Former Butte Boy's Trip on War Waters

First Lieutenant B. P. Harwood, Son of Judge E. P. Harwood of This City, Tells of Darkened Dash Across Ocean of Transport Carrying Soldiers and of Nightly Vigils in the Crow's Nest—30 Per Cent of French in Mourning.

B. P. Harwood

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A former Butte boy, Benjamin Porter Harwood, son of Judge E. P. Harwood. writes interestingly of experiences on transport as first lieutenant in the One Hundred and Second field artillery of the American expeditionary forces, from the United States to France, also after landing there, as follows:

On Board U.S. Transport en Route the Continent.

This is the first letter I have attempted since coming aboard ship. We were escorted to a certain pier and embarked on this transport.

I was put in charge of the embarking of the 190 or so men assigned to this ship. Their quarters are down in the forward hold—called 'upper one and lower two'—sounds well, but have a hunch that this same hold was used for inanimate freight before the ship went into the transport service. At any rate, things looked like there might be a mess down there if we had rough weather—and believe me we did have some, and my prediction proved abundantly true.

Brunt of Jokesters.

My duties kept me from retiring until quite late the first night on board, but my services were not needed the next morning, so I slept until 11:00 o'clock and made up for some of the two or three hours per night I had been losing at camp for the three weeks immediately preceding our departure. When I did arise. I found that some jokester had spread the report that I had become seasick from the boat's motion at the pier, and about two-thirds of the officers I know on board, including Colonel Howe, came up and either asked how I was or congratulated me on being up and around so soon. Another group 'Had heard' that I visited the nearby town the evening before. I concluded it were best not to immediately argue or reply to these vague intimations against my stamina as a seafarer or my conduct as a soldier, so I shut up, hoping that future events would give me an opening at my detractors, and they did with a vengeance. Hurrah!

Out to Sea.

About 12 m. we pulled away from the pier out into the harbor, and that night at 10:00 o'clock we have anchor and passed out to sea.

Previous to this, orders had informed me that there must be four lookout watches to come from batteries A, C and F (the latter is the one I am now with), to go into the crows' nests and to certain points about the decks, so as to scan all points of the compass, and I was one of the two lieutenants to come from F for one of the crows' nests, the captain of the battery to be in charge of the watch. Our turn would come at 4–8 a.m., 12–2 p.m. and 8–10 p.m.

The night before, just after we sailed, the wind rose strong, with promise for the morrow. There followed a real storm for the next 38 hours, and a lot of the men on board won't forget it in a hurry. The storm itself wasn't so bad, but the sea it kicked up left nothing to be desired, unless it was a speedy demise by most of them, and among these latter practically all of my detractors. Hurrah!

"Mess" Found.

About 3:30 o'clock, after finding that the men. it left to the care of the non-coms. (who I later found were deathly sick) wouldn't get out in time for their relief of the 'C battery watch, I went down into the forward hold to rouse our men out. No wonder they were sick. When I had finally crawled, slid and stumbled light mess fore, were to the inky depths below—no light allowed, you know—I found the I had anticipated two days before. About half of all the men there in the first stages of a sea-sickness of superlative order, pardon my truthfulness, odor also.

No. I'll not describe it in detail. I'll let you use your respective imaginations. I didn't need one, the whole sad story was being acted out before me, but I got most of it by way of the ear, for one could hardly see his hand before his face.

After calling for at least four volunteers for each one-man position I had to fill, I finally got them up on deck, lined them up in column and sent them away to their respective posts. A bit later Lieutenant Watts went up into the for'd crow's neat with his detail of men and I went into the aft one with mine.

Not Soon Forgotten.

Won't soon forget that first trip up. although I enjoyed it exceedingly because of the newness of it all. My five men and I gathered at the foot of the aft spar deck on the starboard side. The wind was blowing one of those 'perfect little gales' one reads about, a cold rain, partly sleet, shot by almost on the horizontal, and altogether it was a real morning. The waves were running higher minute by minute, and the ship rolling and plunging with the waves. There we were—a bunch of landlubbers—and the lieutenant in charge, no doubt, the clumsiest. Up before us a set of ratlines With a tiny ladder rigged between, which we were to shin up till we came in contact with the spar, and then up a perpendicular ladder to the crow's nest.

Being a Hero.

