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Prologue

On February 9, 1941, a lone German Heinkel HE 111 bomber traded its bombs for extra fuel, set a course for a remote island in the middle of the North Atlantic Ocean, and strafed an airfield 1,000 miles from the front lines of the war. This strange act, one plane attacking one obscure outpost, is a story few will be familiar with, and yet that moment changed the course of the war. It had taken almost eighteen months, but British Prime Minister Winston Churchill finally got what he had wanted since September 1939 – for America to join the fight. It was not his glorious rhetoric that had persuaded, but bullets scattering around a Canadian machine gun emplacement on an Icelandic airfield that finally galvanized action. The Luftwaffe’s triumphant broadcasts of its longest recorded flight and the stretching of German airpower out into the Atlantic brought a distant war a little closer to American shores. It gave its President, Franklin D. Roosevelt, more ammunition to end the non-interventionist policies that had dominated its foreign relations since the start of the war.

A month after the attack (and 9 months before Pearl Harbour), on March 11, 1941 the United States enacted its Lend-Lease Act – legislation that enhanced the shipping of supplies and armaments to Great Britain. This all but formally eliminated any semblance of neutrality. The Atlantic became both a super highway and an immense battlefield, and the small, isolated island nation of Iceland was thrust onto the centre stage of a war in which it wanted no part. Sitting in the lava dust at the airfield that day was a platoon of Cameron Highlanders from Ottawa tasked with defending the strategic island base from invasion. They had been there for seven months, waiting for this exact moment. This is their story.

Canada's involvement in Iceland remains a forgotten piece of the Canadian war story, and its starring role in a defining moment of the Second World War is lost to history. It would probably surprise most Canadians to know that Canadian soldiers served in Iceland. Very little has been written about it and, more often than not, the focus is on the naval portion, the Battle of the Atlantic, and not on the ground forces. The Canadian contribution in Iceland is a very special story, a small piece of a much bigger war – one brigade, and later only one battalion, a few hundred men in a war of millions. This is a tribute to those who served in Iceland – the Canadians, the British, the handful of Norwegians, and eventually the Americans – and to their important vigil in the greater outcome of the war.

I drive slowly, watching the blue dot on my phone screen creep along the edge of the old airfield. I move and it shadows me. I have looked at the satellite images of Kaldadarnes dozens of

times before. I could trace it by hand from memory. The striking runways, shaped like an “A” rotated ninety degrees to the right, as clear now as they were seventy-seven years ago when they were scratched into the Icelandic gravel. Today the map has one addition, the blue dot, me.

I stop the car. It takes both hands to press the door open against the wind and climb out. Rain roars at me horizontally. I zip everything tight, pull my hood over my toque, put my back to the wind, and stride out onto the airfield. There is nothing much left to tie it to another time. The huts and hangers are gone. The towers and gun emplacements are footprints in the grass. The runways have been reclaimed as roads. It is the perfect horizontal lines that betray the field’s original purpose. I stand at the corner of the two runways; the flatness runs away in all directions. I have researched this place for years and have waited a long time to come here. I am not disappointed. There are indentations from the huts, a few pieces of rusted piping, corners of concrete sticking out from the grass, and the endless wind.

I take long steps over lava gravel and brown grass to the edge of the Olfusa River. It is a white-capped ribbon of concentrated blue running parallel to the dried grass and black sand shore. Beyond it, the striking flat-topped volcanic fortress of Ingolfsfjall rises from the river valley and starts the high plateau that stretches into central Iceland. It is deeply grooved and is dusted to its waist with snow. To the west, lower hills roll off the side of Ingolfsfjall and fall towards the Atlantic. I am prepared for wind and weather and for the task of layering my imagination of

another time onto an unknown place. I am not prepared for the beauty. Everything is pretty much as I thought it would be – everything except the staggering drama of the landscape. Maybe it is just the intensity of the moment that makes things seem more than what they are. Warm in my jacket, my eyes on the ribbon of blue, my boots on the lava gravel, I am finally in the place I have imagined for so long. I am finally at the place where my grandfather's story begins, on the corner of two runways deep in the heart of Iceland.

Stories choose us. They choose their tellers for reasons that appear mysterious at first, but in the journey to tell the story, it all becomes clear. I know now that the story chose me because I had prepared for it. In many ways, I had been preparing for the part my whole life. I have always been interested in the past. I like knowing where I come from and understanding the events that created the present. I like the idea that I am a result of the chance encounters, the actions taken and the deeds left undone, and the purposeful decisions and the inevitable random events that define all our lives. The war had always been of particular interest. Three of my four grandparents were soldiers in the Second World War, all four of them were in the middle of it, and all of their futures were determined by it. My very existence is a result of its upheaval and fallout. I cannot help but be interested in how it all came about.

I have always liked soldiers. We used to play soldiers as kids, tearing through the woods on our collective missions, re-enacting our favourite movies or inventing our own schemes. I collected toy ones – lead, plastic, from all wars and continents, all of

them standing or kneeling on a bright green metal plate. I was captivated by medals and memorabilia; the specifics seemed important, I wanted to know what they meant, who wore them, and why. I was a devoted visitor of war museums, galleries, and ageing warehouses filled with tanks and trucks. Later, I was an army cadet, proficient in protocol and drilling. I read endlessly about specific soldiers, battles, machines, and organizations and how they played into the bigger picture of the war; always keeping a focus around my grandparents, where they had been and what they had done. It was a centering point, a way to keep the massive, earth-consuming conflict relevant. As I learned and grew, the wooden rhetoric of glory and valour gave way to a broader perspective that included the reality of war – the suffering, destruction and death, the hardship, endurance – and ultimately, the politics that define any conflict.

