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Canadian Troops in England Make Many Friends, Have Good Record

This is the ninth in the series of articles written by Hugh Templin, of the Fergus News-Record, exclusively for the weekly newspapers of Canada. Mr. Templin flew to Britain as a guest of the British Council and was given an opportunity to see what is being done in Britain in wartime.

It was natural that a Canadian on a visit to Britain should want to see as much as possible of the Canadian Army overseas. Some of the Canadian editors had sons or brothers in the service. Every one had lists of addresses of boys from home.

Actually, it wasn't so easy to find any individual soldier. The Canadian units are scattered over much of the southern part of England, and while I was there, they were taking part in large-scale manoeuvres, the bulk of the Canadian Corps moving around London and up towards the coast to meet a pretended invasion. It was interesting to see this large army on the move, but hard to locate units or individuals.

A few days after I arrived in London, a rather unpleasant incident occurred.

The first six editors reached the city late on Saturday night. We were met by E. D. O'Brien, of the British Council, who steered us through the blackout to the Savoy, got us settled in our rooms and by ten o'clock, had us sitting down to dinner at the table reserved for us in the grill room. We had hardly begun to eat before a reporter edged himself into the circle, proceeded to order himself a meal at the expense of our hosts, topped it off with a bottle of whiskey and proceeded to "interview" me because he was beside me. It was an exhibition of nerve such as I had seldom beheld, and I suspect our host seethed inside, but did not want to say anything in front of his guests. As the bottle got lower, I wondered what the interview was going to sound like.

As it turned out, it wasn't as bad as it might have been, but my name was spread over Britain as the editor of a great group of weekly papers, stretching from coast to coast.

That brought in what the radio and movie people would call "fan mail," but which might more properly have been called "letters to the editor."

One of them was a scurrilous postcard, denouncing the conduct of the Canadian troops in Britain. The writer said he was coming to the Savoy the next morning to tell me all about them. I made enquiries, found that the writer was an Australian in London, not too well thought of himself and a bit of a crank. The English people resented what he had done. The man turned up next day, but I made sure I was away at the time.

Troops Have Excellent Record
After that, I made it my particular business, wherever I went, to ask about the Canadian boys in England. I received answers from high and low. I slipped away from the group and talked with the English people in their gardens. I got official figures from Canadian Army Headquarters. I talked with civilians and English soldiers. Before I left London, I had satisfied myself beyond any doubt. The record is not perfect, of course, but there were few serious crimes or misdemeanors. I

learned little bad and much good. The one definite episode in which a group of Canadian soldiers took part rather amused me, though perhaps I should have been shocked.

The British people cannot speak too highly of the Canadians. Many of our soldiers are billeted in private houses, especially east of London in the villages near the Thames. These boys have been adopted as members of the families.

One day, during manoeuvres at Aldershot, I went along the street asking the residents what they thought of the Canadians. I asked if they had any complaints, if there had been any trouble. Almost invariably, they had nothing but praise. I never heard any criticism of the Second Division, which was in the district at the time, although there was some of another division which had been there earlier. Aldershot has probably seen more of the Canadians than any other town.

The best authority is doubtless the Provost Marshal of the Canadian Headquarters staff. I had dinner with him one night at the quaint old East Indies and Sporting Club in London. He gave me comparative figures. It might be expected that the record of the English Regiments, living near their own homes, would be better than that of the Canadians. Actually, it isn't. Crime among the soldiers of the Canadian Corps is only one-third as prevalent in proportion to the number enlisted, as in the Imperial Forces. In spite of driving conditions that are strange to Canadians, the highway accident records of Canadians is better in proportion to the number of vehicles. Investigation of accidents showed that there was a tendency to blame the Canadians for more than their share. For instance, a woman called up one day to say that a Canadian Army vehicle had damaged her fence. Asked how she knew it was Canadian, she said it had a hippopotamus painted on the side. It was explained to her that the hippopotamus was not a Canadian animal; the vehicle belonged to another Dominion.

A Few Actual Incidents

Perhaps a few simple stories will illustrate the attitude of the English people to the Canadians.

In a small city near London, friends called a taxi to take me to the railway station in the blackout. When the driver arrived and found I was a Canadian, he asked if I would mind if he went around by his house and brought his wife along; she would like to talk to a Canadian. When I left them at the station, he would not accept a penny from me.

