

# Reminiscences of Army Life

By "Steelback"

## CHAPTER 15 A Military Interlude

Picture to yourself a regiment composed of stalwart young men, with a sprinkling of veterans giving dignity to the occasion by a display of medals, in their bright uniforms and polished accoutrements, marching through a town. Colours un-cased. The band playing a spirited march as they swing along, bringing to doorway and window, matron and maid, the latter with heaving bosoms and sparkling eyes — some perhaps, dimmed with tears, not with grief, but with enthusiasm, looking upon these marching men. They wave their hands, and words of farewell are banded back and forth. There is nothing more apt to stir up the feelings of a maid than a military display.

These are the kind of women that marry soldiers. That accompany them from one place to another. That bear them sons, some of whom, as they attain to manhood, follow in the footsteps of their fathers. These are the women who help to make history. The hardships met with were borne with a fortitude that is little known and less understood.

What do they care about hardships. They have married the man they wanted, so nothing else matters.

Married life in the army from a civilian's point of view was not, for the girl immediately concerned, considered a very rosy existence when the writer was allowed to marry.

The living conditions of a soldier and his wife, whether sergeant, corporal, or private, were, with the exception of pay, the same. The quarters—or rooms—assigned to them on their marriage, if any were available, were furnished alike. Two single bed cots—iron—as used in the barrack rooms—side by side. Two single palliasses filled with straw, and two pillow slips stuffed with the same kind of feathers. Two hospital sheets, and four full-sized brown blankets. This made up the full sized bed.

The furniture. Two kitchen chairs, one stool, one shovel, one poker, one tub for carrying coal, one fender, one candlestick, one four foot table, and two iron trestles, two plates, two basins, one three gallon can, one barrack room dish. All this would be in a room about 12 feet by 8 feet. To this elaborate outfit a soldier brought his bride. These were the conditions when I married.

A married soldier received all his pay with the exception of barrack damages. A sergeant would have to pay ninepence Monthly Sergeants Mess subscription in addition to the barrack damages. This varied in amount and there was no escape from it.

His rations—1 lb. bread and 3/4 lbs. of meat. This was issued twice weekly, and there was no allowance for the wife. Everything else that was needed for their comfort they purchased themselves. They did not buy furniture or a lot of utensils. It was not advisable to do this.

Two years in one station was the general rule, and when moving, accommodation for their baggage was limited, and anything in excess had to be left behind. Old boxes, a little cretonne, and a resourceful woman worked wonders.

This is a bright picture compared to some. In some stations the accommodation for married people would be limited. This was so in Ireland, so they were placed in barrack rooms. These rooms held 24 men. In this small space they put four families, making a passageway down the middle by hanging blankets on some rope. The blankets came to the floor. The space left would then be divided into four, each part being occupied by a soldier and his wife. If he had any children he occupied two parts. These were furnished the same as the single rooms. It is hard to imagine what the feelings of these people were who occupied these places, but they endured it. It couldn't be helped so what was the use of grousing about it. Even this, bad as it was, was an improvement on conditions before 1882. When I left the army years later a married soldier was as well off as most working men at that time — better than many in some cases.

Marriages in the army were not encouraged. A corporal, or private, was not allowed to marry unless he had seven years service. Had taken on to complete 12 years with the colours, and had some money in the Bank, and not even then unless there was a vacancy. A sergeant was allowed to marry but had to

get permission from the Officer Commanding the regiment, and his intended wife had to have a reference from the minister of the parish in which she resided.

The government did not allow any rations for the wife of a soldier no matter what his rank. His marriage was recognized by allowing him quarters, if available, if not, he would be placed on the lodging list and would live out of barracks. He would then be entitled to an allowance to provide fuel and light. Any soldier could marry without getting permission, but he got no privileges, except that, if of good character, he would be granted a sleeping out pass when not on duty.

In this case he would have to report to the orderly sergeant of his company every morning at reveille, and must not leave his lodgings after 10 p.m. unless he had a pass.

When the regiment left to go to some other station, his wife, unless he provided the means of transportation for her, would be left behind. These cases are frequent enough, too frequent in fact.

Well, it seems to me, that I ought to get back to Her Majesty's Troopship Assistance.

## CHAPTER 16

We were gradually drawing near to the shores of England, from which so many of the regiment had been absent for years. They felt like strangers, but with boyish eagerness they awaited the tying up of the old troopship to the docks at Liverpool.

At last the final bump. Hawsers were made fast to the bollards, gangplanks were put in place, and the order "All ashore" was given.

Relatives of some of the men were on hand to meet them. Embraces, kisses, tears, handclaps and boisterous laughter held sway for quite a while. At last a bugle call—the Fall in, by companies. Working parties are told off, and soon the baggage is being transferred to luggage cars all labelled showing their destinations. Some are marked Preston. This was to be the Headquarters of the battalion. Others marked Isle of Man, and others Fleetwood. At length the job was finished. We put on our accoutrements, and the order "Fall in" was given. We were told off to our destinations. Two companies to Fleetwood. One to the Isle of Man. The Band, Drums and the remainder of the battalion to Preston.