I never spoke to my grandfather, my Opa, about these things. He died when I was eleven, before it occurred to me to ask him about the past. He had a heart attack in the Brockville No Frills parking lot a week before my sister and I were to visit for March Break. The trunk of his car was filled with bright yellow plastic bags of apples, chocolate, sesame sticks, and those windmill-shaped ginger cookies. Our letters to him and my Oma were left unopened on the kitchen table with the rest of the morning's mail. It was the first time I had experienced real loss; something was gone that could not be replaced. I had shared some of the best times of my life with him, especially summers at the cottage, and I would like to think that he would have said the same. We shared life together at different

stages along its length – mine near the beginning, and his near the end.

For me, at eleven, he was just my Opa. A tall, broad-shouldered man with a ready smile and a funny laugh. He sounded like a seal when he laughed. It was a full-hearted, infectious laugh that made you laugh just to hear it. *Looney Tunes* could always make him laugh. We had one special VHS tape, an hour of episodes; we knew each one through, and yet every time he laughed. I loved watching the show with him just to hear him. If I see Wile E. Coyote, I hear his seal bark. He had a steady, soothing voice, twinged with a slight Ottawa Valley accent, heavy on the “eee”. Slow to anger, gentle and capable, he smelled of Old Spice aftershave, and I remember him wearing a lot of beige and brown and grey, often all at once. He had a particular grey sweater that he seemed to wear all the time; it had a brown argyle pattern on the front. Whenever I see argyle, I smell Old Spice.

Eighteen years later, on an overcast fall day at the family cottage, I read the word “Kaldadarnes” written in his loopy script in a soft-backed leather journal. I sat at the dining table, the windows open to the breeze off the lake, and read the journal cover to cover. There were stories about my grandfather’s childhood, his family, his first jobs, and the early days of the army in Ottawa. There were stories from England, Normandy, and Holland, but it was the stories from Iceland that caught my attention. He painted vivid images of a harsh and inhospitable land with wild weather and dark mountains, an austere but unique beauty. He wrote about a part of his life I knew nothing about, a part of

history I knew nothing about, places with unfamiliar names that he had never spoken of, places where he had been as a soldier. That was the day the story chose me. It leaped out at me and tied me to it. Later I would understand that our meeting was not an accident. It was simply time. We were put in each other's way. I saw the story and knew that I was ready to tell it.

Kaldadarnes is the first word, the cornerstone from which I built outward, to discover how a soldier from Smith Falls, Ontario ended up in Iceland. It would be a slow journey, taken over years in small fits of creativity and longer bouts of intense research. By the time I began, most everyone who had been part of the story was gone, including my grandfather. I had to go back to the beginning and work my way forward, one word at a time. In the lulls throughout the years while the story waited on the backburner, it never released its hold; it was always weaving its mystical threads through time and space, ever orchestrating in the background, calling quietly, waiting to be finished.

I go from a word, to a shape, to a framework, to the howling Icelandic wind in February and from local museums to national archives, from conversations with neighbours to interviews with professors half a world away. I spend time in libraries and basements, living rooms, and virtual forums. Letters are pulled out of attics, photos are discovered, and regimental histories add substance to the line I am following. The story becomes more than just being about my grandfather; it starts to include other members of the regiment, Canada and Iceland, and other nations and interests in a much bigger war context.

There were tangible glimpses, windows where the past came momentarily to life. The musty smell of equipment, grease, or old rubber takes me to another time. I hold photos that transport me to the past. I have stood in the places he stood. I have seen the rivers and the mountains that were his sightlines. I have travelled, adventured, and explored. I have had the howling wind on my face, felt the sting of ice pellets on exposed skin, and have known the endlessness of the weather. I have had my limits tested. I have known fear, boredom, exhaustion, pain, and loss. I know we shared those experiences, and it makes our connection real. For a moment he is there, beside me, and I know exactly how it was, and exactly what to say and how to say it.

I tell his story in his voice. I believe that the historical accuracy is important. The book is deeply researched and has been reviewed by top military historians. It draws on sources from his journal, archival documents, regimental war diaries, and battalion histories, as well as letters and interviews with family, Cameron servicemen, and Icelandic historians. I blend exhaustive research with my impressions and experiences to build his story. It is the best way I know to honour him and his colleagues and recreate a picture of another time. The stories in this book are all true. I use real places and accounts wherever possible. Each of the events portrayed took place during the war in Iceland. They did not necessarily all happen to my grandfather, but they happened to someone, at some point during the occupation. On occasion, I have altered the sequence or elaborated the stories to build a narrative. Aside from my grandfather and the names of the commanding officers, none of the Canadian

soldiers mentioned are real; they are fictitious extrapolations of many different people I came across in transcribed interviews and personal letters during the research process.