'Well,' said I to myself, 'here's my chance to be a hero—my first and probably my last—let's go.' So I led the way up. After what seemed years of climbing and swaying from side to side, as the wind tried to guarantee that it was surely my last chance to

try the hero stunt;' now and then glancing from our elevated hangings at the gloomy old ocean, first on the port and then on the starboard side, depending on which way, the ship was rolling at the moment one looked, and after the deck seemed to have gone off and left us in a sea of clouds amid ocean, and alongside one lone spar with a set of ratlines for comfort—all in the thick darkness which precedes daybreak—I reached the place where the ratlines join the spar, and found, to my disgust, that the remainder of the ladder was on the other side of the spar, this mistake having been made by me as I had by no means hired out for both sailor and soldier and had neglected to examine the way up to the nest the night before, my relief, being the first night watch to go up after leaving port. So down we had to go and up the port side. One would think that the practice would have relieved the strain, but I didn't find it that way, for we were now climbing on the win'ard side and it required strenuous effort to get up at all. Finally. I came to the straight-up climb and crawled up till I reached the hole leading into the side of the crow's nest. Here was more trouble. I couldn't get through that hole, so had to climb on a bit higher and fall in through the top. The men following me were able to get through the hole.

Watching the Waves.

Shortly after this venture daylight came and the world took on a far more encouraging aspect. There we were some 80 or 90 feet above the deck and could see for miles all around us—just what we were up there for—and we watched the storm driven waves, for all the while the storm was growing not better, but worse. Our speaking connection with the ship below was by phone, and aside from that I imagine one could pretend himself a regular Robinson Crusoe, were he up there alone.

From midday to 4:30 we were again on watch in the crow's nest, storm-beaten—the coldest, wettest most miserable lot of men you ever saw—the rain and sleet having poured in through the hole of entrance until every one was soaked—then a seaman brought up a strip of canvas to lash across that hole, after we didn't care whether we had US' protection or not. Three of the men were quite seasick, but had insisted on sticking it out. It was then that I had my first real, serious problem, for there was a real danger that one of them might lose control of himself going down—when a well man by no means would—the result being something I did not care to contemplate. However, all got down safely one at a time as the other men came up one at a time to relieve us. Thus about 4:45 I got out of that nest and called it a day.

Some Rolling Country.

With some dry clothes on I found that I had never felt better in my life, and was enjoying myself hugely on the whole—things by no means being as bad as many an

experience I had had in the cow country. Indeed, there was a certain similarity to those good old days of my summer and school day week end vacations. As Ed Watts puts it (he's the other first lieutenant in Battery F). this is quite some rolling country we are now passing through on our little excursion trip.

Further, I found to my great joy. that one of the worst colds I had ever had in my life—contracted at Boxford in the two or three weeks of very cold weather we had before leaving—had practically disappeared during the day.

But the greatest joy of all was to find that I was a 'good sailor,' as one seems to be called when seasickness fails to claim him as a victim. That night and the next morning the waves were worse than the day before, and it took a full day for us to run out of the storm, or for the waves to subside, whichever was the case. And I must confess that there was also some joy in seeing my false accusers and other airy individuals among my brother officers succumb to the positive, comparative and superlative degrees of sea-sickness in their respective order as time went on. Fully 50 per cent of the officers and men were victims before we ran out of the storm into the Gulf stream. Here the days have been wonderful. Most of the time warm and balmy, lately a little cooler, but wonderfully clear and sunny.

A little more luck came my way to crow over-after we land. The first day out the stateroom assigned to me and other lieutenants had all it could accommodate, and too many for convenience. My rambles about the ship discovered two vacant staterooms. The captain of the quartermaster corps, who is in charge of such things on the ship, on my application, allowed me the use of one of them for an office, and the other for the use of my orderly while working on some canteen accounts. By this shift. Watts and I obtained a stateroom apiece to ourselves—something not even the majors and captains aboard have, so far as I know.

In the Danger Zone.

Another day. This letter, you understand, is added to from day to day. Now, as we are told, we are well into the danger zone. This morning—during the 4–6 watch—we saw three vessels for awhile, and most of us thought that it must be a convoy coming to meet us. They soon disappeared, however. and I saw no more of them during our watch. After breakfast Ed and I went to bed for the finish of our night's sleep, and when we came on deck again for the 10–12 we found that the naval convoy had arrived to escort the remainder of the voyage.

Today came on soft and balmy—but quite cloudy before daylight, and then it suddenly turned very windy for a few hours, and has been kicking up the waves quite a bit ever since.

Am having the hardest time imaginable trying to write this letter so that the censor will not object to it. and try as I will it seems as though something is always about to creep in which will be objectionable and cause the letter to be thrown out.