On the arrival at Fleetwood of the detachment, the company to which I belonged was quartered in the "Hutment Barracks" outside the town, the other company being quartered in the town. We found life at the "Hutments" anything but merry. There was a theatre in the town but it was seldom opened. Our greatest excitement, now I come to think about it, was chasing rats and devising means to catch them. They came in their hundreds from the sea shore which was about 800 yards away. They were ferocious looking animals and invaded the barrack room at night seeking food, fighting and squealing among themselves if they found a bone or a piece of bread. Boots would fly from all directions but there were never any casualties. The only result from their invasion would be the sorting of boots the next morning.

Just across the road from the Huts was the rifle range. The rifle in use was the Martini Henri. The cartridge for this rifle was made of thin brass, an iron base, and centre fire. The bullet was of soft lead and weighed one ounce. The rifle was sighted for twelve hundred yards but we never went beyond the eight hundred firing point. Can you imagine this bullet striking your shoulder, and the wound resulting from the impact? The bullet would expand and make a terrible mess. The kick of the rifle was very great and many a recruit would pad his shoulder with his towel until he got the knack of holding the rifle firmly into the right shoulder.

The targets were made of iron. For 800 yards range they would be six feet square with a three foot centre, a two foot bulls eye, and the remainder of the target being an outer. The scores would be four for a bull, three for a centre, and two for an outer. There would be two such targets separated by about ten yards, and there would be a stone hut for each target to shelter the markers. In front of these shelters, but well above them, would be the dummy targets. These are made of canvas and on the face is shown a white bulls eye and white centre mark. The marks made on the tar-

get, where the bullet has struck it, are shown by the marker. He has a round disc, about 12 inches in diameter, fastened on the end of a long pole. He places this disc on the face of the dummy target. If a bull's eye is seen on the target the black side of the disc is seen by the firer covering the white bull's-eye on the dummy. Other hits are shown with the white side to firer, in contrast to the black of the target.

These dummies are held in position by half inch rope tied to iron pegs driven in the ground. At some celebrations parading the streets will be seen, very often, a large banner with some device on its face being borne aloft by two men with a pole each. Four other men are holding on to guy ropes. There you have the idea of a dummy target. Looking up the range from 800 yards, it is not possible to see the ropes of the dummy target between the markers shelter and the iron target. This explanation is given so that the reader can form his or her opinion as to the marksmanship of Donovan. It also shows the method adopted by the military authorities in teaching the soldier to shoot.

Donovan had ten rounds of ball cartridge in his pouch the same as the others. This is what he did with it. He lay down full length, loaded his rifle, came to the "Present" and, with a sigh, pulled the trigger. The captain of the company was sitting on the grass beside Donovan and was watching the target through his field glasses. When a bullet hits the target we, at the firing point, can hear a metallic ring, but on this occasion there was no ring, but we saw something, and what we saw was the dummy target fading from sight the other side of the markers shelter. Up went the red flag. The cease fire sounded. The markers came out of their shelters and repaired the damage. Yes—you've guessed it. Donovan couldn't hit a six foot target at 800 yards but he could sever a piece of rope half an inch thick.

The mishap cost Donovan one shilling, and later on he cut it twice more, and with his last shot of the ten rounds he hit the target at the bottom—making an outer — scoring two.

It was decided by the Captain that Donovan should go through a very extensive course of recruits musketry training.

It seems strange, but three weeks afterwards we had a day at judging distance. This, I may say, is to give a man some idea of how far any object, animate, or otherwise, is from him.

On this day, with one exception, he swept the board. His answers were correct, or nearly correct, every time. Captain D was in charge, but the Lieut., a Mr. G, was asking the questions, and putting down the answers. Mr. G wore a glass, or monocle, to one eye. He had exhausted, with one exception, all visible objects, so he gave us this one for the last question. He said to the company, "See that cow over there"—judge distance on that. "We gave our answers, and while this was being done the cow took a notion to quietly slip through a nearby hedge. Lieut. G, fixed up the range finder onto its spindly legs and started to get the three objects in line but he could only see two objects and they were the two points of the stadiometer, or range-finder. Suddenly he looked up, and stared around, but he couldn't see the cow. He remarked to Capt. D, "I say D, the cow has moved."

We had our laugh later on. We weren't allowed any mirth in those days. The moral to this story is (Don't judge distance on animated objects unless they are tied up).

It's very evident that Donovan was scared of his rifle, but he mastered it. Donovan was uneducated. He couldn't read or write. His signature was an X. There were large numbers of men like him, but lack of education didn't interfere with their soldierly qualities.

N. Clarke Wallace L.O.L. 28 Woodbridge, this week sent a cheque for \$100 to the Toronto "War Victims Fund", the sum representing proceeds from the benefit dance staged last Friday, January 10th in the Orange Hall. All expenses in connection with the affair were covered by donations.

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