It has been a remarkable journey. I have had the good fortune of sharing it with many interesting companions and characters – people I would never have otherwise been connected with. Some of them were willing participants; others were swept into the current of the quest by force. I helped them with their explorations, and they with mine. When I started out I did not know where the journey would take me, where I would go, whom I would meet, or how the story would end. What's more, as I approached the end, it became clear that there was no tangible conclusion, only a transformation. Journeys do not end. They become a part of us, along with the relationships and the memories and the stories that go along with them. You may arrive back at home. You may stop recording. You may even create a version to share. The journey, however, continues to grow. We carry them all with us. We blend them with our own experiences. They make us who we are. We are all made up of journeys – our own, those we share, those we take in search of others – and no two journeys are ever the same.

Arrival

I ICELAND

Our liner, *HMT Empress of Australia*, creeps closer in the inexhaustible summer light. The stark Icelandic landscape comes into focus. Low fog banks blur the boundary between sea and shore and give the island an illusory feel. We float towards it, but closing the distance does not improve my comprehension of what we have encountered. It sits just outside the edge of my reality. It defies my limited conceptions of the world and puts an end to the notion of the Atlantic being boundless. It is the long green arms of land stretching toward us and the white peaks poking up in the distance that give the shrouded isle tangible form and promise a reality beneath the dream.

The *Empress* captain is outside the bridge yelling down to a small fishing boat. Their words are lost to the wind, but I watch the fisherman extend his full arm towards the north. The ship swivels under our feet, and the bow turns a few degrees to match the fisherman's bearing. Our navigator has managed our incredible 2,000-mile, zigzag crossing with an all

but useless magnetic compass, and now, twenty miles from Reykjavik, it is a man's arm that will close the gap in our journey and take us into port.

The first thing I notice is that there are no trees. The realization is instantaneous enough, but the strangeness slows any immediate adjustment. Instead my eyes twist the distant radio towers and seiner masts into more familiar arboreal outlines. I try to acquaint the new reality with the old, while I search for a baseline on which to build a fresh foundation. There is none.

I had not been given the chance to think about where we were going or what it might be like. Two days ago, I did not know where our ship was headed. A month ago, I had not been more than an hour from my house. The train from our last training camp outside Barrie, Ontario to Halifax was more distance than I had ever travelled. To cross an ocean or to conceive of a place without trees was a stretch of the imagination I had not made. It is how we came upon Iceland, like something out of a dream, something imagined. It appeared on the horizon in an instant, rising from the endless grey sea as if we ourselves had pulled it out of the depths.

I am not the only one who finds the transition difficult. My comrades all stand the same way, with cocked heads, twisted faces, and dropped jaws. I know my face reflects theirs. Stewart, my childhood friend, is at my elbow. I can't remember how or when we met. We have been friends for so long that I have simply blurred the past so that he is congruent with all of my memories. As usual, he is less affected by the drama of the moment than everyone else. "I hope you like fish," he quips. "The

island is looking a little sparse.” I can’t help but laugh. In his own way he has captured the essence of the situation perfectly.

If I had been asked yesterday how I would define my home, or myself, I would have struggled to reply. Now the answer unveils itself to me with the lifting fog. We are unconsciously shaped by where we come from – not just by language and culture, but by the landscape itself. We are grounded by the physical characteristics of home; they are fundamental to who we are.

Trees are a defining feature of the landscape of my home, something so familiar that they cease to be visible. The consistency of their existence is calming and immutable, something to be relied upon. Their cycles regulate the seasons. Their unique forms define skylines. They mark the very boundaries of civilization, of our authority over nature. We carved our existence from them, often negotiating that boundary with brute strength, forcing our way onto the land. Their trunks put armadas to sea and joined the nation together by rail. Their timber built an empire. It is a complex relationship. In our more limited moments, we know them as obstacles and as resources. In our better moments, we know them as sanctuaries and as partners. Their leaves adorn our crests, flags, and badges. Their names, their presence, have seeped into our speech and have integrated into proverb and song. The broad, definable leaf of the maple, symmetrical and sensible, is synonymous with Canada itself.

The only thing that is clear is that I have taken them for granted. Now they are gone, and with them, any notion of home. I blink hard in the low light and cling to past notions of normalcy

even as they are being obliterated before me. It is like watching a dream slip away; the harder I try to concentrate on it, the faster it disappears.

The last of our escort, the heavy cruiser *HMS Devonshire*, begins a slow arc away from us, turning for England and the war raging there. I watch its three giant smoke stacks become specks on the horizon. We are alone, perched on the edge of a strange new world. The *Empress* crew swing the lead to find the depth offshore of the harbour, and the anchor rattles off the bow and plunges into the north Atlantic. I stand against the railings on one of the mid-decks. I feel the cold of the metal through my wool pants. The air has a snap to it; it is different from the moisture-filled sea air that has surrounded us for the last few days. It is sharp and dry and has no smell at all. I am aware of it by its touch, its physical presence, in contrast to the more formless sea air. The dark grey mountains of the volcanic Esja range dwarf Reykjavik's colourful skyline. To our left sit the islands of Akurey, Engey and Videy, fingers on a hand outstretched to pull us into the harbour. The land is barren, scorched sterile by eons of volcanic eruptions. The immense desolation is fearsome. The devastation is a trail left by an awesome and temporarily invisible power, a dormant monster lying in wait. In the same way that the ocean inspires fear, keeping you aware that present conditions are but momentary and that it is capable of awe-inspiring shifts, this land too is capable of grand transitions. There are battles being waged below. The earth trying to suppress the liquid fire, wrestling molten rock in superficial clutches. It is a place very much alive, still in the throes of formation.

