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WWII Veteran
Andes

CANADA'S IMMIGRATION MUSEUM
PIER 21



To the Many Faces of Pier 21

The morning had been a busy one on board the troop train as we neared our destination - Halifax Harbour. Two days before, our small group had left the army camp in the fog which enveloped Kitchener, Ontario. We had changed trains at Toronto and did not stop along the way except to meet trains heading west. This was a different kind of experience for us. All cars of this train were filled with young people in uniforms, mostly khaki, some blue and navy blue. The long train pulled slowly into the dark dingy sheds at Pier 21 before the sun rose. It was a cold damp November morning. Outside of the troops who disembarked, the only other personnel were the train crew and dock workers.

All of us had some time in the past month or so, said our fond 'so-longs' to our loved ones at home. There would not be any tears visibly shed on this occasion.

To our right, stood the giant ship that would carry us far away on this adventure into the unknown. It was camouflaged and no name appeared on its bow. Capacity was unknown, but it was said that the number on board after laying in that dock that whole day was between four and five thousand.

Sometime after midnight, the large ship Andes crept out of the harbour and into open waters of the Atlantic. Daylight revealed stormy skies overhead. The wind caused the ship to lurch and roll, and water splashed over the bow as we cut through the high waves. Many of the young men and women were unable to get to breakfast that morning and some remained in their beds or in the ship's hospital so ill they were unable to lift their heads from their pillows. We saw no other ships or land for the eight day journey, just water in every direction.

We all breathed a sign of relief when we saw land in the distance. Our ship headed into the port at Liverpool, England where we disembarked in orderly fashion to board the small UK narrow gauged trains so unlike our monstrous steam engines and larger cars in Canada. With a quaint peep-peep of their whistles the trains pulled out and away, headed for the various destinations. We members of the Canadian Women's Army Corps went to the holding camp at Aldershot, Hampshire, from which point we were allocated to our various jobs in the UK.

The return journey was from Aldershot, down to Southampton docks and aboard the Nieuw Amsterdam, where we left in broad daylight without the strict blackout rules that had been in force aboard all ships throughout the war. We met other ships which openly greeted us with a blow of the whistle and many waving hands. That trip ended in four days having been able to follow the regular shipping lanes.

The sighting of land to the west, Canada's shores, brought many a smile, hooray, and happy greetings among the passengers on board, some of whom had been "over there" for the last long six years. What a glorious feeling pervaded.

As we approached Pier 21 in the bright sunshine of a lovely Sunday afternoon, we could see throngs of people awaiting the arrival of our ship. The brightly decorated Welcome Wagon with a happy crowd aboard playing music and singing our favorite army songs, greeted us some distance from the shore. A loud shout erupted from the passengers on the Nieuw Amsterdam, and continued until the tugboats pulled us into dock at Pier 21.

Was this the same dock from which we had departed one, two, three or more years ago? It did not look the same. However, time did not permit investigating for the trains were idling, waiting for the many uniformed passengers eager to get home. HOME, what a happy thought! Once the trainload was ready, the train pulled out of the shed and we were on our way. The wheels seemed to be repeating GOING HOME, going home, going home, as the train sped west.