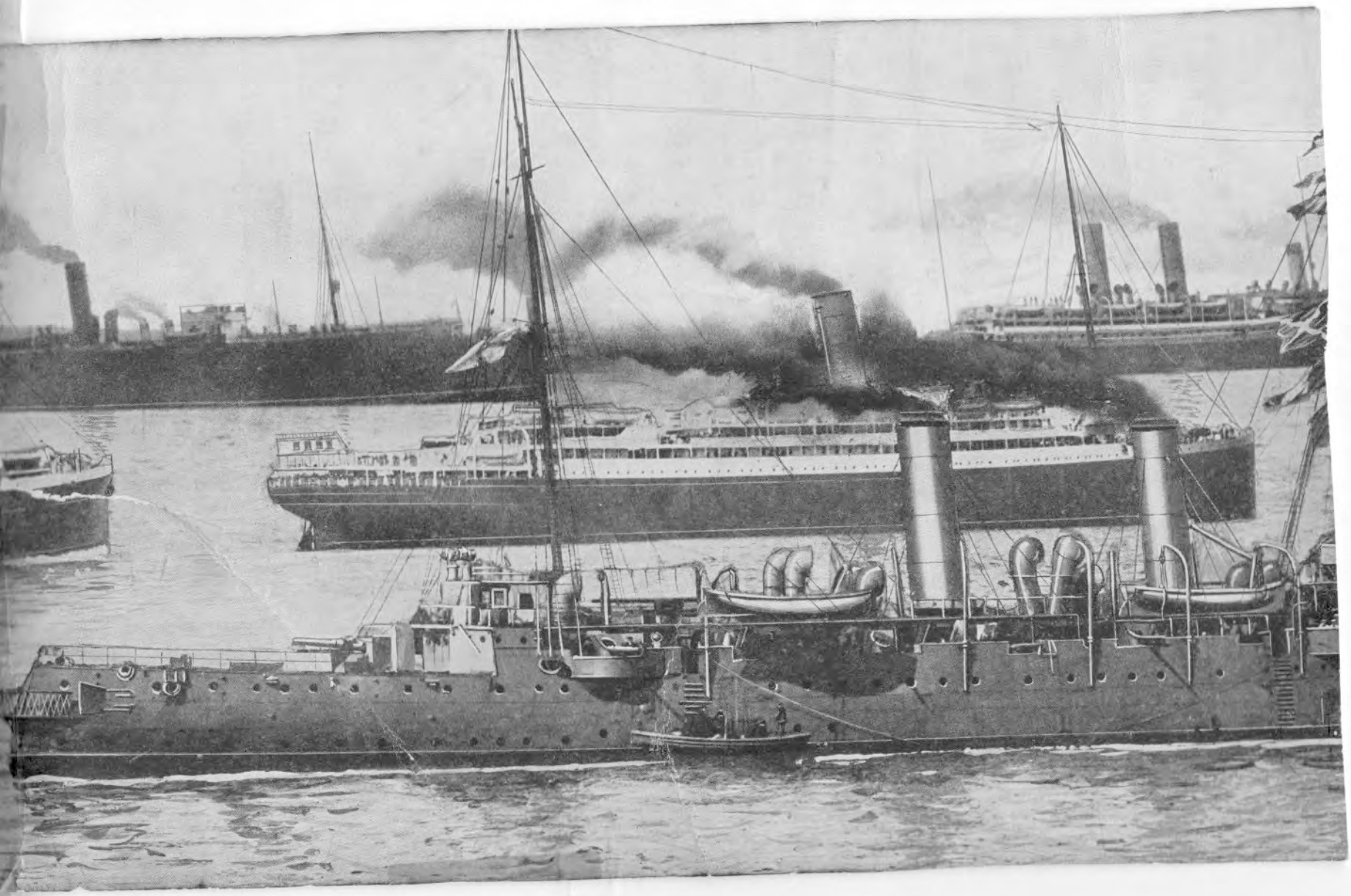
Column "Z"	Column "Y"	Column "X"
H.M.S. Eclipse	*H.M.S. Diana*	*H.M.S. Charybdis*
Megantic;	Caribbean;	Scotian;
Ruthenia;	Athenia;	Arcadian;
Bermudian;	Royal Edward;	Zeeland;
Alaunia;	Franconia;	Corinthian;
Ivernia;	Canada;	Virginian;
Scandinavian;	Monmouth;	Andania;
Sicilian;	Manitou;	Saxonia;
Montezuma;	Tyrolia;	Grampian;
Lapland;	Tunisian;	Lakonia;
Cassandra.	Laurentic.	Montreal;
		Royal George.

