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Dix chevaux ou cinquante hommes

Twilight and evening bell,
And after that the dark:
And may there be no sadness of farewell
When I embark
(Alfred, Lord Tennyson, *Crossing the Bar*)

The *SS Viper* joined an enormous fleet which was assembling in the Solent in evening sunlight. Long grey destroyers were going to and fro and signalling with light to one another and to the shore. Darkness fell, and the convoy started for France. Curtains were pulled down by the sailors from one deck to another, and all lights were obscured, except on the destroyers, which tore round the outside of the fleet, sweeping the sea with their searchlights in search of German U-boats.

What a voyage. I assume that every ship was packed as full as we were, but I can only describe conditions aboard the *Viper*, if that is possible. I stayed on the deck, which was crowded, but I knew it would be more crowded below. I had to go below once, and that was enough. All the floors, corridors, WCs and urinals were covered with men lying in all directions and all postures. One could not step between them so one just had to walk on them. The stench of sweat, vomit, beer and urine was simply dreadful, and the air was almost solid with 'fug'.

I was astonished that nobody was suffocated, but when daylight came and we found ourselves safely in harbour at Le Havre, there they were all merry and bright.

The harbour was packed with ships. Between the *SS Viper* and the quay were two ships alongside one another, which we had to cross to land. Having landed we formed up and marched to a canvas camp on the hills behind St Adresse (a suburb of Le Havre). The distance to the camp was three or four miles. When we got there we were allotted fifteen men to a bell tent, which meant that some had to sleep outside. We only stayed the night before marching down to Le Havre to entrain for Rouen and the Front.

At the station our train awaited us. It consisted of covered vans with a sliding door on each side, and painted on the side were the words 'Dix chevaux ou cinquante hommes' — ten horses or fifty men! They were always referred to as cattle trucks, but I doubt if any cattle ever went in them. Whoever decided they could carry fifty men was an optimist or a sadist. The lucky ones sat on the floor with their backs against the side or end, and, of course, the rest in the middle, but after some hours of travel the sitters slept and slumped on to the floor in one jumbled mass, and it was a little off-putting to wake up and find a pair of Army boots on one's face. We arrived at Rouen on April 3rd, and after an uncomfortable stay under canvas entrained for the Front on the 6th.

During our stay some 400 of us were posted to the 2/4th Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry, and we were issued with our identity discs, of a kind of plastic, about 2 inches in diameter, with name and number impressed thereon and a piece of string attached with which to hang it around one's neck. They were very important, but for some reason or other they could not be distributed individually before we left, so when our draft of about 500 strong (nearly all eighteen or nineteen years old) paraded to depart, a bag containing the discs was handed to a soldier, who was told to carry it a bit and then pass it on to someone else. It was not very heavy, but you must realise that we were in full kit, weighing about 60 pounds, with two rolled blankets on the top, and this was onerous on a long march.

We set off, and before long the disc carrier passed on his bag successfully. This occurred two or three times and then stopped, as no one else would take the bag.