

## TRANSCRIPT OF A PAPER WRITTEN BY BSM C F BEST MM – DATE UNKNOWN

From the quayside the grey hull of the transport towered above them with its rows of ports passing out of sight above the corrugated shed roof. The men stood at ease quietly in their ranks, talking, but more quiet than usual. The dockside labourers were busy and cargo and baggage were still going aboard.

Through the gates into the street behind us, the sunlight streamed. To the Sgt Major, standing with the senior NCOs it seemed a little unreal. Events had moved rapidly and he had experienced a trying time in the last 24 hours. Here was yet another embarkation, his third, where would it lead to this time and for how long. How many of these lads would make the return trip? Further thought on these lines was prevented by the usual cry of "Orders". In a few minutes the men commenced to file up the gangway following their guides to their Mess Deck homes stumbling up the inclined way under their heavy and cumbersome kit. Far below the little strip of water between the ships side and the quay seemed suddenly to take on a new significance as they dived through the dark port into the ships side and to a new life.

Through a maze of passages, down steep ladders and onto the Mess Decks filed the men. Here each party was numbered off to a Mess Table under the charge of a Junior NCO, kit racks allotted, hammocks drawn and arms taken into the ships armoury. All this amid a hubbub of sound in a ship preparing for sea with 4,500 troops on board, all strange to the sea way of life. Conditions were so crowded that hammocks were too few and for the others there were mattresses laid on the steel deck. It seemed impossible that this struggling mass of humanity would ever be sorted out into ordered discipline, particularly after reviewing the first attempts of our embryo mariners to sling and get into a hammock. This last evolution was a never ending source of amusement. Getting out of them was almost as bad, particularly when in later weeks "Boat Stations" were ordered in the middle of the night. Here too, each man took over that cumbersome article which was to become his constant companion for the remainder of the voyage, his life jacket. Leaving this scene the Sergeant Major and the NCOs eventually found the cabins allocated to them, decks away. These though somewhat crowded by peace time standards (6 bunks in place of two) afforded some privacy and quiet unlike the teeming mess decks which the Sergeant Major vaguely associated in his mind with ideas of the main deck of the old "Victory"! Having hastily dumped their own kit and located the Troop Commander and Subaltern Officers, a further pilgrimage (for so it seemed) was made down to see how the men were getting along.

With their usual genius for making themselves comfortable comparative order had been secured. Mess Orderlies for each table had been detailed to fetch the food from the ships galley and serving utensils drawn. The Sergeant Major commenced his never ending job of checking the Troop Roll, and making new additional ones, for each Mess Table and having provisionally found a place on the upper deck which all might recognise for morning parade and seen the first meal issued they withdrew.