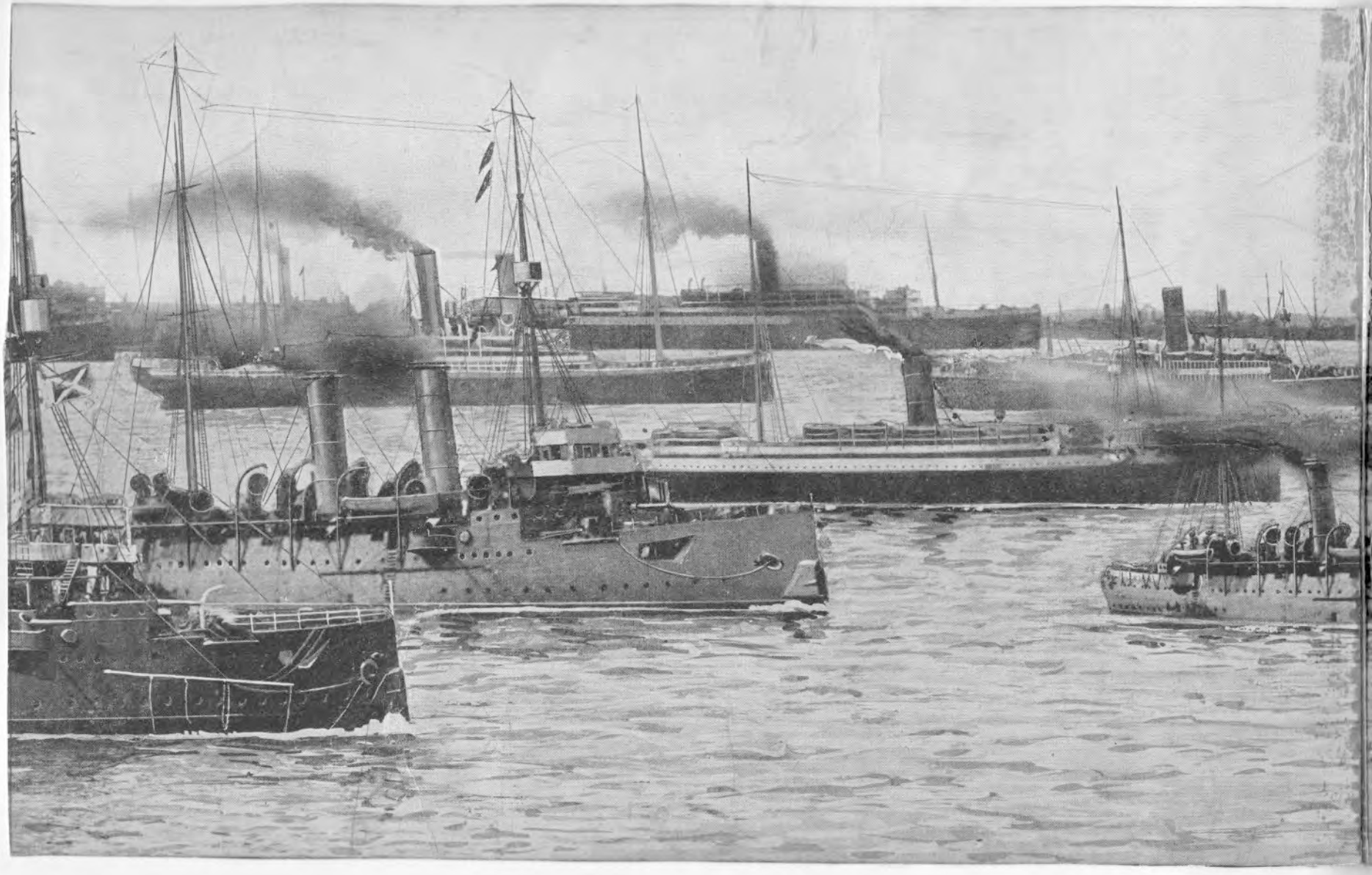
H.M.S. Talbot

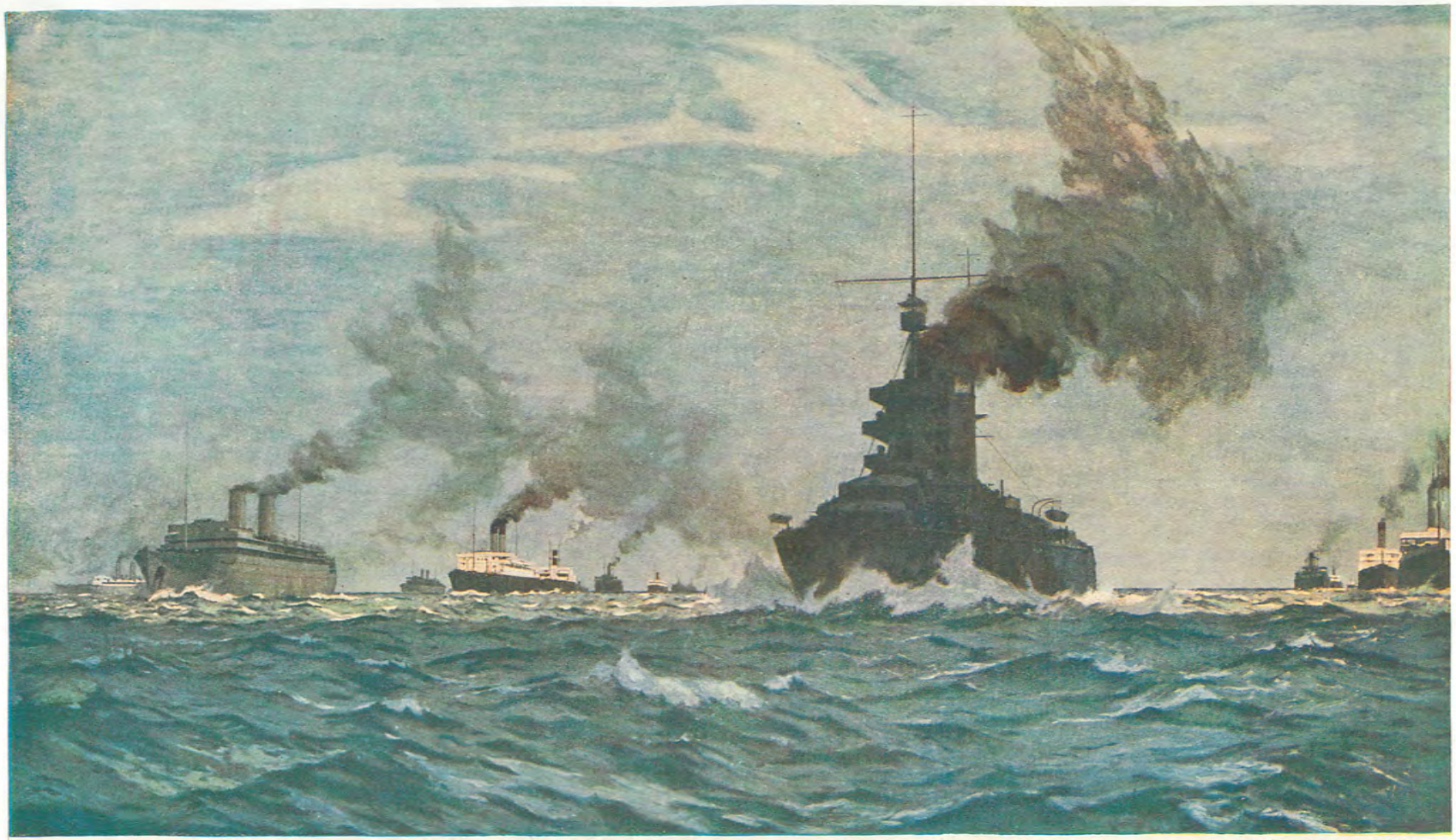
At 3 p.m. *Eclipse* led Column "Z" out through the narrow exit of Gaspe Basin into the Gulf of St. Lawrence. As the *S.S. Cassandra* passed *Diana*, all ships in Column "Y" raised anchors and followed along, and similarly until, by 6 o'clock, the great convoy was clear of the Basin and in the open sea, headed for England. As soon as the first column was out at sea speed was reduced, to enable the other two columns to come abreast; and in this formation the convoy continued its long voyage.

H.M.S. Glory joined the escort vessels off St. Pierre-Miquelon on Monday,.the 5th October; while, later in the day, the steamer *Florizel*, with Newfoundland's contingent of 650 men, joined the convoy.









