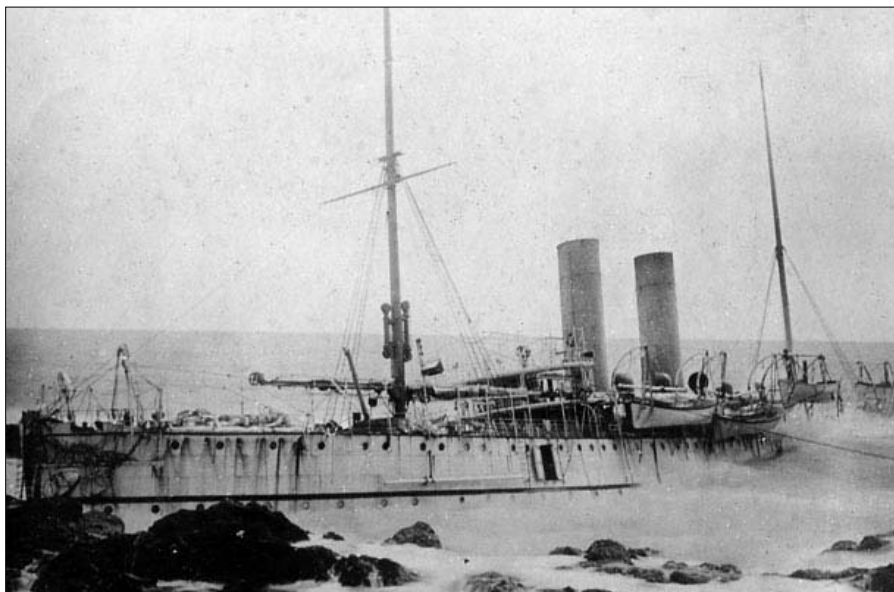


A Letter Home

Letter from Lance-Sergeant Alfred Addyman

An account of the voyage with
the Royal Indian Marine Troopship “Warren Hasting”



The article *Wreck of the Royal Indian Marine Troopship “Warren Hasting”* was published by the KRRC Association in 1997. At the time of her sinking the troops on board “Warren Hasting” consisted of the 1st Battalion The King’s Royal Rifle Corps, the Head Quarters and four Companies of the 2nd Battalion York and Lancaster Regiment and a detachment of the Middlesex Regiment.

Lieutenant-Sergeant Alfred Addyman’s account of the events are described in his letter home to his mother. The full content of Alfred Addyman’s letter follows on the subsequent pages.

No 5598 L/Sergt F Addyman
1st Batt King's Royal Rifles
Mauritius
Curepipu Camp, March/97

My Dearest Mother,

I will now endeavour to write an account of what has taken place since I left Jullundur. I left with the Battalion and acted Quarter Master Sergeant, as the 2nd QMS was left behind to hand over the Barracks. I had a great deal of work to do, seeing the baggage loaded properly at every station, and that the rations were issued out and were good and sound. We arrived at Deolali, and then commenced night and day work to finish up everything before leaving India, you will be able to see what work the 2nd QMS and I had to do, and in fact all the other officers, when we should have had at least 3 months to do the work in, whereas we only had about 3 weeks. Boards of officers have to assemble to inspect all Equipment, Clothing and Necessaries in possession, and have to rate the amount to be paid by the English Government to the Indian Government, and of course they only dictate and we do the work, and the clerical labour is something terrific on an occasion like this. Then there are things not to be brought from India, such as Camp Equipment etc, and these are to be returned to arsenals, or else made over to other corps, procuring transport is no easy matter, and the form that has to be gone through, to get the things off ones hand, makes it very difficult and hard to carry out, but this after very hard work was completed.

I went on in advance with the 2nd QMS, to Bombay, and then went on to the ill fated "Warren Hastings" to see about and allot the accommodation and the rations, and get every one and everything settled down. This we worked out, and then the Battalion came on Board, and told off to their messes, then came a hard time, drawing and counting and then issuing the blankets, hammocks, tin pots and plates, dishes, kettles, nets tallies and other things too numerous to think of now, this was at last finished. The ship sailed at 12 am the 11th December, in very fine and calm weather. Having finished the work and got settled down I looked forward for a long rest, and a pleasant voyage, but this I soon found out was not to be the case.