Each a. m. when I got up at 3. for the 4–6 watch the night watchman feeds me hot coffee and sandwiches or toast. He is a sort of hobo, also a sailor of some attainments. He has 'bummed' his way all over the western country of the U. S. A. He assuredly has a warm heart, and we immediately established cordial relations when he learned that I knew where some of the best places for refreshments were located in certain western cities.

At 4:00 a.m. I awaken Lieutenants Watts and Simpkins, who go into the crow's nest at 5:00 a.m. Forgot to say that all of the captains who first went on lookout duty were relieved the second day out, and in Battery F that left me in charge of the relief, and necessitated getting another lieutenant for my place in the crow's nest. Tried my best to stay where I was and have the interest and pleasure I was getting from the sensations of the crow's nest, but they refused to allow it because they seem to feel that the responsibility of, the entire watch should fall on the senior of the two first lieutenants detailed to same.

Boat Drill.

There are various sorts of military schools being conducted on board now by our field officers—i.e., since the officers have recovered from their seasickness—one for the Morse code, another in drill regulations, and a third in terrain board firing, i.e., simulated artillery fire.

We also have boat drills every day when all of the officers and men rush to the boats and rafts to which they are assigned, and go over the drill which they would do in earnest if we had the necessity facing us. I have a little raft for 10 men. The idea is that the officer in charge and the men hang on from the water to a rope that runs along the raft's edge. We have christened it 'Here's Hoping.' My raft crew is composed of two sergeants, four corporals and four privates. Larry Page i.e., Captain Page) is the small rafts' commander, and has 15 raft commanders under him, each with one of the rafts I describe. "Some fleet," we tell him.

Day before yesterday we got the word that all men on board would carry their life preservers at all times from then on. Beginning last night all were advised to sleep with their clothes on.

Starting with yesterday morning all hands aboard are awakened at 5:00 a.m. and told to get up on deck until after daybreak. That proposition appeals to me the most, for from the bridge—where I am on most of my watches now—excepting when making the rounds—I am able to see all the devil-may-care attitudes that the officers assume while they stand around on deck impressing the men with their nonchalance, and many of them no doubt wondering whether the much heralded torpedo will reach us the next or the following moment.

Enjoying himself.

Two of my watches being during darkness for the most part, I have learned the old ship from the tip of the bow to the end of the stern—at which places I have a post. Somehow it has been quite natural for me from the start to wander over the ship in the pitch dark and never strike anything. Why, I don't know, unless it is an offshoot from the habit of riding in strange country at night and feeling my way about places where I have never been before. Anyway I enjoy it immensely. I almost hate to tell how much I have enjoyed myself on this trip, for to do so is to confess that I have let myself drift back to imagining all the glorious things a boy. always does when he reads such books as 'Treasure Island' and 'Westward Ho' and hundreds of other adventurous novels of good repute in the way of literature, not to mention the various and sundry scores of dime novels wherein he read of lurid happenings on the sea. It's just like a lot of delayed boyhood to me. and I don't mind saying that I have turned my imagination loose, as it were, and enjoyed every moment to the utmost. As I said above, not a light is allowed on the ship after dark, with few exceptions in certain places below decks, so there's plenty of chance to pretend that we are on some devilish mission of the utmost secrecy.

Many Ships Seen.

We have seen many ships all in all. but none nearer than a couple of miles. The steward just told me that one has now shown up to the starboard of us. and that some of the convoy are after her. Guess there is mighty little that gets by the boys who are charged with our safety. It's a great sight to see how they handle themselves during the days and nights of our voyage. I have a great time trying to catch all the signals, but when I am successful, I never learn anything, for all of them are in code.

Each day we get the baseball scores and a bit of world news issued in the form of bulletins. I have seen very little of same, however, for I am asleep during most of the day when I am not working in my stateroom, and at night one can't see to read them.

I think we will land fairly soon now, and then I will have other censored news to send you, i.e. when I get time to write. Be sure to drop me a line whenever you get the time. I can see now how much a letter will mean to us when we get at it.

On Land.

From Somewhere in France. Oct 12, 1917.—Just a week today since we pulled into port, and also since I dispatched my long letter to you. This must be comparatively short, for there is a heap to do around here between daylight and darkness.

No one landed the first night we were at the docks, but the next morning we took the battery out for a road march and brought them out to this camp. We are in a

sort of barracks—a very comfortable situation. The rules of the censorship forbid a description of anything military, so I must omit that, even though it would be of some interest to you.