We disembark from the *Empress* on the afternoon of July 7, 1940. We climb down cargo nets in our greatcoats in full marching order with our rifles, haversacks, and larger canvas kitbags. The wind is terrifying. I thought that after crossing the Atlantic I had experienced wind, but nothing has prepared me for the Icelandic version. It travels in a straight, unfettered line direct from Antarctica or pours down off the Arctic Circle with ferocity I do not have the vocabulary to describe. I cling to the net, my hands ache from over-gripping; my heavy wool collar slaps my face; my eyes water; and my kit bag pulls me backwards as the wind tries to knock me sideways into the sea.

Below me, the barge pounds up and down on the waves and bangs off the side of the ship. The *Empress* too pounds up and down, but at a different rate to the barge. There is no rhythm, no consistency to the movements, just the unsettling effect of a small metal boat on a big choppy sea. I look down between my feet and find that the barge is still a long way away. My stomach turns. I will myself not to look down again. I focus on moving one hand, one foot at a time down the net. The more I focus on this task, the more I realize that my terror is abating and is being replaced with anger. I am filled with unadulterated rage at this ludicrous situation. It consumes the adrenaline, the nausea, and the fear. It is beyond rational thought that anyone should decide that the best way for 1,800 people to leave a ship of our size is down a cargo net.

My feet meet the barge. It is an unceremonious landing – somewhere between a fall and a catch. I certainly do not land on my feet. I am pulled into the boat. As we ferry ashore, I sit facing

the land. I do not speak. I never once look back toward the ship or the sea. I have had enough. The seven days on board and this final insult is sufficient. I cannot wait to have firm ground beneath me. I grew up in landlocked Ontario. It is a place full of water – massive lakes and rivers that can grandly assert themselves, but impressive lakes cannot prepare you for the immensity of the ocean or for its endlessness, its inscrutability, its indifference. The idea that the ocean could in some way be soothing is an impossible notion for me. To say I feel small is an understatement; to think that we might be in control is a joke.

As a boy I loved reading all kinds of naval adventure stories. Admiral Nelson and the heroes of the Napoleonic wars, daring battles on the high seas, pirates and buried treasure, inexhaustible explorers in frozen wastelands, maddened despots on petulant rivers and, of course, revenge-driven whalers. We staged some of those battles from rowboats and canoes on the river in the summer, flipping a coin to see who had to be the enemy, the buccaneer, the loser, and then knocking each other out of boats with water bombs and paddles. By eleven we could have taken on the Spanish Armada and won. We were so sure of our future career paths that there would have been no talking us out of wanting to be anything other than the captain of a ship. Nothing sounded grander than bellowing commands from the bridge, a stiff wind in the sails and the whole world stretched out before you.

In the calm moments between his enraged battles with the whale, Ahab speaks so eloquently of the sea. From my vantage point, on dry land, safe between four walls, Melville could have

convinced me of its beauty – rolling pastures covering the earth that might even have a soul. Yet not even the most prolific prose had prepared me for experiencing the ocean firsthand, and the reality was much less to my liking. Dropped into troughs only to rise again on a crest and look out and see nothing but roll upon roll gliding toward you is a humbling experience. I think that because it moves, it seems alive. It is ever changing, and in its vastness, ever the same. It is that unpredictability, coupled with its immensity and power, that fills me with respect and fear. I think more of the souls that have drowned in its restlessness, whose dreams and lives have passed beneath the endless shades and shadow. I am pleased to have my boots crunching over gravel again and to feel insignificant against a landmass instead of the liquid hills we have passed through.

II THE EMPRESS

Looking back it's hard to believe it was only a week ago – on June 30 – when we arrived in Halifax. We had come by train from Camp Borden, Ontario the night before we sailed. The tracks led right onto the pier, and the cars pulled up parallel to the harbour. We descended from the train and faced a mass of glowing windows and doors suspended in blackness, disembodied from anything tangible. In the darkness it was hard to tell where the ship ended and the night began. It took a moment to register the scene, and as my eyes adjusted to the light, the outline of the ship became clear against the night. It was so

unexpected – a ship sitting at the end of a train platform. The tide was out and the gangplank was inclined at a very steep angle to the ship. It was difficult to see in the reflected light of the boat, and the bridge was narrow and had only ropes for sides. I gripped the rope railing tightly with my free hand and wobbled from side to side encumbered with heavy kit. We made an incredible noise. Thousands of hobnailed boots against the thin metal of the gangplank. Above the tromping, I could just hear the incessant swearing and cursing as soldiers slipped and stepped up the steep ramp and experienced the decks of a ship for the first time.