The Quarter Master Sergeant joined us the last day at Deolali, and he was in great disfavour owing to having had a ridiculous

dispute with the Barrack Sergeant, when handing over, and through him, the Barrack Sergeant was very strict in his duties and would not overlook any little item, but in the end he made the Regiment pay something to the tune of £800. If I had handed over the Barracks, I being a friend of the Barrack Sergeant and also generally respected with everybody, I think I could have got out for a mere song, hence the dislike. He came on board and having had the easiest time I handed over to him the duties, but he was generally sick, therefore I had occasionally to perform them. We reach Seychelles and were put in quarantine. We wanted coal, but nobody would come on board, the coal was brought to the ship side, and immediately left, therefore there was nothing else for it, but, for the men to coal the ship, and for this performance they each received 1s/-d, the weather was horrible, raining all the time we were there, we got continually wet through and were very miserable. I got a very severe cold and had to go to Hospital where I spent my Christmas day. I was only two days in Hospital, and then begged to be let out, as there was only accommodation for about 12 men, and the majority inside were venereal patients, and it sickened and disgusted me, therefore I preferred to be on the decks and suffer than be inside, all I got was 3 pints of condensed milk dissolved daily, and I thought I would be better off with a friend looking after me. The QMS was very kind, he asked me if he could do or get anything for me. I thanked him, but I do not like to accept hospitality, so therefore I never accepted of his great kindness because he has been too generous and kind to me, and I think to myself, that it is forcing oneself on too generous a man, well I managed to get alright when we landed at the Cape and that was on the 28th December 1896. I managed to get off the ship every day and visit the Town. I was present when Mr Cecil Rhodes spoke from a platform, specially erected for him, he seems here, the general favourite, but he has a lot to contend with. I heard that they had burnt his fine house down. After the speeches, our band, amassed with the 2nd Battalion Band, who are at the Cape, gave a performance which was very satisfactory to everybody. The country seems in an unsettled state to me, men of all nations doing nothing, they are a lazy lot, got no work, and want none, so long as they can shout and frighten the weaker, and I think they are a lot of braggarts and bullies. For good tradesmen there seems plenty of places to be got, and at very high wages, say from £10 to £20 per month, but what is this compared to the high price of rent and living, the place would not suit me. I like peace and quietness at any price.

I was in a public house having a little refreshment and rest, after

being tired of walking about, when a great fellow came in, and demanded me to pay for his drinks, which I promptly refused, he then commenced to bully me, but I instantly knocked him down, and the people present took my part, and they had him ejected, and I think he was handed over to the police. I cannot find time to give you a geographical description of the Cape, as you will be able to find better accounts, than I can give, in any hand book.

The 5th of January 1897

The half Battalion of the 2nd York and Lancaster Regiment embarks this day, our Half Battalion having disembarked on the 29th December, of course I had to do their work, as they were not accustomed to it, and did not take any trouble to find out, how to do it, they were too lazy to trouble themselves. The 2nd QMS of the Regiment, who is always drunk, when chances permit, did not care the least, so my 2nd QMS and I, acted the good samaritan to them, and got them settled down and in working order. I took over the duties of Acting 2nd QMS, the 29th December, when our Half Battalion disembarked.

The 6th of January 1897

We should sail to day, but cannot get out of the docks, as the wind is very strong, they call it here, the Doctor, because if it was not for it, the place would be very unhealthy, it acts as a very good scavenger, as it blows all the refuse into the sea.

The 7th of January 1897

We got out of the docks and put to sea, weather rather bad, but everybody in good spirits, and in hopes to finish the voyage, everything goes well, until the night of the 13th inst, when we were passing the Isle of Re-union, the weather becomes bad, the night is as dark as pitch, and rain falling in torrents, impossible to see anything. I retired to my hammock, after getting wet through above, and feeling cold and just then miserable. I could not sleep. I was thinking of everything, first that we should land alright at Mauritius at 2 pm tomorrow, then we would be able to get comfortably settled down once more. At 2-20 am, the ship gave a terrific shock from stern to stern, which threw me out of my hammock, as I was only lying on the side of it, to the deck. I got up and looked through the port hole, and could see, we were stopped, and a great rock a few yards in front, the water beating violently against the side of the ship.

The men being awakened by the shock, were about to make a

confusion by running up on the top deck, when they were ordered to bed. I and another L/Cpl, who had our hammocks together, told them that it was alright, as we had landed, and that it was only the anchor that had been dropped, this satisfied the men, but when they saw the ships carpenters taking soundings of the wells, and screwing up air tight compartments they knew we were on the rocks, but we all kept calm, and waited for orders, and in the meantime steadily dressed, the best way we could, as we were then in total darkness, afterwards the ship was being bumped up and down on the rocks, by the high sea running, then came the order to advance on to the next deck, called the waste deck, this is also covered in, we fell in on this deck, and were packed like Herrings, we waited about one and half hour, and the anxiety was tremendous, but we calmly waited for orders. 1/2 hour before day break, the ship is now going on one side, great fear is manifested that it will completely capsize. Men ordered to go down and get properly dressed, and save what they can, lots of us go down, but extremely dark and nearly full of water, it is impossible to get anything, therefore we go back to the waste deck, where we awaited for final orders.