We packed up our luggage and left the ship for good on Sunday and moved up here. Since then we have been very well occupied with the usual duties and in making a new camp.

Since I have been in a line officer's job—i.e., since we left the United States—I have felt better every day. due, no doubt, to the fact that a line officer gets far more exercise, as a rule, than a staff officer. My sea-going appetite remains with me. and I am enjoying my food like the old ranch days. Hope to put on some extra weight in preparation for a strenuous winter. No matter how wonderful the weather augurs at the beginning of any particular day. it seems that we are bound to get somewhere between 4 and 20 showers in its duration. Some of them are not so bad. but last night we had a corker, with a fierce wind.

Near a French City.

We are camped not far from a French city, where the boys and the officers are just at present having the time of their lives, dabbling with the French language, and learning how to deal in francs and centimes, etc. I have had very little difficulty with the money, but have had my full share of humor in trying to make myself understood by the shop keepers and other French people with whom I come in contact. However. I manage to get along fairly well and enjoy the experimentation exceedingly. My college French is gradually coming back to me. but as I never had more than a reading vocabulary I am having the usual difficulty with pronunciation and the acquisition of a hearing and speaking vocabulary.

One could spend hours telling of the strange and amusing incidents that happen to the boys from the United States in their wanderings about the towns and villages hereabouts. However. I have little time to write, and the main idea is to let you know that all is well with our outfit, and give you a hint of our situation.

Thirty Per Cent of Women in Mourning.

All our boys are well and in the best of spirits. The people around here are quite solemn and quiet in demeanor; they seldom laugh or appear light hearted, but all that is easy to understand under the circumstances. Few there are who have not given one or more members of their families to the cause in which we have now joined them. It seems that 30 per cent of the women are in mourning; there are no men except the old and crippled, or soldiers on furlough or discharged for disability: the women and scores of little children, who roam about at play or in the attempt to glean a wee bit toward a

more or less uncertain livelihood. constitute the greater part of the population. These little fellows are the ones that get to the hearts of our men. To use some invaluable American slang—'Nothing is too good for them'—and I have never seen one of our soldiers refuse to do a little something for them when the occasion presents itself. Always these children share the fruit, candy and other sweetmeats which the men buy at the little shops and eat as they walk along, and the great American institution of 'scramble for a coin' has nothing on the coin tossing which goes on when our men go to town.

No use describing the houses, shops, public buildings, etc., to you. for most of you have seen, this country before the war. To me they are of constant interest, particularly the outlying districts, and the farming country with the quaint, old, thatched roofs, stone houses and all that goes with these-old European countries.

Money Talks.

Have had several meals in the cafes and hotels of the city and have enjoyed the strangeness of it all immensely. There is the same old universal language here as elsewhere. No one ever has any difficulty in getting a meal, for as we are wont to express it, 'money talks,' and apparently it talks quite understandingly whenever the American soldier calls at the cafe.

This morning when I thought about writing letters, it seemed to me that I had been writing a good many lately. But I discovered that my impression was due to the fact that I have read from 50 to 100 daily, and by auto-suggestion or some peculiar mental reflex action, had gathered the idea that I was reading letters of my own even before posting them. In fact, even now. I can't for the life of me tell what I have written home to you. or what I have not written. We line officers have a part in the great task of censorship, and for the present I am the censor for the battery to which I belong. So daily I wade through all that the boys write home with the feeling at the end of each day that I have more than kept pace with my duty in the letter writing line. For awhile, the censor's task is full of interest. for one naturally reads every word very carefully, and thus gets a large concentrated view of how this game over here strikes our American soldiers, but. like everything else, all that soon changes and one becomes an automaton, who is looking merely for that which is not to be allowed to go through in the letters.

What the mail service will be between here and the United States is quite a question, but after awhile I guess we will know approximately what time it takes to make a round trip, and thus plan accordingly.

Many Reunions.

There are many reunions here among college men; they occur anywhere from a chance meeting in a cafe or on the streets, or battlefield no doubt. I met Bruce Cortelyou the first day I was ashore—he is an old Yale friend of mine—was on the News there with me. He enlisted with the first he heard were coming over for sure, and he happened to guess right, and landed over here a month ago.

Maybe I will be able to figure out how to write an interesting letter for my next, and yet be within the censorship rules and regulations—with all of which I am supposed to be fully conversant. I know enough of them to hesitate at almost every sentence I attempt."

The Ted K Archive

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The Butte Miner (Montana). <mthspublic.newspapers.com>

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