By Norman Wilkinson

"CANADA'S ANSWER"

Ships Conveying the first Canadian Contingent of 33,000 men, in Mid-Atlantic. October, 1914

The better-informed members of the Contingent looked askance at the accompanying warships. All were slow, obsolete vessels. The *Diana*, *Eclipse*, and *Talbot* were cruisers of the *Talbot* Class, which had been built in 1897-98 and had a speed of less than twenty knots. The *Charybdis* of the *Astræa* Class had been completed in 1895, and was no faster than the others. The German warships *Karlsruhe* and *Dresden* were known to be at large in the Atlantic. The former was one of the latest fast light cruisers, capable of making at least twenty-eight knots; the latter was a protected cruiser, about six years old, with a speed of 24½ knots. Either of these vessels would have been more than a match for the warships convoying the Canadian Armada. But the vessels under Admiral Wemyss were merely shepherding the Canadian fleet. Great Britain had her real dogs-of-war scattered over the Atlantic seeing to it that no dangerous enemy vessel approached within striking range of the transports. On the second day after leaving Gaspé Bay a cloud of smoke was seen on the horizon, and slowly a great grey battleship of the pre-dreadnought type hove in sight and took up a position on the flank of the fleet. It was the *Glory* of the *Canopus* Class, a more heavily armed and better-protected ship than any of the other vessels of the convoy. But she was even slower than any of them, having a speed of only eighteen knots; evidently the Admiralty had little fear of German attack on the American side of the Atlantic.

The fleet as it passed into the Gulf of St. Lawrence took the southern passage between Newfoundland and Cape Breton. On the 5th a steamship appeared on the left of the line and the *Eclipse* turned aside to examine her. It was the *Bruce*, plying between Newfoundland and Cape Breton. The news of the sailing of the Contingent had been kept a profound secret, but, from the direction the ships were heading, the captain of the *Bruce* could hardly have supposed that they carried an invading army. However he ran for it, pursued by the *Eclipse*, but he soon saw that he was being chased by a British warship and disclosed the identity of his vessel. The *Bruce* then proceeded on her way to spread the tidings of this wonderful fleet among the people of Cape Breton.

Meanwhile the officers were kept busy. From the time of embarkation they had been fully occupied getting familiar with their unaccustomed surroundings and arranging for the training of their men while at sea. Lifeboat drill had to be practised, physical drill kept up, and lectures in map-reading, topography, etc., given to both officers and men. Morning and afternoon the soldiers had a twenty-minutes' run round the deck and then an hour of physical drill. As far as possible military drill was carried on, but the cramped, crowded quarters of a transport naturally did not lend themselves to instruction in manœuvres. During the voyage excellent progress was made in signalling. The men in their spare

hours amused themselves with dance and song, boxing and wrestling, playing shuffle-board or ring-toss or any other game suitable to the deck of a ship. Fortunately the weather continued fine; it was constantly threatening, but the fleet kept ahead of the storm and was almost in sight of England before it experienced anything like heavy weather.

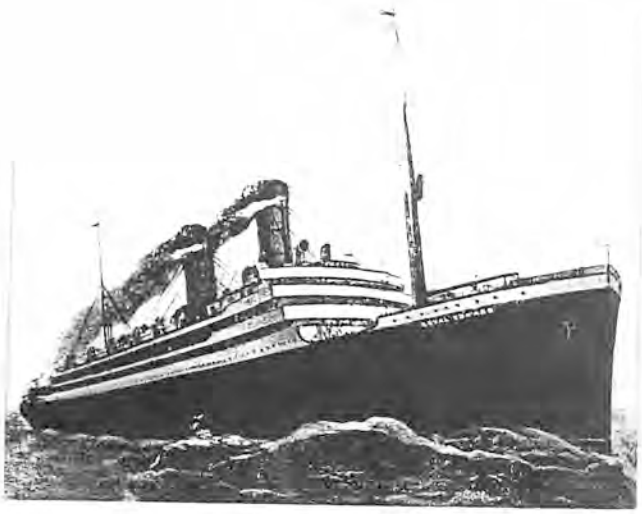
By the 10th the fleet was getting into what might be considered the danger zone. The slow-moving warships that had so far accompanied it would be of doubtful service against a vigorous enemy attack. But preparations had been made to safeguard the Canadians. On this day the famous *Princess Royal*, a battle cruiser of 27,000 tons displacement, manned by nearly 1,000 men, and with a speed of 28½ knots, joined the convoy. This vessel, with her eight 13.5 guns and sixteen 4-in. quick-firers, was capable of taking care of any warships, torpedo-boats, or submarines the Germans had at large. However, until within the immediate waters surrounding the British Isles there was little to be feared. The Germans had entered the war depending for success at sea mainly on their submarines, but at this early stage in the struggle undersea boats capable of a wide range of operations had not been built. On the day following the appearance of the *Princess Royal* the stately old pre-dreadnought *Majestic* took a position at the head of the line. Now, too, appeared swift torpedo-boat destroyers; the Admiralty was taking no chances. The fleet which left Gaspé Bay apparently under the convoy of four weak warships was in reality shepherded across the Atlantic by five cruisers and four battleships.