Daybreak. Still on the waste deck, the water more furious, the ship is going over, now comes the most trying ordeal that can ever happen in a man's life, being closed in, with hundreds, and seeing the water rising and breaking iron doors, as if it were matchwood, the men on the starboard side, which is quickly filled with water are first to be moved on to the top deck, and landed by the best of means, then comes the order for the port side of which I am on, to move above, the deck is now at an angle of 50 degrees, the companion ladder being right over, makes it very difficult to climb, as I was climbing a man nearly fell off, and if he had he would have gone rolling to the starboard side, and certainly gone into the water, and would have been washed away through the iron gangway broken open by the water, but he managed to claim hold of my foot and nearly pulled me down. I held on like grim death to the ladder and then he did the same, but managed by it to pull one of my shoes off, which I lost. I got on the top deck, and being very slippery and at an angle of 50 degrees, I went sliding with speed from the Port to the Starboard side. I just managed to save myself half way by grasping the hydraulic lift from going into the sea, as the starboard side was all in the water and it was above the rails. I then threw my other shoe away, as I could not stand in it, it was too smooth and slippery. I find now, being in my stocking feet I can climb up the deck, and now grasp and cling to the Port side rails and riggings, ropes are now

taken ashore, and the men are going down them hand over hand and getting ashore. I get on to the boom and help the men, until I was nearly sent flying off that into the water, and unfortunately I cannot swim a yard, so some men, seeing me, said, "come along Corporal, it is your turn now and probably you will get knocked off the boom". I said, "you go first and I will follow". but they would not listen. It is feared now the ship will slip off the rock, and will go immediately down to the bottom, in the water, which is very deep. Orders are now given that any man who can swim ashore can do so, and the others to be calm and get off the ship as best as they can. It is impossible to land them by the boats, as they would be smashed to pieces on the rocks. I now lay hold of the rope with my hands, and went sliding down into the water, it was a terrible drop, my shoulders and head are just out the water. I find it is very hard climbing hand over hand on the rope, you are assisted a little when the wave comes in, but it is terrible hard work to hold on when it returns, it is so strong that you have to hang on to the rope with superhuman efforts, landed and pulled ashore by willing hands, who said, "come along Corporal, that's another one safe and sound". I feel very faint and go up the rocks a little to rest, the rocks are terrible, the worst I have even seen for sharpness, they are cutting my socks and feet to pieces. I now have had a rest and witness many gallant deeds of saving life done. I now return to the ship and assist in the best way I can, the Adjutant who was there with a jar of spirits seeing me, called me, and gave me a keg, which put life and animation into me, then I began assisting to hand about the baggage we were saving, we are now ordered to leave the ship, as it is feared she will totally collapse, a pair of boots are thrown off the ship, which I promptly seize, they are too small being 5's, but I cut the front to enable me to get my feet into them, it is now better than being wholly on my bare feet, but they are painful, as every step I take I cut my toes, which are protruding over the sole, with the rocks, but wrecked men cannot be choosers, so therefore I must contend with it.

The Battalion is now formed up and counted to see if anybody has been lost, we are all reported present, then the order is to march away and find some shelter and food for the men, the 2nd QMS and myself are greatly requisitioned, the men are now located in huts on the estate kindly lent by the owner, next comes the ration business, the little we managed to save is all collected under the 2nd QMS and I am then put in charge of it, and calculate for the disbursement. The officers and everybody had the same, nothing could be bought here,

as they did not expect us, therefore they laid in no stock. The officers were very pleased and thank me courteously for the very small piece of biscuit I gave them, about the size of the palm of the hand, made a good meal of water myself.

The authorities now come, arrangements are made for provisions. I am running here and everywhere.

4 pm. The meal arrives and I now issue it to the troops. I have no shelter, as all the huts are packed full, but I now manage to find an old half covered phaeton which answers the purpose admirably, darkness and rain sets in. I am cold, weary and hungry, so retire to my carriage for a nights repose.

The QMS, a few officers and the sick are in the building near my carriage, therefore I can be easily found by the 2 QMS when required, his dog now comes to keep me company and to share my carriage, which he finds more comfortable than being in the rain, he is very welcome, so with my companion we go to sleep.

