

We go aboard. There is a general settling into quarters. There is a general investigation of the ship, with the two vital questions, "Where do we eat?" and "Where do we wash?" quickly answered.

The bow points towards the desert, and it takes all afternoon to bring the luggage aboard.

We have exchanged tents pitched in whirling sand for cramped sleeping-quarters between steel walls. "This is to be home for the next four or five weeks," one says.

A torrid Red Sea day gives way to sultry night. The air is filled with the threat of the *khamseen*, old terror acquaintance of desert days, reminder of sand-gritted teeth, hair, tea, bread, blankets, eyes; of dust-filled, hot, choking winds and nights when sleep was impossible.

All is calm. There is no sense of motion. The funnel and masts are still against the sky. Over the starboard quarter a shining golden path leads to a half moon riding low among the stars.

Seven bells sounds faintly.

It is our first night at sea.

Rumours abound aboard this ship. They do on any troopship. In fact, rumours form a distinct part of army life anywhere. Many times some one heard of the Division's move from some one who knew as a hard fact that some one had heard that the colonel's batman had overheard a conversation. The majority of rumours, right from the time of mobilization in the long, long ago, bore what

was supposed to be a more or less official stamp—"This came straight from the orderly-room"—but the genuine hallmark of the class rumour was "Keep this to yourself, Dig, but I've just heard . . ." Some one had "just heard" something at almost any time on subjects ranging from the contents of despised M. and V. stew to the Division's role in the Far East war.

Lacking an enthusiasm for statistics, and being somewhat intolerant of rumours since being compelled to listen to such a crop during our voyage so far, I have not kept a record of the constant variations in imaginative dinkum oils. But plenty have circulated.

We were to stop at Aden.

We were not stopping at Aden.

We stopped at Aden, there joining the other vessels of the convoy, together with our escort.

We were not calling at Colombo; just the escort, for refuelling, while we marked time in the vicinity.

We were calling into Colombo because (a) this ship was short of fresh water, (b) one of the other vessels was short of fuel and had engine trouble, and (c) one of the vessels had to put ashore a patient requiring an abdominal operation and this could not be done aboard.

We tied up in Colombo, but were not permitted shore leave.

However, this provided the rumour-circulating concerns with an excellent field-day.

We were next calling at Fremantle.

We were not calling at Fremantle, but heading straight for Melbourne.

The presence of Australian air and naval personnel aboard these ships, together with the fact that the repatriation scheme was assumed to require direction from experienced Government officials who must join the ships somewhere, made a call at some Australian port a certainty. The rumours went on and on and on.

"This ship is now bound for Melbourne," said the voice of officialdom over the ship's loud-speaker half an hour after clearing Colombo's breakwater, and thus settled all doubts, at least for a time. A very good thing, that laconic speech.



Embarkation.