We spent that first night on board while we waited for our gear to be loaded. It had been an eventful twenty-four hours, filled with new sights for me and for most of those with me. I experienced more new things in that one-day period than I ever had before. I was trying to register it all for what it was, and at the same time, pair it with the notion that these new places would be my last views of Canada. All day I had watched the familiar St. Lawrence River grow wider and wider through the long, thin, rectangular concessions of rural Quebec until I no longer recognized it. Identically carved parcels ran from road to river, all touching the water on one short end and then stretching fertile lands back away from it; row after row of green fields and farmhouses. After Quebec City, the river became like a sea; the banks grew farther apart as it opened its mouth to take in the Atlantic and eventually become one with it entirely. It was no longer the river of my childhood. We flowed along side by side,

in opposite directions, each of us changing as we moved farther from our point of origin; adapting to meet what lay ahead.

We turned south before the end of the peninsula, passing through the rolling greenness of New Brunswick and across the back of Nova Scotia. As the light of the day faded, we passed within reaching distance of the Bay of Fundy, and I came upon the ocean for the first time. I smelled rather than saw it. The tide was out and the water had retreated well out from the bay, but the long mudflats retained the flavour of salt and seaweed and would hold onto the ocean's memory until the tide came again to replenish it. I would not truly see it until the next morning from the deck of the ship.

We sailed from downtown Halifax midday on July 1, 1940 – Dominion Day, our national holiday. There were two full battalions on board, about 800 men each – us Camerons from Ottawa and Les Fusiliers Mont-Royal (Fusiliers) from Montreal, as well as 200 additional men that we had picked-up in Montreal. Our sendoff was tremendous. Thousands of people gathered to wish us farewell. I could not see the ground from the start of the pier to the edge of Point Pleasant Park; it was like a cheerful fur covered everything. Behind them rose Citadel Hill, its white star shape standing out against the bright emerald fields. We stood along every inch of railing and waved back, caught up in the unexpected dispatch we were being given. Voices calling “God speed” and “Bon Voyage” rose up from the harbour with incredible intensity. Our pipers were on deck playing “Cameron Men” and “Will ye no come back again” and their skirling was all but drowned. I did not think that the cheering could get louder, but

when the ship's whistle sounded, indicating our final moment of departure, the crowd below erupted to a higher level of excitement. It sounded like someone had scored an overtime goal. The engines revved, the ship shuddered, the ropes were cast off, and we pulled away from the dock. I stood facing the harbour, etching the last panorama of Halifax into my mind.

We had not been given much warning about our deployment. At the time of my last leave home, our overseas posting had not been confirmed. In the hurried lead-up to our departure, I had not considered what was ahead of us or what I was leaving behind. It is mostly impossible to imagine a reality outside of the present one. We are better at adapting to new situations than we are at conceiving of realities of which we are not a part. I felt nothing but excitement for the journey and awe for the escort that had been assembled. We were still at the very beginning, and it felt like a great adventure.

In those last few moments, as we were tugged into the channel, some things did begin to condense in my mind. I saw the steel-grey shapes of our escort waiting beyond the submarine boom – two Royal Canadian Navy (RCN) destroyers, the British Royal Navy (RN) heavy cruiser *HMS Devonshire* and the hulking mass of the RN aircraft carrier *HMS Furious* – and for the first time, I saw that we were part of something much bigger than ourselves. The size of the ships themselves, our transport included, was staggering. The fact that we were only the smallest piece served to make the immensity of what was being created and the scale of events that were unfolding much more astounding. It is called the “war machine”, the military resources

organized for waging war, but I had never seen it. We had stepped away from the barracks and streets of Ottawa, away from the forests where we had trained, away from what we knew, and onto a bigger stage. It was a joyous sendoff from home on a perfect summer day, and then we were engulfed by our escort and turned into the unknown.

New rules and regulations were imposed on us on the ship that brought the war the closest it had ever been. Safe in our beds across the Atlantic, the only things that tied us to the war were words. On the ship, every mile brought us closer to the front lines. Full blackout orders were instated. At night, we were not allowed to smoke or carry a light of any kind, all portholes were closed after 1900 hours, and we had to carry our lifebelts at all times. Paravanes, winged underwater gliders for sweeping mines, were strung out and streamed alongside the ship for the first few days, and then hauled up and stored on the decks. Watch parties scanned the seas twenty-four hours a day. The threats, German and nautical, were real, even if they were implied; no one finished the sentences as to what might happen if the rules were not obeyed. I was grateful for that. I did not need definite examples to feed my imagination of what might be hiding out in the waves and darkness.

On the second day, we had a training muster parade and were detailed the rules of emergency situations. We needed to understand the different whistles and signals of the ship's klaxon. The drilling filled me with a terror I had never before faced. The implication that we might be under attack brought with it the sobering realization that, on a ship, there was

nowhere to go. My body flowed with flight or fight chemicals, and yet all of my normal reactions to being in danger were useless. Our grand liner was not much more than a floating tomb. At sea the practice is to use the word “soul” in place of person. It certainly enforced on me the idea that we were forever at its mercy. It surrounded us, engulfed us. There was no escape. Only one force had dominance over it, and that was death. You had to transform from a person into a soul, and only then could you be set free.

