

NOTE

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Visit to BORDON CAMP;
Brigadier PAGE'S reminiscences
of Iceland, etc.
The War and the English Countryside

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by 000 for DHist NDHQ
Date: NOV 13 1986

Canadian Military Headquarters,
2 Cockspur Street,
London, England.

The Director,
Historical Section,
General Staff,
National Defence Headquarters,
OTTAWA, Canada.

Sir,

I have the honour to present a further report.

2. On Jan. 8 Lt.-Col. McCARTER, of this Headquarters, drove to BORDON CAMP to attend a conference at Headquarters, Canadian Base Units. He invited me to drive with him and I seized the opportunity. We left London soon after 0830 hrs and arrived back at C.M.H.Q. about 1620 hrs, having spent about four hours at Bordon.

BORDON CAMP

3. Bordon, in Hampshire roughly 12 miles south of ALDERSHOT, has lately become the chief centre of the growing family of Canadian Base Units, though some of these still remain at Aldershot. Bordon is now mainly a Canadian station, though certain British units still occupy some of the barracks. The buildings at Bordon are in the main permanent brick barracks of various ages, but these are largely supplemented by huts. A few of the buildings were destroyed by enemy bombs some months ago, but there have been no recent attacks.

4. I paid a flying visit to the SIGNALS HOLDING UNIT and had a brief conversation with Major W.A. KYLE, and old acquaintance, but as they had recently moved in and were very busy I did not linger.

5. The Headquarters, Canadian Base Units, is at BROXHEAD HOUSE. Here I met, among other officers, Lt.-Col. W.H.S. MACKLIN, the A.A.Q.M.G., and we lunched in the mess with

Brigadier L.F. Page, D.S.O. (2 bars), who commands the Canadian Base Units subject to the superior authority of the Senior Officer, C.M.H.Q.

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THE CANADIAN TROOPS IN ICELAND

6. Brigadier Page talked for some time of his experiences while in command of the Canadian force occupying ICELAND. I understand that Brigadier Page has given lectures on this subject in the Aldershot Command, and he said that he hoped some day to set down some reminiscences on paper (he remarked incidentally that he had copies of all the cables which he had exchanged with the authorities in Canada during his time in Iceland): but in case it should happen that he never writes down his experiences himself, I am making a record of our conversation.

7. Brigadier Page said that he found that some people thought of the Iceland enterprise as a sort of picnic, and that he had had difficulty in convincing them that the troops actually suffered great physical discomfort. They were under canvas for a long time (the last men, he said, were huddled only about ten days before he left) and heavy and continuous rain and tremendously high winds made their lives miserable; on one occasion there were 13 successive days of rain. He added that works of any kind were very difficult to construct; there is little soil on the island, and where soil is found one usually strikes water at a depth of about two feet. The lava rock of Iceland is very hard to work, dulling any tool immediately, and its sharp protusions inflicted many minor injuries. Virtually all building material used in the island is imported.

8. I asked Brigadier Page how the Icelanders regarded the British occupation. He answered that they were far from enthusiastic. The limit of their warmth was the admission that it was, perhaps, better to have the British than the Germans in the country; but they would have greatly preferred to be left alone altogether. Brigadier Page added however that the Canadian troops undoubtedly made more progress in friendship

with the Icelanders than did the British, and would have continued to make progress had they remained. This was due to Canada's connections with the island, growing mainly out of the large Icelandic population found in Manitoba. The Brigadier mentioned two occasions when he encountered residents of Iceland who had fought in the Canadian forces in the last war.

9. An example of the manner in which these connections operated to Canadian advantage appears in the friendly relations of the force with the Landsbank, described by Brigadier Page as the national bank of Iceland. It appears that some time ago a resident of Winnipeg, presumably of Icelandic origin, left a legacy for the benefit of Icelandic fishermen. The money was distributed by the Landsbank; and it so happened that Brigadier Page's Auxiliary officer, "Ned" Spencer, a Winnipeg lawyer in civil life, had been concerned with administering the legacy. His name was well known to the bank, and the consequence was that the latter was friendly to the Canadians and gave the Brigadier a great deal of help in his business relations with the inhabitants.