12 pm. The Bread now arrives, I am called for to assist in the issue of it, we blow the bugle call and also sent for men to come and draw it for the Coy's, but the men being so fatigued and far away, they did not come for it, so the 2 QMS and I sat on the cold steps of the telegraph office waiting for the men to come for the bread.

3-30 am, the last of the bread is issued, we again retire for rest. I save a few loaves for the officers.

5-30 am. The troops are aroused and make preparations to march to the next place (St. Josephs) from here (St. Philippe) where we were wrecked.

I am much sought for by the officers to beg from me a little bread, and you would be surprised to see half a dozen, sharing a crust, and I receiving thanks as if I was giving my own property away.

We now struggle on the road to the next place, and a more pitiable lot one would care to see, but we all tried to be cheerful and put on a good show, the inhabitants marvel, they thought we were devils, as we all seemed so cheerful and indifferent as if nothing had occurred, but as if it was an ordinary every day occurrence. We arrive all tired out, but no rest for me, rations are always required, so I have plenty of running about, it is half a mile to the place where the rations are from the place where we are staying. After completing about 1/2 dozen journeys I manage to secure the rations. We all share alike, officers included, we all had dinner in the open, and in front of the Church, it was raining nearly all the time, accommodation is now found, the authorities here, kindly lend the public school. I return the cooking utensils, then proceed to the school for a rest, but

I find the place is already over crowded so have to contend myself the same as many others by taking a few hours rest on the ground outside, which is awfully damp, after the excessive rains, but being thoroughly tired out this little matter does not trouble me, so at 10-30 I fall soundly to sleep.

3. o'clock. I am again up and down the town, after awaking the men required to draw coffee, before starting on the last long march on the Island.

4.30. The rouse and dress was sounded and by five the men were all ready ... We had to procure carts for the sick, and my boots which were nearly falling off my feet. I found that I would be unable to do the march, not having had any rest from I do not know when.

The 2nd QMS seeing me done up hired a cart for himself and I, but by the time I reached the end of the journey, my inside was nearly out of me, with the terrible jerks. It was not quite day break, we are now on the march, after a mile march we now have a splendid view of the volcano, which is a burning one, and at present it is in full play and at its height, the lava is running down like a river. We reach the place (St Pierre) and here rest until night time to get the train to St. Denis, where we embark.

This day is very hot indeed, and the men, with the hard march, come in completely done up. I am in charge of the rations, and here I have to serve each man fairly as they come in. I am over the boiling stew pans, issuing to the men, the officers giving me a hand occasionally, with the heat and the steam from the pans I am soaking wet through. I look for all the world as if I was dragged out of a river and just escaped drowning, the work is now over, we march to the Railway Station and now wait for the train on the road outside the station, we look a queer lot all sitting and lying in the road, there are a lot of people waiting to see us off. The train now arrives, and we are all seated, as we are leaving the people cheer us for about a mile down the line, which we heartily reciprocate, until we are quite unable to speak.

2 o'clock. We reach the quay side and embark on the BIMS "Lalpoora", a cargo steamer, running between here and India, this steamer has been hired to convey us to Mauritius, here I fall on the ship and go to sleep, being completely exhausted and done up, the next morning I was wanted very early, the 2nd QMS of the York and Lancaster Regiment, and a ship warrant officer of the "Warren Hastings", wanted me to perform some work, but I strongly refused to do it. I told them that they had been on the ship about a day before

me and having had nothing to do they had time to have a good rest, as this was not my case. I was not going to do anything until I did have a rest, so went down below for a few more hours rest and left them with their own work. After breakfast some canvas slippers arrived for the bootless, these were purchased, as it was agony for the men without boots tramping over the sharp stone. I now part with my dear foot breaking boots and procure a pair of the slippers, and thought I was in Heaven, for the comfort my aching feet felt. Well I then tucked in and fitted men without, until being done up by the sun, the officers sent me away, as having no helmet they said I would get sun stroke, and that I had done quite enough. In the afternoon I borrowed a helmet and then assisted to count out the tobacco which was also got for the men, and then issued it to parties concerned. I retire early for rest, thank the Lord, I never slept so like it in all my life, hard boards and no covering is nothing now. Morning 14th arrives, we are now to sail, the moorings are unfastened, and away we sail out of the harbour. Two French mail boats are here and lots of people congregated to see us go, so with the instruments the band managed to save, we play the Marsellais, and the people cheer and salute us fanatically which we also return, it is now more than I can stand. I have to go below crying like a big spoilt child, but I cannot help it I am choked, please excuse me now to again ease my sorrowfulness, I shall never forget this in all my life, and I cannot help tears coming into my eyes at the very mention or thought of it.