By the third day, we had settled into more of a routine. It had a calming effect. Routines are the mainstay of a soldier’s life. They provide structure and allow us to function; we are bound by them, but their consistency also makes us beholden to them. To be in an unfamiliar place, a new and unknown liquid geography, without one was like being without a basic necessity. We needed something regular and predictable, and the daily ship routine was created. The schedule was filled enough such that only a few hours remained unstructured: reveille, breakfast, inspection parade, calisthenics, lunch, lecture, free time or optional activities, dinner, free evening or optional activities, confined to cabins, lights out, repeat.

The *Empress* was a Canadian Pacific Lines first-class civilian ocean liner that had been converted to a troop ship in the fall of 1939. It had already transported the 1st Canadian Infantry Division to England in December 1939. Before its conversion it had carried royalty to and from Canada several times, and some of our officers were billeted in the luxurious first-class cabins. The rest of us were billeted below decks in cots and hammocks, but

as the ship had been refitted to take 5,000 soldiers, there was lots of room for the 1,800 of us.

The weather was good for the first few days of the journey, and though the sun never felt warm due to the speed of the ship and the wind, the clear skies were welcome. The food was good and plentiful. We had spent the previous five weeks doing field training in unseasonably cold and wet June weather. We had lived in leaky tents and had eaten cold rations, so the ship was a great relief. Some of the men were seasick, but for the most part, the Atlantic behaved itself and the seas were as calm as could be asked for on a crossing of our duration.

Every morning we had full battalion parade at 1030 hours. The ranking officer, our own commanding officer, Lieutenant-Colonel Rogers, his Adjutant, the *Empress*' First Officer, medical officer, and Master at Arms made a tour of the ship. There was no one place large enough to have all 800 of us at once, and the parade wound around the decks, wherever there was space for us to stand for inspection. Afterwards, we had control of the decks until lunch and then traded with the Fusiliers who had use of them for the afternoon.

The ship had huge wooden decks, and there was room for running and physical games. There were boxing matches and push-up competitions. The empty pool was turned into badminton courts. We had come to know each other very well, and there was a relaxed manner among us; there were no strained interactions or courtesies that needed extending. When not on deck, we spent most of our free time in the mess hall where there was more room and the stale odours of engine oil,

cooking smells, and seasickness from the lower decks were less severe. The room was filled with benches fastened to the deck and long metal tables fitted with a rim on all sides to catch whatever might be rolling around. There was a lot of bingo. We played cards and talked, joked, and bet. We read the sports pages and balled up the others to throw at each other. We wrote letters home and tried to divine where it was we were headed.

After lunch on July 3, the two RCN destroyers returned to Canada. We watched them arc away behind us, leaving two identical half-circle wakes in their stead. Two days later, the *HMS Furious* also took her leave. She had been with us since we left Halifax, but we had never seen her up close. She pulled along beside us to bid farewell. There was nothing beautiful or streamlined about her. She looked like an overgrown car carrier – an 800-foot-long, floating steel rectangular prism with a flat top and a snub-nosed bow pointing out from underneath. What she lacked in beauty, she made up for in sheer mass, speed, and water displacement. We lined the railings and stared at her crew across the water like a scene from a Western, each side sizing the other up; lines of navy blue and army green. It was silent briefly as we looked up at the towering double decks, gun mountings, and the crew dwarfed in her mammoth beam. Then one of the sailors put up his hand and the severe moment dissolved into hooting and waving. We couldn't speak to each other with the wind and engines and distance between us, but we came close enough for eye contact and good-natured yelling. Their ship was affecting enough on its own, so it was even more thrilling to stand so close to one another, our ships flying side by side, the

water tearing away rapidly below us. We stood across from each other for ages, our lines of blue and green seemed to become one. Then she started moving away from us, slowly at first so that it was undetectable. The split got wider and wider until she was out ahead of us, and little by little, her monstrous outline got smaller and smaller until it vanished over the horizon.

The last of our escort, *HMS Devonshire*, watched vigilantly over us, usually staying to the rear, and occasionally venturing out to port or starboard if something caught her eye. Once we watched as she apprehended an Italian tramp steamer and later a Dutch merchant ship. She would bring the ships along side, they would exchange the required numbers and nationality, and then the ships would continue on their way. We regarded the *Devonshire* and her crew with great affection. She was our shepherd, the only thing protecting us from potential destruction. She was the physical embodiment of well-being for a group of landlubbers from Ontario and Quebec who feared both the vast and empty sea and the contradictory knowledge that it was full of prowling German U-boats.

Our adoration for her became even more fervent when we heard a transmission from the pro-German propaganda broadcaster *Lord Haw Haw* that the *Empress* had been sunk with all Camerons and Fusiliers lost at sea. Some of the men spent their free time watching the waves and adding extra eyes to the ship's official lookout parties. We knew it was useless. If an attack had come, it would have been at night, and it would have been finished before we knew it had started. If it had been allowed, I'm sure some would have slept on deck to ensure a quick escape in

case of attack. For those long days on the crossing there was a no more stirring sight than to see that grey ship cutting through the water, first on one side and then on the other, continually on the alert for anything that might endanger our 1,800 souls.