10. The complicated Icelandic language was a difficulty; and Brigadier Page mentioned that the Icelandic phrase-book supplied by the Canadian Legion was subject to the disadvantage that it dwelt at length with such topics as railways (which are unknown in Iceland) and military matters (though there were no soldiers there prior to the arrival of the British troops). His official interpreter could speak and understand Icelandic (after a fashion) but could not read it or write it, at least at first. Most of the younger Icelanders have some knowledge of English, having learned it at school.

11. Brigadier Page mentioned, as an incident worthy of special note, the occupation of the VESTMANNA ISLANDS (off the south coast of Iceland) by a platoon of THE ROYAL REGIMENT OF CANADA commanded by an officer named WILKINSON (probably Lieut.

C.P.WILKINSON ?). This officer had many difficulties to surmount, especially as the local Mayor was pro-Nazi; and his one platoon had to conduct an examination service in addition to all its other duties. Wilkinson, however, handled the situation admirably and the Mayor actually wrote a friendly and complimentary letter when the platoon withdrew.

12. Brigadier Page referred to his relations with Brigadier G.LAMMIE, M.C., who was evidently in command of the British forces in the island. Brigadier Lammie (whom incidentally I remember as Brigade Major of the 8th Inf.Bde. in the Southern Command in 1928) apparently showed a slight tendency towards the dictatorial at their first interview, when he came on board Brigadier Page's ship on the latter's arrival. Brigadier Page subsequently explained that his force was operating under the Visiting Forces (British Commonwealth) Act of 1933; at this Brigadier Lammie was visibly taken aback, and it was evident that he was not well acquainted with this legislation. Later, Brigadier Page found Brigadier Lammie an agreeable colleague, and enjoyed most friendly relations with him.

13. I gather that the only Canadian unit now remaining in Iceland is the CAMERON HIGHLANDERS of OTTAWA (M.G.). At Broxhead House I met two of their officers, Majors FORTEY and MACKENZIE, who are in England for a machine-gun course.

THE WAR AND THE ENGLISH COUNTRYSIDE

14. This drive gave me the first opportunity of seeing the English countryside under the conditions of the present war, and it may be worth while to record some impressions.

15. One most noticeable change is the manner in which all names indicating localities have been blotted out - not merely from Railway stations, etc., but also from churches, shops, garages and advertising hoardings. The object, of course, is to make things difficult for enemy troops who may land by ~~plane~~ or parachute.

16. Many minor defensive works and precautions are in evidence . There are numerous brick or sandbagged posts suitable

for machine-guns or riflemen; much material for road-blocks is kept at hand (heavy concrete blocks, trestles with barbed wire, etc.) and a certain number of substantial blocks are permanently in place. Defence preparations are especially in evidence in the Bordon area, including positions apparently designed for field guns. At Aldershot the playing fields have been studded with posts (apparently made of lengths of sewerpipe filled with cement) to prevent the landing of hostile planes; and in general all fields and open spaces have been obstructed in one way or another for the same purpose. These precautions are monuments to the apprehension of imminent invasion which dominated the country last summer, after the collapse of France; but the possibility of invasion, of course, is not yet a thing of the past. At the present moment, the fact that the German press is spreading rumours of an impending British attack upon Eire suggests to many people the possibility that Germany is herself contemplating an invasion of that country, and perhaps of other parts of the British Isles.

17. This was my first visit to troops in the field. I have not yet had an opportunity of visiting any units of the Canadian Corps, and there are still tasks to be done in London, including considerable work at the Record Office. I hope, however, that it will not be long before I shall be able to begin reporting on the activities of the Canadian troops.

I have the honour to be,

Sir,

Your obedient servant,

C.P. STACEY,

Major,
Historical Officer, C.M.H.Q.