

A century ago brave men shipped out to fight and die

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“THE cable repair could take three weeks,” the Telkom call centre lady retorted 10 days ago when told that my telephone and internet connection were offline, and my defunct communication system continues to frustrate me.

Fearing isolation for the promised three weeks, I dusted off a copy of Brown’s flag signals and have tested an aldis lamp, although a runner along the beach at low tide might be a better option to carry the host of messages I need to convey to the outside world.

I feel I am back in Cape Town a century ago when communications were minimal, yet an undersea telegraph cable linked London to the Cape. In response to an urgent “cable” from London via that cable, passengers were disembarked and cargo was discharged from six Union-Castle ships that were in South African ports. Shoreside squads augmented the liners’ crews to paint the ships grey, décor was removed from public rooms, and cabins were converted to dormitories.

The ships congregated in Cape Town to victual and bunker before 5 000 soldiers from the Imperial Garrison embarked, while down below, stokers were shovelling coal into the furnaces to raise a good head of steam.

Later that day, a century ago today, crowds gathered at the docks and on the breakwater (yes – on the breakwater, despite it being wartime) to watch the cruiser HMS Hyacinth (the flagship for the voyage) lead the six-ship convoy (mailships Balmoral Castle, Kenilworth Castle, and Briton and intermediates Dunluce Castle, Goorkha and Guildford Castle) from Table Bay with another cruiser, HMS Astrea, on the convoy’s port side. Also travelling in one of the ships for the voyage to Southampton were 376 family members of the troops.

On reaching St Helena Island, the ships anchored in the shadow of the island’s rugged cliffs while lighters delivered coal, water and fresh vegetables. Waiting at the island was HMS Leviathan to relieve HMS Astrea that returned to Cape Town.

When the troops tramped down the ships’ gangways in Southampton, ahead lay unspeakable dangers that, tragically, claimed many of them, some dying in unmarked fields or drowning somewhere in the channel. Others of that garrison lie amid thousands of graves in Flanders or in France, reminders of the horror of war. Ironically, all of the ships that carried the men to the frontline and their naval escorts survived the war, although Kenilworth Castle had a narrow escape.

In June 1918, she was in a blacked-out convoy approaching Southampton when the escort cruiser, HMS Kent, turned to leave the convoy. Seeing the cruiser bearing down on his ship, the mailship’s master ordered a sharp turn to starboard, causing Kenilworth Castle to ram the stern of an escort destroyer, HMS Rival.

The impact caused depth charges on the destroyer’s quarterdeck to explode, ripping a hole in the liner’s bow. Folks aboard thought she had been torpedoed or had hit a mine, and although it was unnecessary as the bulkheads held, one lifeboat was lowered, but capsized with the loss of 15 lives, including several nurses who were bound for Britain to care for the wounded.

Down by the head, Kenilworth Castle limped into Portsmouth where her passengers and cargo were landed, and after repairs were completed, she embarked Australian troops for repatriation. Sailing via the Cape to avoid intense heat in the Suez-Red Sea area, she could not enter Cape Town harbour because of a flu epidemic aboard.

I have managed to convey these century-old stories, but should my communication crisis continue, I shall unleash my effective attack dog, Julius, on Telkom.

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