



STILLY NIGHT

by Greg Clark

War Correspondent traveling with the
West Novas on the Chrobry, Dec 1939



Seven of my seventy Christmases have been spent strangely and afar.

From them I am able to prove that Christmas catches you, wherever you are.

And the strangest of them was spent in the mid- winter mid-Atlantic. Ahead of us, a half- submerged monster, the grey sea breaking over its sea- grey, surging deadliness, ploughed the British battleship revenge.

To the south of us, ghostly in its lighter blue- grey, the French battleship Dunkerque vanished and appeared in the broken rhythm of the ocean. Astern, the French battle cruiser LaGlorie seemed to be keeping us in her sights.

And far and wide around us, like porpoises, the eye catching them mostly when they burst the sea on their knife- edger's, were the little destroyers, plunging, gliding, and seething.

What a setting for Christmas!

What a setting for five P.M. of a Christmas Eve.

Watching the duck coming down, we huddled in sheltered angles of the deck of the Polish liner Chrobry, and no doubt thought of home.

Most of the 1.208 of us in khaki would not see home again for five years. Many of us would never see it again.

Of the 340 of us in the nondescript working clothes of the Polish merchant marine, the ship's company, all would be in the sea in less than four months, off Narvik, Norway, and the great

white ship, her whiteness snarled and smeared in the grotesqueness of camouflage, would be on the bottom.

And that stately, spectral Dunkerque, fading to the south, what new and fateful meaning her name would have for us in less than five months! But she herself in humbles hiding in a little slimy North African port.

We were the second convoy of the First Canadian Division, and it was Christmas Eve, 1939.

The darkness deepened. One by one the farther vessels vanished, no light showing anywhere. One by one the six other troop- laden liners melted into the night around us.

Well? Said Andy O'Brian, the sportswriter turned war correspondent for the duration.

Let's go below, said Sammy Robertson of the Canadian Press, who three years later was to be lost at sea in another ship, torpedoed.

Right! Said Abbie Coe, of the Winnipeg Free Press Good evening, sir! Said I.

For around the cabin corner came Capt. Deschainkowski master of the Chrobry, a tall, fair, Blue- eyes man like an English squire in the Tatler. He was unbuttoning his storm coat.

Gentlemen, he said, I shall see you at dinner!

We let him go on and lingered. We were the four war correspondents with the second convoy, a little inclined to be by ourselves.

I wonder, said Abbie Coe, what's cooking?

Christmas dinner, remarked O'Brien, on Christmas Eve?

It's the Polish custom, I reminded.

To me, Sammy Robertson, in the darkness, it's rather wonderful. These Poles, this ship's company, inviting us all for Christmas dinner! They haven't had a word from their homes, their wives, children, for four months. Since September, they have been wandering the sea like pilgrims, like the Flying Dutchman, homeless wherever they go. And by golly, they invite us to be their guests for Christmas dinner! The troops are to be the guests of the crew. And the officers the guests of the ship's officers...

I wonder, I said what it will be like.

We went below to our cabin, to fresh up. We would respond, in our best bib and tucker, to this Christmas hospitality in so improbable a situation.

The corridors of the dimly lit ship were bust with the West Novas. The unit the Chrobry was carrying was the West Nova Scotia Battalion, a rugged Maritime brotherhood of fishermen, miners, farmers, apple growers, not to mention drug clerks, storekeepers, truck drivers, schoolteachers, schoolboys. They were thronging the corridors, heading for below decks on the big main dining saloon of the liner, all its mirrors stowed all its pretty fixtures left in some strange port. A troop transport!

Andy O'Brien and I shared a cabin.

Our door burst open.

Holy doodle! Cried Sammy Robertson, come on below! You should see this place!

Down the corridors, down the stairways, we followed Sammy, among the crowd of soldiers. Ahead we could hear the din of men in meeting. When we craned our way into the great saloon, there it was. Christmas.

