

Copy/JH

Transport All.
TSS. Ascanius
between Colombo & Aden.

18/11/14.

Dear Kiddie,

How my last letter fared I do not know. As you perhaps know by now, we had to send our letters and postcards to the flagship to be censored. Those which were left unsealed and which contained no information which would be of value to the enemy should the mail be confiscated, were to be forwarded at once; but those which were sealed, or contained information, were to be held over until we had reached England.

So I wrote you two letters, one of which I left open, and the other I sealed. I suppose you have received the first by now.

If the same restriction is applied at our next port I shall have to write another letter to you, and send this sealed.

We reached Colombo at about 2 o'clock in the afternoon of Sunday, November 15th. All the morning we had been in sight of the coast, but it was not until about 10 a.m. that we saw the first sign of life. At about this time we saw four or five tiny black specks appear on the water. As the distance decreased we discovered them to be little sailing boats, called "catamarans" (I think that is the correct spelling). It was not long before more appeared, and presently there were scores of the frail looking craft swarming through our lines. They are quaint little boats, about the length of an ordinary row boat, but so narrow that you would wonder how a man could squeeze into one. They would undoubtedly overbalance with the weight of the sail, were it not for an affair called an outrigger - kind of narrow raft attached to the boat by two poles. I am not much of a sketch artist, but roughly, here it is -

(Don't laugh. If the boat was about half the length it would be more in proportion).

If the wind is very strong, one man has to climb out onto the outrigger and stand there all the time (as per "illustration"). These little boats often have five or six natives in them and at times are almost submerged. One we saw was so weighted down that the natives were the best part of the time in the water, but they seemed not to mind in the least. They say that sharks rarely touch the natives - which is very discriminating on the part of that otherwise voracious fish.

Colombo appears to be a very pretty place - the luxurious vegetation mingling its green very harmoniously with the red and white and grey of its buildings.

There are some fine buildings; the Golden Face Hotel, which is a big red building on the seashore some little distance from the port proper; the Post Office and Government offices contained in a great white edifice which stands on an elevation some few hundred yards from the sea; also a new hotel, just completed, and also of some white stone, looking like some great fortress, with its flat roof, and appearance of solidity and strength. It has, I think, 350 bed rooms.

Unfortunately no one was allowed shore-leave, so we had to content ourselves with admiring the view from the anchorage. It was terribly close (the atmosphere, I mean) during our two days in port, and we got heartily sick of the view, the crowded shipping and the dirty sea, which was of the colour and consistency of weak pea soup.

On Tuesday morning a party of about ten natives came out in a couple of home-made crafts and entertained us by diving for money. They are not by any means an ill-looking race. In features they very much resemble Europeans. They might, indeed, be ordinary white laborers covered with soot and grease, coal-lumpers, say. A peculiar thing about them is that the soles of their feet and the palms of their hands are quite white. They are wonderfully quick in the water, and it is very seldom that they miss a coin. A threepenny piece will fall into the water several yards from their boat, but they dive and you see them swimming away under the water and presently they come to the surface with the coin between their white, even teeth. They keep their eyes open while they are under the water (like the pearl-divers at Broome, I suppose) and swim round until they see the coin sinking in the water.

Occasionally they varied the programme by singing! in unison; their masterpiece being "Ta-ra-boom-de-ay", followed by some chant in their own language - all clapping their hands to keep time while they sang.

We left Colombo Tuesday morning at 11.30 and it was a pleasure to get out where the sea was blue and the breezes also blew (the pun is accidental). We have left a portion of our fleet back in Colombo. They are to follow later and will probably catch us at Perim or wherever we coal.

Our escort, too, has apparently left us, for all that we have with us now is a British cruiser the "Yarmouth" I think. (Later discovered to be the "Hampshire").
Saturday 21st - Did you have bad dreams last night kiddie? You came very near being a "poor widdy-woman with six children". I went to bed about nine o'clock, hugging my newly inoculated arm (second time round), and slept the sleep of the tired. At precisely 4.20 a.m. I was awakened from my beauty sleep by a decided bump. Then the boat rolled right over to starboard and shook herself like a big dog. At first I thought we had struck some bad weather, but just then there was another heavy bump, another roll, and another shudder, and our engines stopped. I knew then that we had run into something solid and just then the alarm bell started ringing. Out in the passage ways we could hear feet scurrying to and fro, and then the order came down to close all the ports. Heritage and I tied on our life belts over our pyjamas, and started for deck. Then it occurred to us that an empty stomach is a bad thing to swim on so we went back and got some apples. In opening the cupboard to get the apples Heritage caught sight of a pair of riding breeches that he was about five weeks in getting, back at Morphetville, and for which he naturally has a great regard. So he decided that if he was to be drowned he would sooner be drowned in his best breeches than in his pyjamas. So off came his pyjamas and on went the breeches and a tunic.