We get out of the Harbour and put to sea, and all goes well, we reach Mauritius alright about 6 am, the French mail boat arrived before us, and to reciprocate the feelings they all climb the rigging and cheer us heartily in, we now signal to come into harbour, but instead we are put into quarantine, which causes great indignation on board, as we have no provisions, or sanitary arrangements, two latrines for 1300 ship wrecks, besides the ships crew, if we have to stay on the boat much longer. I dread the awful results, shipwreck I think would not be in it, we should soon have cholera amongst us, as the native sailor lascars (Indians) are a filthy and dirty smelling lot, thanks heavens a board of health assembles, and after inspecting everything and everybody we are permitted to disembark. I go ashore in the Generals lot, which is the advance and along with the 2nd QMS and a small fatigue party, we set off to Line Barracks to take them over. I had plenty to do this day getting rations, blankets, bed boards. Having got the men settled down we commence to work to clothe and arm the men, which is the hardest job of all, as there is

nothing on the Island, but we are clothed in a way, the police authorities have given us all the clothing they could, a nice lot we look in garbs of various hues.

The time I was at Line Barracks from the 18th January to 3rd July I have never worked so much in all my life, night and day continuously, until I fell asleep in the chair, with the pen in my hands, and was found thus on two occasions. We have moved from Port Louis to the Hills (Curepipu Camp), we are now getting settled a little, but the accommodation is scarce, the men's beds are all touching, so therefore it renders it an impossibility to fall out. The York and Lancaster Details are being cleared off the Island so there will be room, and the number of patients in Hospital are decreasing, so we shall take over the building they have had to misappropriate, then we shall be more comfortable. Some clothing has now arrived so we are clothing the men as fast as possible with the little we have. The Harlech Castle from England will arrive here soon, and she has all our requirements on board, then we shall be alright again and probably forget our troubles and trials.

I have a great deal of work to perform, so in the little time I can spare, I have added line by line, and by now I think I managed to write you a fair account and a rather long letter. I hope you will preserve this letter, as it is a record for a Mother to be proud of her son, who has faithfully carried out this. I never thought I should be ever able to perform what I have done in the army. I have always thought and being so often told so, that I was a little delicate, but the severe tests I have been put to, seems to prove the contrary.

I will now conclude, having satisfied myself that at least I have been able to complete the long letter many times promised. I may add that this is an awful place for rain, we have only had six (6) what you may call fine days in six weeks, and the inhabitants assurance is that we may probably have two fine months in a whole year. Statistics show that it rained over 300 days in one year, and the downfall was I think 60 per inch, it is something awful this continuous rain, but they say it would be awfully unhealthy if it was not for it, and also there would be a water famine here. Then we are also threatened with hurricanes, which destroy half the place, and with numerous fatal occurrences. I am in very good health at present, and I hope this letter will find you all the same at home, so with dearest love to you and all.

Your ever loving son.
Alfred.

This is a copy of the Telegram received from "The Queen" and a copy of a letter from the Duke of Cambridge, our Colonel-in-Chief.

"I wish to express my great satisfaction with the admirable discipline shown by the Troops under your Command, on the occasion of the wreck of the Warren Hastings" particulars of which have only lately been received by me. I much regret the loss of private property sustained by all ranks."

V.R.I

Reply.

*To Private Secretary
Windsor Castle*

Please convey to "Her Majesty" heartiest thanks of all ranks for her gracious message.

Colonel Walker

The Dukes Letter.

(Extract.)

You can easily imagine how much I have been distressed by the sad calamity which has befallen the wing of the Battalion of the King's Royal Rifles (60th) in being shipwrecked on board the "Warren Hastings" together with a wing of the York and Lancaster Regt on their voyage to Mauritius. But whilst deeply deploring that catastrophe I am full of admiration of the admirable discipline of both corps, which has resulted in the saving of life of every soul on board, including sick, women and children. It is a noble example set to the army, and to the world at large as to what discipline can effect under the most trying circumstances, and I hope you will express to the officers, non-commissioned officers, Rank and File of your Battalion my admiration of their conduct under the most trying circumstances.

But for their calm and perfect behaviour, it is more than probable that great loss would have resulted.

As Colonel in Chief of the Gallant Corps, I feel more than ever proud of being associated with so splendid a Regiment.