On the 11th, the *Aluania* steamed out of the line and speeded away with the *Charybdis*. A wireless message telling that Antwerp had fallen had just been received. The men of the Contingent had so little realization of the magnitude of the task the Empire had before it, or of the gigantic character and efficiency of the war-machine the Allies were fighting that it was rumoured throughout the fleet that the departure of the Admiral had to do with the sending of the Canadians to recover Antwerp.[1]

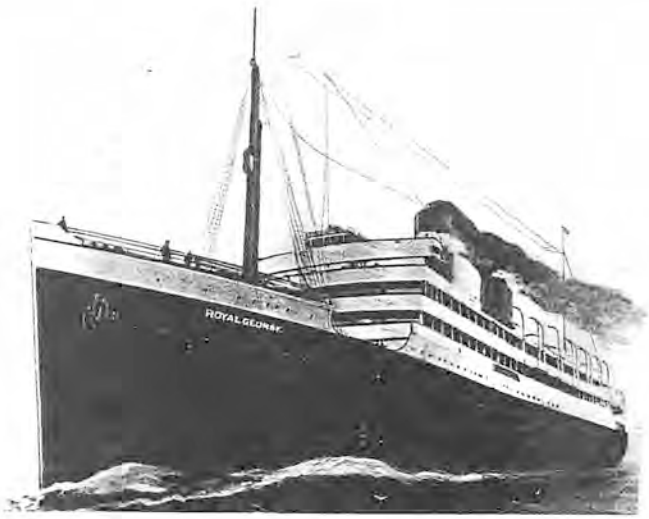
On the 12th Lizard Point was sighted, and early on the 14th the fleet was off Eddystone Lighthouse. Here the Channel pilots were taken on board. It was now learned that the destination of the transports had been changed. Southampton had been the port originally selected, but the submarine menace caused the Admiralty to alter this to Plymouth. Toward evening on the 14th the fleet began to enter this historic harbour—a place made illustrious by memories of such men as Hawkins, Raleigh, and Drake. Cautiously the vessels were piloted through mine-fields, past warships, torpedo-boats, destroyers, submarines, and seemingly numberless transports. Plymouth was a centre of war work, and the arsenal, the shipyards, the factories, the docks were all astir with activities intended to win the war, while on every vacant stretch of land men were drilling.

The arrival of the Canadians was unheralded; but news such as this quickly spreads, and soon the shores of the harbour were lined with an enthusiastic cheering crowd. But the men on the fleet had to enjoy their reception from a distance; shore-leave could not be obtained; indeed, it was several days before some of the regiments were able to disembark. In the meantime, Lieut.-General Alderson, who had been chosen for the command of the Canadian Expeditionary Force, visited the Commanding Officers of the different units, and preparations for disembarkation were made. Control of the force now passed from the Canadian Department of Militia and Defence, and for over four years was to remain almost exclusively in the hands of the War Office.

The Contingent had arrived at a time when Allied reverses were weighing heavily on the spirits of the people of Great Britain. In the language of Winston Churchill, then First Lord of the Admiralty: "Canada sends her aid at a timely moment. The conflict moves forward to its terrible climax, and fiercer struggles lie before us than any which have yet been fought." At the end of the fourth year of the war some of the men of this contingent were still fighting valiantly in France and Flanders, and the climax of the struggle had not been reached.



THE "ROYAL EDWARD"



THE "ROYAL GEORGE"
The ship that carried the Princess Patricia's to England

SHIPS OF THE CANADIAN ARMADA