On day six, after morning parade, we were unexpectedly broken up into our platoons and told to wait to be briefed by our lieutenants. We grouped on deck around one of the up-turned lifeboats, smoking and wondering what news was coming to us. There was endless conjecture, and in the end the answer did not come from our platoon commander, but was blown to us on the wind from somewhere else on the ship. The news was that our final destination was to be Iceland. We laughed. It was so unbelievable that it had to be another piece of soldier gossip. Why would we be going to Iceland? Then our lieutenant arrived and confirmed the rumour that had out-paced him. He was not able to do much more than make a confirmation. He did not have answers to most of our questions. He could only tell us that we were scheduled to arrive within the next twenty-four hours.

Our final destination had been popular talk throughout the voyage. There were several pools going on where we would end up, with Britain being the obvious choice. The optimists that hoped for the West Indies had been wrong since day two. Norway, France, the Mediterranean had all been possibilities. The reality was a shock to us all. It was the first time since enlisting that I could remember a betting pool being divided up and returned to its owners. The volume on our collective speculation only increased after that. We spent hours talking loudly

about what we did not know and asking questions to which no one had any answers. Despite the fact that no one knew anything about Iceland, it was the only topic of conversation. The weather took a turn for the worse. The last day on the ship was miserable, and with no idea what was in store for us, we welcomed the thought of not being on the ship any more. The Fusiliers grumbled about “ressentir le balancement des vagues”. I was not sure exactly what that meant, but vagues sounded pretty much how I felt.

III WALRUS BAY

After our landing in Reykjavik harbour, we prepare to move to “Staging Camp B”, a tent camp set up just outside the city in Walrus Bay, where we will wait until our gear is unloaded. The Fusiliers disembark first and wind their way through the streets ahead of us. The ground does not feel as solid as I remember. It moves around underfoot and our first steps are comical; hundreds of men list from side to side as we adjust to dry land once more. There is no place to create a marshalling area, so we just walk away from the harbour, shouldering our gear and fixing our kit as we go. We are all excitable and chatty, and our non-commissioned officers (NCOs) holler and herd us into lines. We march in two long columns, a long khaki snake that stretches all the way back to the dock.

The city’s size surprises me. It sprawls out from the harbour towards the dark, flat-topped mountain range behind. Row

upon row of solid, two- and three-story stone houses with steeply peaked metal roofs line the roads back from the water. The houses are mostly white and grey but often have brightly coloured roofs – red, blue, and green – in contrast to the dullness around them. I could imagine that if the roofs were covered in snow that the whole city might actually vanish from view. Every once in a while, a church steeple spirals up above the shoulders of the low-lying houses and buildings and speckles the horizon with some diversity. It is just after five in the evening, and yet the streets are quiet, lined with closed doors and windows. The cold reception is palpable. I feel both invisible, which seems impossible given our numbers filling the streets, and unwelcome. I am glad for the cloud of dust that rises off the unpaved road and makes us shapes instead of faces.

It is strange to march through silent streets. All the other times we marched out together like this it was along crowd-lined streets with people waving and cheering. One of our last great marches was on May 24, from Lansdowne Park in Ottawa – where we had lived and trained for nine months – to the train station. It was 8:00 p.m. on a Friday, a grey evening with cloudy skies. We turned out of Lansdowne Park and onto Queen Elizabeth Drive where a cheering crowd engulfed us. People lined the whole two-mile route along the canal and then all along Elgin Street to its confluence with Wellington where the train station stood. I could not believe the spontaneous and emotional display of respect and affection we were being given. We marched three abreast, down the centre of the road, our pipers and drummers out in front leading us with familiar tunes. We marched in step,

a movement so familiar to me I did not have to concentrate. I am taller than most, and I made micro-movements with my head, trying to extend my peripheral vision out to take in the street and the people and their cheerful dispatch. The water in the canal was high and as still as glass. The air was muggy and carried the smell of fish. I was warm in my wool uniform; sweat ran in gentle streaks out from the sides of my Balmoral cap, but kept away from my eyes. The scenic route of our march along the canal and right under the nose of Parliament Hill took about an hour. We passed through many familiar spots – places I had walked, laughed, smoked, drank, sat, and simply been.

The Cameron regimental affiliations to Ottawa pre-date confederation. The unit is a part of the city's history and fabric. It shares the city's motto *Advance* and has been bestowed the Freedom of the City honour. The regiment has always been a part of Ottawa's connection to war; the men serving have always been its "boys". It was where we learned the basics of soldiering. It was where we had been housed, armed, and trained. It is where we had been entertained, courted, and loved. It is where we had been given our start, and now they were letting us go. The showing of pride and affection in the streets was genuine and overwhelming.

The crowd that had seemed impressive during our march through the streets of Ottawa had thickened to many times that size by the time we arrived at the train station. We were given our seat assignments and then allowed to break formation. The station gates were opened, and the platform flooded to become a colourful sea of soldiers and civilians. Soldiers swam upstream

to meet family, friends, and loved ones. There was shouting and waving; a lovely, ordered chaos of tears and goodwill. At 2130 hours, the train pulled out of the station, its headlights fracturing open the darkness and pointing the way to Camp Borden, near Barrie, Ontario, where we would live for five weeks and complete our training. I did not know it at the time, but it would be our farewell to Ottawa. We would not return before being sent overseas.

