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## CHAPTER IV

### ON SALISBURY PLAIN

OCTOBER, 1914—FEBRUARY, 1915

*Map: Salisbury Plain 1914-15 (facing p. 170)*

*End Paper: Western Theatre 1915*

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## DISEMBARKATION

As ship after ship of the unexpected Canadian convoy moved up the Sound and dropped anchor in the Hamoaze, the townspeople of Plymouth and Devonport became aware that with the arrival of the first troops from overseas another historic event was taking place at their ancient harbour. Naval cadets dressed ship and cheered, church bells rang out, wondering crowds lined the waterfront and wharves, workmen building battleships dropped tools long enough to chalk "Bravo Canadians!" on the armour plate; women and children hurried aboard excursion steamers to make a tour about the transports. The Mayor of Plymouth, on behalf of the civil population, sent cordial greetings<sup>184</sup> and among many others Lord Kitchener also welcomed the troops to the shores of the Mother Country.<sup>185</sup>

Lieutenant-General Alderson was on the quay ready to take over his new command. Born in 1859 he was first

commissioned in the 97th Foot, now the 2nd Battalion of The Queen's Own Royal West Kent Regiment, and except for attendance at the Staff College and two years as D.A.A.G. he had served entirely with troops. His first active service was against the Boers in 1881; in the following year he was fighting in Egypt, at Kassassin and Tel-el-Kebir; in 1884-85 he was on the Nile Expedition with a Camel Corps (Mounted Infantry) at Abu Klea, El Gubat and Mettemmeh. In Mashonaland 1896, the forces under his command broke the rebellion by taking the stronghold of the paramount chief. He served throughout the South African war 1899-1902, being present at the relief of Kimberley, the battle of Paardeberg and many other engagements. In this campaign he came in contact with Canadians for the first time in 1900, when the Royal Canadian Dragoons and the 2nd Canadian Mounted Rifles formed part of his Mounted Infantry Column for seven months, an association which led to his present appointment. His chief peace command was the 6th (Poona) Division, 1908-1912, upon completion of which he went on half-pay; but on 5th August 1914 he was called upon to take command of the 1st Mounted Division, a new Home Defence formation comprising four yeomanry brigades and concentrated in the eastern counties of England. For war services he had been mentioned in despatches on a number of occasions, and received the brevets of lieutenant-colonel and colonel. He had been A.D.C. to Queen Victoria and to King Edward VII, and wore the bronze medal of the Royal Humane Society, awarded for diving into the Nile to rescue a man overboard. He was a keen and perspicacious sportsman — yachtsman, horseman, horsemaster and master of hounds—and he held a high reputation as a leader of irregular troops.<sup>186</sup>

At 10 p.m. on Wednesday 14th October the transfer of command from Colonel Williams to General Alderson took place on board the *Franconia*, and next morning disembarkation began. The Contingent, being destined to camp on

Salisbury Plain, was now in the Southern Command, under Lieut.-General W. Pitcairn Campbell, C.B. A plan for disembarkation at Southampton and transportation by rail to Salisbury Plain, to be completed in three days, had been drawn up by the Southern Command; it ended with a cautionary "Note:—These arrangements are subject to alteration if necessary at the discretion of the Embarkation Commandant." The discretion of this officer was now to be severely taxed—the docking and railway facilities at Devonport and Plymouth were few compared to Southampton; one ship, the *Royal Edward*, was sent round to her home port, Avonmouth, to unload; the troops, horses and military cargo on board many of the transports were not as supposed; units, not being complete in one ship, would not fit standard trains; all the ingenuity of the railway and military staffs was required to assemble rolling stock and to prevent at Devonport a re-enactment of the chaos at Quebec.