The poles had gone ashore, in Halifax, and laid in an enormous stack of fir and spruce, three times life-size Christmas trees that lined the walls of the war-bared dining saloon of the ship, hiding its iron bones. The trees were decorated with lights, tinsel, bright coloured objects of every conceivable shape that would shine: tin, brass, clipped metal from the ship's stores. The long tables of a troop transport, unlovelier than a political picnic's, were bright with white cloths, starred with a cluster of candles.

Flowers, yes, sir, flowers in vases.

As the West Novas, incredulous and noisy, sought their places at the tables, the Polish waiters and stewards, the crewman not on duty above decks, the men from the purser's office and the sick bay, came from the kitchens with the Christmas feast.

It was a Polish feast. The dishes were the traditional things their lonely men would have had, if they were home. There was music and singing from them, retaliatory music and singing from the West Novas, pounding their tables. There came huge gingerbread girls, iced in colours, and the West Novas were introduced to the Polish custom of breaking these cookies among one's friends: you take a bite of mine; I'll take a bite of yours.

We four war correspondents, watching to see seven o'clock creeping up on us, when we were expected in the captain's big dining room above, left the rising tumult, down there in the bowels of the ship, with very strange feelings in our heads and hearts.

Come on, you fellows! Called one of the West Novas officers, this way!

Capt. Deschaikowski was in his formal uniform, as were all his officers. They greeted the thirty, thirty-five of us from the West Novas and a few supernumeraries, like ourselves, in an anteroom. We moved into the dining cabin. It glowed with a Christmas nimbus like theirs, like ours, the evergreens, the candles,

the bright colours of flowers and silver. The best china, the shining crystal, the fine wines, the feast of food, strange, Polish, gourmet, proud. We had the traditional cookies, which we broke with our hosts. We made speeches. We sang a couple of songs.

The Revenge, Dunkerque, LaGlorie, the Destroyers the six sister transports. Outside that very door, that shrouded, curtained door, where no chink of this lovely light dare peep...

So far, so good.

It's a trifle before seven o'clock.

Christmas is an hour away.

Up rises the lieutenant- colonel commanding the West Nova Scotia Battalion, from his place on Capt. Deschaikowski's right.

Lt. Col. Rev. G.W. Bullock.

Reverend, did I say? Yes, sir, yes madam, Reverend! Rector of the Anglican parish of Bridgewater, Nova Scotia who raised and recruited this battalion, and who now commands it.

Gentlemen, says he, may I invite you now to below to meet the men of my battalion and the usual Christmas Eve service in the celebration of the Nativity of our Lord. Following this, the chaplain of my regiment, Captain the Rev. T.F. Cashen, will conduct the Roman Catholic midnight Christmas Mass.

This is the truth. The truth of Christmas Eve aboard the Polish ship Chrobry in the year 1939.

We went below. And in the big dining saloon where the troops had finished their dinner, the altar had been set up.

And the Lieutenant- Colonel commanding the West Nova Scotia Battalion put on his surplice and vestments over his soldiers' uniform and conducted the office of the Anglican prayer

book that marks the Nativity of our Lord. And no man in the jammed ship's great belly moved.

And when the lieutenant- colonel commanding removed his vestments and surplice and took his place among his men, the battalion's chaplain, the priest, Father Cashen, stepped up to the same altar, laid out on it his linen and his missal and his little golden chalice, and while no man moved of us all, began the midnight Christmas Mass.

And that, my friends in the midnight Atlantic, and that winter gale, and those unseen ships plunging with us on a long, far errand, was my ecumenical Christmas.

Rev. Bullock, due to his age was unable to command the West Nova Scotia Regiment in the field. He reverted to the rank of Captain in order to follow then to Italy in 1943, in a graves registration unit. He had the sad duty of burying his own son, Reg, mortally wounded on Christmas Day, near Ontona – 1943. Reg had commanded the mortar platoon of the WNSR.