Today in Reykjavik, through the crunching of gravel under hundreds of boots, I hear something familiar. It is a groaning, a low-pitched bellowing. It grows louder and more distinct. It is the unmistakable sound of bagpipes being filled with air. I hear the staccato rattle of the snare drum setting the scene. It makes the hair on the back of my neck stand up. The first clear note sounds, followed by the next, and then the notes become a melody. The sounds float up to us, pushed along by the breeze from the Icelandic harbour. I recognize the tune as “O’er the Sea to Skye”, a traditional Scottish song. It is not a triumphant march, a conqueror’s ballad, but a slow, haunting song about the wind and the sea, the loss of youth, and the longing for home.

Our pipers and drummers have put on our Cameron of Erracht tartan kilts adorned with leather and white horsehair sporrans on silver chains. They wear red and green diamond pattern knee socks, flagged on the outside with red tassels, and their polished black boots are capped with white, ankle-high puttees. Our Balmoral bonnets set just right; the silver St. Andrew cap badge glows in gentle light, the downy blue hackles pushed flat in the wind. They march stoically, three abreast, in perfect time

with our Pipe Major out in front, stepping proudly. Their tartans and silver tipped pipes and white drum skins costume them against this strange place. Their deliberate movements protect them from the harshness of the land and the reception we are being given.

Our highland traditions have ingrained the legends of the pipes deep inside each of us; it is part of our basic training. We know that for centuries the pipes, the *Piob Mhor* as they are known in Gaelic, have captivated, inspired, and frightened. Their songs tell stories of bravery and loss, victory and defeat, truth and legend. For the warrior, they are able to describe the clash of arms, the roar of battle, the ecstasy of triumph, and the agony of defeat. They have moved soldiers to heroic feats and played mournful laments in the aftermath of battles. For me, the sounds are so familiar that sometimes I think I can hear them in the wind.

The piping seeps through me and I am surprised at the strong effect it has over me. It changes something in me, in all of us. It draws us under its spell and extends its shield over us. We stand straighter, and we march more stoutly. In the familiar notes I find protection from being unwanted in an unfamiliar land. I see in practice how certain protocols can pull individuals together when they are engrained deep enough. It is not pride that I feel. It is a sense of belonging, and in that belonging, I find relief. I am aware of a unity that comes from all being from the same place, sharing a common background, and recognizing the same tune. I feel an affinity for those around me that I have never felt before. The piping weaves us together, taking the thread of

our shared pasts and backgrounds and making it the backbone for our uncertain future.

The influence of the pipes stirs a deep and ancient magic that rouses the city from its strained indifference to our arrival. Doors open and faces appear in windows. A few people even stand in the street. The women are in long skirts, and the men wear dark wool jackets and caps. Young children stand at their parents' knees and the older kids tug at their parents' hands to be let closer to the parade. They do not cheer or wave. They simply stand silently, watching with renewed interest as we pass. As Iceland is new to us, so are bagpipes to them. For twenty minutes not one of the observers move. For twenty minutes we cease to be an invading army and become a spectacle. Perhaps twenty minutes is all that is needed to change perceptions, or at least to create a memory that is about more than war. For me at least, that is how I remember coming to Iceland – not the down-turned eyes, but the upturned mouths, somewhere between disbelief and a smile.

We arrive at the field at Walrus Bay and set tents in the dirt. The lava gravel bends our tent stakes into strange formations, and the wind tears at the canvas with such force that on more than one occasion it is torn from our hands. The whole field flaps like a boat with loose sails. Stewart tries to make jokes, but I can't really hear him above the whipping of the tent. We spend a lot of time yelling "What?!" back and forth at each other until we give up and just focus on getting the tent set.

Our first meal is not a celebratory affair. I think it is supposed to be stew, mutton maybe, but it is just thin broth with bits of fat

and gristle. Large vats of water are set to boil, and we file by with our rectangular mess tins and are given ladles of the gruel and hot water for tea. I sip some of the watery grease, but I can't swallow the meat. It is a new experience. There has been no end to problems and no shortage of complaints for just about everything since I joined up, but food was never one of them. We had always been set up with a good kitchen and mess. In fact, I know there is good food on the ship. I saw them loading it: crates of beef and bacon, butter and jam. Everyone is miserable. The grumbling rises above the wind. There is nowhere to sit. The ground is wet, and there are no benches or tables or even vehicles to sit on. We perch on our packs and spoon the gristle stew.

Stewart sits beside me. He is many things: laid back and charming, amicable, confident, smooth, and so at ease with talking to people. He is the consummate salesman. He can spin yarns and tell stories until you do not know which way is up or remember what is true. He is also very insightful and an excellent judge of character. He can grasp people, behaviour, and situations effortlessly and instantly work out the effect different actions would have. He can rub people the wrong way though. His priorities do not always line up with everyone else's, but I have known him for so long that I have gotten used to him, and I know when I can trust him. It is his ability to focus on other things that I like most about him. He is always upbeat, smiling; he never grumbles or complains. I think because his mind is always on other things – the next plan, the next girl, the next game, or scheme. He would be a first-class officer and leader if

he were not so self-focused. His unsoldierly demeanour is refreshing; some variety in among the idealist volunteers who say the right things but who are not sure what it all means. Strangely it is Stewart who is responsible for getting us both here, in every sense of the word, to Iceland, the army, this camp, and this very moment in time.