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R.A.F. in Iceland

By R. B. R.

What do we mean when we talk glibly of the hardships of war? We, who live in England, suffer few comparative inconveniences. We all have our pet grouse. A few of us imagine that our burden is heavy. The black-out, of course is depressing. Station life can be sometimes a bore. But the real hardships of war have only lightly touched us.

In a barren nook of an Icelandic bay, several squadrons of the Royal Air Force have made their homes. In May, 1940, the first contingents of the British Army landed in Iceland. With them came the Royal Engineers who built a vast aerodrome, without fuss and with organised speed. A number of tremendous runways were laid down. The foundations were made of lava brick, and thousands of tons of concrete completed the job. The structure and framework of all the buildings came from across the sea. Every piece had to be shipped, unpacked, checked and erected.

The Icelanders were displeased with this invasion. They received our soldiers with frosty indifference. This was natural enough as they were a neutral country, and they could not be expected to welcome us with open arms. It took a little time to defrost the Icelanders, but it was done and done well.

Iceland is one more garrison in the line of island forts that guard our convoys and from which aircraft hunt the lurking U-Boat and surface raider. The country itself is built upon volcanic rock formations and is close to the Arctic Circle. It is a land of swamps, lava fields and furious winds. It has few roads and, with a population of a hundred thousand, is the most sparsely populated country in Europe. The flat, treacherous coastline is broken by rocky pinnacles. Inland is barren, bleak and colourless, consisting of rocks, swamps and some grassland on which hundreds of goat-like sheep are grazed.

It is to this place that the R.A.F. have come. The town close to the aerodrome has some 40,000 inhabitants. In the growing, straggly streets, the buildings are a mixture of concrete, wood and corrugated iron. Here and there you see a smart little hat shop, displaying "the latest

from New York". The Icelandic girls favour American dress fashion, and they are particularly fond of up-to-date, odd shaped hats. The older women, however, still dress in rational costume. This consists of a velvet skullcap, tasselled, on long-braided hair, a neat apron over the dress and an ample shawl.

It was a "big moment" for our Squadrons when Mr. Churchill wandered unheralded into the R.A.F. Mess. He had come to this town from his historic meeting with the President of the United States. After he had addressed the Icelanders from the balcony of the *Althing*, the Parliament Building he paid a surprise visit to the R.A.F. Station. To the men of this lonely outpost, the unexpected appearance of the British Prime Minister must have indeed been an invigorating tonic.

The pilots and aircrew of this Station are in the front line of the battle of the North Atlantic. It is a task of ceaseless watching, demanding strength of purpose and men of iron-will. The vast tracks of water are divided among the various squadrons, not only on Iceland, but of other northern garrisons. The squadrons provide escorts to convoys. They are on constant watch for the U-Boat, to swoop down on him and blast him from the seas. Their task is never ended. The vastness of the sea, the snail-like movement of the ships and the circling of aircraft overhead make up the background of their constant, ruthless battle.

I met this morning a young Flight Lieutenant who had spent many months at this Station. He is now back in this country for a change of environment.

- « Life out there is pretty tough », he said, as soon as we had settled down. « When Iceland was first occupied by British Forces, it meant that many thousands of average men were placed in an environment completely different from that to which they're accustomed. During the winter months it can be mighty cold there, and the gales average forty miles an hour. Our big problem is to provide the men with something to do after their duty period is over ».

« I had the idea of organising a hobbies club, and it has been very successful. All kinds of varied talent has been discovered. One of the men turned out to be a portrait painter and I got him to do a portrait of the King for the Officers' Mess. After all, the King is a qualified pilot too, you know. We are very proud of that portrait ».

« We are now hardened to the winds and the cold. All the same I have seen some of: your Stations here and I do feel that you are having a pretty soft time of it. Take beer for instance. The Icelandic beer is a depressing drink. It is known as "near-beer". Believe me, it is not nearly "near" enough ». Then he added with a grin, « On the other hand, we certainly have it over you concerning cigarettes. I've already tramped half London to get a miserable twenty. In Iceland, we get a good supply ».

I asked what kind of equipment had been issued to the men.

- « Oh, it's excellent. They have those great tropical coats, gum boots, sleeveless leather waistcoats, thick stockings and oilskin outfits. Although the winter is hard, and the nights are long, much is being done to counter-balance this. Pianos, wireless sets, books, sports equipment, games, and such like have been sent out for the use of the men and more is

following. I was delighted to see in this morning's newspaper that a big consignment of comforts has just arrived out there. The men's, spirit is high. Naturally; they got browned off now and then ».

« But, considering the rough and ready life they lead, they are all in excellent fettle. I suppose it is because they realise that they are doing a real job of work there ».

I asked about the American Air Force.

« We have a big bunch over there now. We all get on very well together. I do think it- is a good thing to be able to interchange ideas and experiences with them. We spend quite a bit of our leisure time in their company. They are good types ! »

- « I suppose you flew back », I asked, as I prepared to go.

- « Rather ! I had a marvellous trip home. It took only five hours. Iceland looks wonderful from the air : an immense, bewildering panorama of volcanoes, fjords, creeks and pools. The mountain range has a cindery look, with a crusty, ragged edge. In the distance, you can see the snow-covered tableland of the lava flats. It was a great experience. And believe me, it is a great experience to have lived near the Arctic Circle for so long-and now, well, I'm off to have another look at London ! »

THE UNDERGROUND FRONT

The B.B.C. News Services broadcast to Germany is alarming Nazi circles.

- « These London Broadcasts, » Dr. Goebbels writes in an article published in *Das Reich* recently, « are designed to create unrest among the German people. They tell fantastic stories of German losses and we cannot answer their lies since we only wish to present exact figures which at the time have not yet come in. The listener to Radio London -- who is ripe for hard labour -- thus carts this figure of 3,000,000 losses around with him for three or four weeks, whispers it into one ear after another, only to learn one day that though our losses are very grievous they do not ever reach a tenth of the figure mentioned by the English. When the German wireless is silent, it is the duty of every German to wait and have confidence. To do otherwise is not only criminal, but unfair in the

highest degree. This practice of "learning" from the English is so despicable as to make one spit. It is ungrateful -- contemptible. It shows lack of the most primitive respect for the work and the responsibility of German leadership.

The German people have suffered disaster once before by listening to Britain's propaganda lies. It must not happen again.

Germany is fighting for her life. Rumour mongers deserve hard labour and the contempt of the whole nation. If these listeners have not enough brains in their heads to understand that one must not listen to the enemy in war time, then they must be made to by exemplary punishment. »