Before going ashore each man, as provided in the charter-party, drew one day's dry ration from ship's stores, from which also were issued two feeds of oats per horse. Dismounted units, greeted enthusiastically by the citizens with cheers, cigarettes, kisses, drinks, and presentation copies of the New Testament, marched up the thronged streets direct from the docks to the railway station and entrained; the regimental transport and horses sometimes preceded, rarely accompanied, and sometimes followed. Mounted units usually spent a day in bivouac at the naval parade ground, so that the horses might recuperate from the fatigue of standing for three weeks on board ship; the days in harbour, with no breeze to ventilate between decks, had been hard on them, and more horses died in port than on the voyage—the casualties on shipboard totalled 86, about 1·13 per cent.

From Plymouth the trains carried the force across Devon and Dorset to stations in Wiltshire adjacent to Salisbury Plain—Lavington and Patney in the north, or Amesbury to the east—and the final march of eight or ten miles

into camp was directed by a local policeman, the postman, or a boy scout. The horses, too weak for draught were walked under harness, and after the four days of gentle exercise specified in Camp Orders, were fit to recover the vehicles parked under guard at railhead.

Two of the mechanized units—the Divisional Supply Column and the Automobile Machine Gun Brigade—proceeded the 150 miles by road, staging at Exeter, Taunton and Heytesbury, and arrived in camp in two days. It had been estimated by the Admiralty that the Contingent could be disembarked at Plymouth in six days,<sup>187</sup> but not until the 23rd October, after nine days in harbour, did the last of the units go ashore. By that date the *Manhattan*, having made the voyage independently four days behind the convoy, had reached Devonport and was discharging her 850 horses, which, as their drivers had crossed in other ships, were looked after temporarily by local Territorials; thence she proceeded to Southampton to unload her heterogeneous cargo, which was reclaimed in part by Canadian detachments sent from Salisbury Plain. The ninety crated motor vehicles of the Divisional Ammunition Park were assembled at Southampton by personnel of that unit, and taken by road to Salisbury Plain where they arrived on 30th October.

In the course of the protracted disembarkation at Devonport it had seldom been practicable to reunite units with their horses, harness, stores, equipment and transport. Trainloads of this detached material were shipped independently and unloaded chiefly at Amesbury, where a large park of unclaimed vehicles was established. All available wheelers, fitters and carpenters were detailed to reassemble vehicles dismantled for the voyage, and teams loaned by units which had both horses and harness hauled the wagons into camp. Eventually the confused mass was disentangled and redistributed as far as possible to the same units as had been in possession at Valcartier.

## CAMPS

Before the Contingent embarked, an advance party had sailed from New York (23.ix.1914) for liaison duties in England; it was headed by Colonel John Wallace Carson, a prominent business man of Montreal, who at fifty, after twenty-three years commissioned service in the militia, now commanded the 1st Regiment (Canadian Grenadier Guards).<sup>188</sup> With him were Lieut.-Colonel F. Strange of the Canadian Ordnance Corps, a major and a captain of the C.A.S.C. and two junior officers to report as A.D.Cs. to General Alderson. At this time there were also with the British forces two officers of the Canadian Permanent Force: Lieut.-Colonel P. E. Thacker, L.S.H. (R.C.) in the Dominions Section at the War Office, and Captain J. H. MacBrien, R.C.D., specially employed on embarkation of the British Expeditionary Force, who later was appointed to the staff of the 1st Canadian Division. The six senior of these officers were all engaged on various liaison duties with the War Office or Southern Command in anticipation of the arrival of the Contingent and of its sojourn in England.

Salisbury Plain, where the force was destined to spend sixteen memorable weeks, is a broad hilly tract of three hundred square miles rising above the closely cultivated farmlands of southern Wiltshire and drained by the Avon and Wiley and their tributaries; a part of it, six miles by fifteen in extent, was War Department land which for a number of years had been used for field artillery and rifle ranges, and for summer camps and military manoeuvres. The upland area of deep bottoms and rolling downs, rising to over six hundred feet, was bare but for scattered clumps of trees and a few lonely farms; on every side were innumerable prehistoric remains—tumuli, dolmens, barrows and ditches, relics of early Britons, Romans and Danes. A thin turf cropped by grazing sheep grew in the few inches of poor soil overlying impervious chalk. In the narrow sheltered river valleys, embedded in the underlying greensand levels at three hundred

feet, rambling thatched villages clustered among deciduous trees by the clear waters.