When at length we got up on deck things looked serious enough. The men were all lined up at their various boat stations, the officers were ready with loaded revolvers in case of a rush for the boats, and the boats were being swung out preparatory to lowering. Just out to the left was the boat with which we had collided, and whose siren was shrieking like a thing possessed. Then, so that she should not have it all her own way, our boat began to bellow like a wounded bull.

Out on the water were what we at first took to be life boats with signal lights in them, but we afterwards discovered that they were patent life buoys for use at night time. They have a little lamp attached to them, which sends out intermittent flashes so that a swimmer could see his way to them at night.

Our escorting war boat, the "Hampshire" (not the "Yarmouth") had her searchlights playing all over the water in very quick time.

It appears that the "Shropshire" was steaming a little ahead of us, when she lost a man overboard. Without giving any warning blast on her siren, she reversed her engines and consequently stopped dead.

Our third officer, who was on watch, at the time, was apparently not quick enough in altering his course, with the consequence that we hit the "Shropshire" right astern. The impact swung us round and we brought round our stern and hit her again. Luckily all the damage was above the water line, so we did not have to swim for it after all. But it was a near go.

When daylight came we could see the damage. In the fore part of the boat there was a great rent about sixteen feet long by about three inches wide. The ironwork was crumpled up like tissue paper and the railings all torn away. At the rear end of the ship one of our life boats was torn clean away from the davits and carried off on the deck of the "Shropshire".

The "Shropshire" was badly damaged about her stern, but, like us, it was all above the water line.

We hung about till daylight, when the warship came alongside and made an inspection and then we steamed ahead again.

Her officer was very sarcastic at the expense of our officer. As his ship swung close alongside the following conversation took place:

"Ascanius, have you anyone overboard?"

"Nobody overboard, sir" from our skipper.

"Can you go ahead on your own?"

"Yes, sir -"

then a space in which both speaking trumpets tried to talk at once; then the voice of the "Hampshire's" officer, slow, distinct, and scathing "You may compliment your officer of the watch, and tell him that in thirty years I have never before seen a ship in line run into the ship ahead of her".

And before our skipper (who is a big, bulky, red-faced fellow) had stopped spluttering and turning purple the "Hampshire" was well out of range. Like a woman's last word, it was left to rankle.

I feel very sorry for the third officer though. He has already suffered a blowing up from the skipper, which is bad enough, but I expect when we reach England he will be deprived of his certificates.

Those life belt parades that I told you about in a previous letter have proved of value. Although everybody must have realised the seriousness of things, there was a remarkable absence of anything approaching panic. The men marched quietly up to their boat stations and stood there, talking and joking quietly amongst themselves. There were very few cases of actual "scare". One of the men in the lower troop decks, at the first crash sprang out of his hammock shouting "rush the deck". He had'nt got far when one of his mates stepped out and caught him a most unholy whack under the chin, that sent him reeling under a table where he remained until the trouble was over.

The Colonel is very pleased with the conduct of the troops, he considers it augurs well for their coolness under fire when we reach the front.

There might easily have been a panic. The darkness, the sudden awakening, the lack of any information, might easily have given rise to terror. It has made me think more highly of the men in our Battalion. I do hope with all my heart that the Australians will prove "good stuff" when we reach the front. I would feel ashamed of the name if any of our fellowes showed funk. But last night, or rather, this morning's business has reassured me. A man who could joke, with the prospect of a cold bath on a dark night in a sea infested with sharks, will not be likely to turn tail when the bullets begin to sing.

One thing made me laugh. The Orderly Room Sergeant of the 11th is a tall, ungainly fellow, with lanky thin legs and an everlasting grin. (He comes from Broome, by the way and knows Doug. Archer).

He came up on deck clad in a short singlet (his sleeping attire apparently) and a life belt - and, of course the grin.

I wish you could have seen him, with his spidery shanks and the little singlet ending somewhere about the waist line. He resembled Simplicitus, only more so. I told him that fish were as partial to a certain portion of the male anatomy as the proverbial ducks are supposed to be, and, that if he valued his claim to manhood, he had better "go and put his trousers on". But he only grinned a wider grin.

We have just been informed that our next mail will not be censored, so I expect that will also mean that those letters which were delayed at Colombo will now go on, in which case you will get my last letter and this one by the same mail.

We expect to reach Aden on Wednesday morning (25th Nov.) There is to be no shore leave

.....

G/MR

12/11/62

19th August, 1927.

Mrs. P. G. Leane,
54 Marlborough Road,
Westbourne Park,
South Australia.

Dear Madam,

The photographs and letter of the 18th November, 1914, have been duly received. Very many thanks indeed. The photographs are now being examined and where it is thought necessary copies will be made. Upon receipt of these the originals will be returned to you. A copy has been made of the letter and the original is now returned to you.

Your action in placing these records at the disposal of the War Memorial is greatly appreciated.

Yours faithfully,

T. J. P. Smith
for Director.

Mr. McAllan.

Copies of letter above referred to enclosed for records. A copy has been forwarded to Mr. Bazley.

T. J. P. Smith
for Director.

22. 8. 27

1 DRG 412
11