Waiting for the train in that same station, I talked to three English Aircraftmen in the R.A.F. They were loud in their praise of the Canadians because of an incident that had just happened. They had ordered lunch at the refreshment counter. Service was slow. An English Major came along after their orders were in and insisted on being served first. The girl at the counter refused. A bit of an argument had arisen till it was settled by an R.C.A.F. officer of higher rank who took the part of the boys. He had given the Major a bit of a lecture. "After all," he concluded, "we are all fighting for the same King."

One night, the London Standard had a cartoon. It showed an English girl, rather embarrassed, introducing a young R.C.A.F. man to her parents, with the words, "I picked him up along the road." The next day, I sat beside the editor of the Standard at a luncheon. He told me the story.

He and his wife had been driving to the country home the previous Sunday. Along the road they caught up to a young couple with their thumbs up. Hitch-hikers are not common in England but one had an R.C.A.F. uniform so they stopped to pick them up.

They learned that the girl had just met the Canadian. In fact, it was his first week in England. She invited him to her home and he accepted. As they neared the place where she was to get out, she began to have doubts. Perhaps he wouldn't be welcomed. The editor was a good sport. He offered to take the Canadian to his home and that was agreed upon, but as the girl got ready to go, she changed her mind. She wouldn't give him up, no matter what her parents said. So he went along with her.

I have already mentioned the warm reception given us at Coventry. When

a large part of that city was wiped out, most residents escaped with their lives but little else. Canadian garments clothed the people; Canadian travelling kitchens fed them; Canadian medical supplies were used to ease their pain. Standing in the midst of the ruins of Coventry Cathedral, the Provost presented to each Canadian editor a priceless souvenir, a cross made of two ancient nails picked up among the ruins.

Actually, every person I met had high praise for Canada and Canadians — and it was sincere, not merely a polite gesture. Many of them had visited Canada. There was Lord Riverdale, head of a great steel company, who knew my own town of Fergus; Sir Harry Brittain, who asked particularly about Acton, Ontario, because he had visited there, his home being in Acton, England; Winston Churchill, who promised to visit Canada again as soon as he could, a promise since carried out. James Bone, London editor of the Manchester Guardian, who lost his clothes when his boat was torpedoed as he returned from Canada; and the taxi driver who used to work at Jasper Park and believed it was the most beautiful spot on earth.

Canadian Soldiers and English Girls

Many Canadian soldiers are marrying English girls. That is not surprising, but few in Canada realize how many weddings there have been. The commanding officer of a Western Ontario battalion told me that 100 of his men had married English and Scottish girls. He said they were good girls, of the best types, for he insisted on interviewing every one before he gave his permission for the marriage to take place.

Now that is something that Canadian relatives of soldiers and particularly Canadian girls, should not overlook. B. K. Sandwell, who was with me, believes that a certain "glamour" surrounds Canadians in Britain. He ascribes that in part to the movies and novels. Perhaps he is right. At a big aircraft factory, I saw a girl sitting at a table reading a paper covered novel, entitled "Love in the North." On the cover was a huge Canadian youth dressed in fur parka, hugging a beautiful girl, while the aurora borealis made a brilliant background. Bishop Renison who has spent much of his life in the North, was much amused.

I think there is a more practical side to it than that. The English believe we live in a land of plenty and wealth. Just now, when we eat much they can't get, that idea spreads. A Canadian is considered a "catch," and from what I saw on the streets and elsewhere, English girls are out to "get their man" in wartime.

From the soldier's point of view, I believe loneliness plays a part. The boys don't get enough letters from home. Perhaps they get plenty at first but the number falls off. Some don't get any. They want the news from home, but even more, they want to think that they haven't been forgotten. They need letters even more than they need parcels — newsy, gossipy letters telling what people at home are doing. And they like the home town newspapers, which pass from hand to hand. Councils or service clubs would be doing good acts if they would subscribe for the local paper for all boys from their towns who are overseas.

Parcels are appreciated, of course. The troops are adequately fed, but they get few luxuries. Remember that when you send parcels. Some things are luxuries in England that are plentiful here. Candies are most welcome. I saw candies only twice in England and they were really confections, not real candies. I would have given much for some real ones. Send potted fancy meats and cheese, marmalade and jams in tins (not glasses), braces and garters and razor blades.

Illustrated magazines, such as Life, are heavy to send, but are most welcome. Send a few of them to your soldiers, or to Mr. A. Savaard, Canadian Army Headquarters, Cockspur Street, London.

But remember, letters are best of all. There can't be too many of them.

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(By G. L. Creed, Squadron Leader R.C.A.F.)

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