While the convoy was crossing the Atlantic, preparation of camps on the Plain had been in progress; units of the Territorial Force furnished fatigue parties to pitch tents and marquees, to lay floor-boards in most of the tents, to stuff palliasses with straw, and to erect cook-house shelters. On the 16th of October General Alderson established his headquarters at *Ye Olde Bustard*, a wayside inn isolated in the middle of the Plain halfway between Salisbury and Devizes. The 1st Canadian Infantry Brigade, the Divisional Mounted Troops and the P.P.C.L.I. were detailed to the neighbouring Bustard Camp (Commandant, Lieut.-Colonel M. S. Mercer); the 2nd and 3rd Canadian Infantry Brigades to West Down South—two miles north-east (Commandant, Colonel R. E. W. Turner, V.C.); all the artillery and the Divisional Supply Column to West Down North—three miles north-east (Commandant, Lieut.-Colonel H. E. Burstall); the 4th Canadian Infantry Brigade, the two cavalry regiments, the 17th Battalion and the Newfoundland Contingent to Pond Farm Camp—five miles north-east (Commandant, Lieut.-Colonel J. E. Cohoe). Army Service Corps and medical units were distributed appropriately to the troops they served, except that the majority of the nursing sisters proceeded to St. Thomas' Hospital in London for entertainment and instruction. Veterinary hospitals were opened at the Cavalry School, Netheravon and at Keeper's Farm, West Down South.

The scanty water supply of the main camps was piped up to open reservoirs from pumping stations at wells or streamlets; as a rule there were but two taps in the lines of each battalion for all purposes. For each unit a marquee was provided for bathing and some used bell tents also, but the ration of fuel—2 pounds wood and 1 pound coal per man until 21st November, with an added pound of wood thereafter—and the lack of boilers allowed little hot water. The

equipment per battalion for the first two months was only six tubs, one forty gallon cistern, and a stove. The Southern Command fitted up the Old Corn Store in Salisbury—ten to fifteen miles from the camps – so that a man might have a hot bath for fourpence, if he could find his way there between 5 and 8 p.m. on week days or on Sunday afternoon. Village washerwomen plied a lively trade, and enterprising laundry firms in Salisbury and even London made arrangements for collecting washing weekly by motor truck. Washing and bathing in rivers, streams or mist ponds and the watering of horses in the last, were strictly forbidden; reservoirs and pumping stations were out of bounds and under armed guard. Horse troughs connected to the camp water system were placed to serve a number of neighbouring units.

#### RATIONS AND CANTEENS

Supplies of food and forage were arranged for, by or through the administrative staff of the Southern Command, and transported and delivered by the A.S.C. units of the Contingent. Cooking for the troops was carried out as usual, regimentally; thirty-six n.c.o's underwent a fourteen-day cookery course at Aldershot in December and on qualifying conducted courses in their own units; but cooking for 1,000 men over open fires in the rain—the shelters were altogether inadequate—taxed even the most experienced battalion cooks. Officers' messes in large marquees or corrugated iron huts were run by contract with Harrod's Stores, London, on a flat rate of six shillings and sixpence per day, of which the individual paid one shilling and the Canadian Government the balance. Contracts for dry canteens in the camp lines had also been entered into by the War Office with Richard Dickeson & Co., Ltd., and with the Canteen and Mess Co-operative Society, Ltd., both of London; regimental purchases from these canteens up to fourpence per man were authorized, at option and in lieu, to vary the standard scale. At first the daily ration included 1-pound bread, 1-pound