

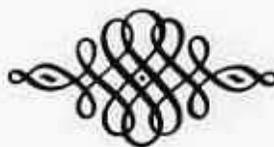


“THE CHERRY BERET”

DISTANT RECOLLECTIONS OF WORLD WAR II

AS REMEMBERED BY

ONE OF THE FIRST CANLOAN OFFICERS



ASHTON L. KERR, M.D.

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by
Ashton L. Kerr M.D.

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Acknowledgments

Unlike many authors, I should be required to make no long list of people who helped me write this story. This is logical, because nobody knew that I was writing it.

To be truthful, however, we should always give credit to those who have inspired us, and while all writers should start by acknowledging their debt to the Bible and to William Shakespeare, we must admit that we have been helped by others.

In my case, the list must be headed by Wilder Penfield, and followed by Daphne du Maurier, John Winant, Evelyn Waugh and Michael Packe, all of whom are mentioned in my narrative. I also benefited from checking my historical memory against Jefferson Lewis's, in his "Something Hidden". However, like Pierre Berton's "Vimy Ridge", it is the product of other people's memories, whereas this story is based on what Ashton Kerr has remembered, and recorded on his portable typewriter. Like any good secretary, he must apologize for any errors or omissions!

Introduction

This is not intended to be autobiographical, and I trust that readers will not find it as such. However, having said that, I am reminded of what my old friend and former classmate, Douglas Fullerton said in his "The Dangerous Delusion: Quebec's Independence Obsession". His opening remarks explained the need to be autobiographical sometimes in order that the reader could understand what the anglophone was thinking about the French.

In my story, it is the war as I saw it, and the remarkable people that I was fortunate to meet that will be described.

Incidentally, having quoted Douglas Fullerton, I should add that his "Graham Towers and His Times" is highly recommended. They say that if you don't recommend other people's books, they won't recommend yours. Just as if you don't go to other people's funerals, they won't go to yours.

And so, we have been introduced. Sorry, I didn't catch your name!!

Ashton L. Kerr, M.D.

Preface

"And what did you do in the war, Dad?" A familiar question, asked of so many veterans.

"Oh, I was a parachutist."

"And did you kill many Germans?"

"No. I was a medical officer, a doctor in uniform. We weren't supposed to kill anyone, but if we did, it was a mistake. We didn't get sued then, the way doctors are today."

"Are your memories of the war pretty sordid, Dad?"

"When you remember the best friends that were killed, it is pretty sad, but there were many funny things that happened, and we all saw some beautiful parts of the world. Our memories are quite a mixed salad."

"O.K. Dad, Why don't you begin by telling me how you joined the Army."

"Well perhaps some others might be interested in my story, so I should write it down..."



The Author

Athens, October 1945

1. Enlistment and Embarkation

In 1941, having just finished my internship at the Montreal General Hospital, I was accepted for a residency in neurology. I eventually wanted to be a neurosurgeon, like Wilder Penfield, whom I was most fortunate to know quite well. As any Canadian old enough to remember that year, will recall, there was a feeling that any young men who were fit and free to leave their families, should join the forces.

Accordingly, instead of continuing my medical training, and since I was already in the militia, I decided to join up, July 2nd. We had to go to the medical training centre in Ottawa as soon as possible. It was in the old Horse and Cattle building at Grosvenor Park, and I can still remember the smell of horses that permeated the place.

Our training in Ottawa was to last for a very short time, but a few amusing incidents are still fresh in my mind. One of our officers had never ridden a motorcycle before, and since the authorities felt that this was essential, he was instructed and started the Harley-Davidson, equipped with a side-car. I thought it rather silly, because I had ridden a bike for years and never tried one with a side-car before. In any event, my friend started the machine, put it into gear and turned the throttle on full. He went straight through a high wooden fence, leaving a silhouette of motorcycle and side-car, just as we have seen in the movies. We rushed through the fence to pick him up, and found him quite unhurt, although the poor motorcycle had a few scrapes.

After only a few days, our Director General came to address us. He had just received a message from the British Director General of their Medical Services, asking if twenty-five medical officers could be found to join their army, on loan, since so many of theirs had stayed behind at Dunkirk. Some of their field units were deficient of a medical officer. He said how eager he would be, if he were young enough to go! We were told that any volunteers would continue to be on Canadian pay and we could keep our Canadian uniforms, a good idea in case we were captured! He wanted to know our answer within two days, and we were to fill in the necessary forms, provided we were fit, single and prepared to serve anywhere in the world.

Sure enough, those of us who thought it better than staying in Canada, examining recruits, were advised that as soon as a ship could be found, we **might** expect to sail to England. We had visions of going over on a vessel like the Empress of Britain. If we had only known!!!

As soon as our families heard that we were going to serve with the British, which for most people meant serving with the English, they bought us the latest novels and other writings of their popular authors.

Accordingly, I read Evelyn Waugh's delightful "Decline and Fall", "Vile Bodies" and other stories, little suspecting that I would later serve with him in the commando that he described so well in "Brideshead Revisited". Watching the TV production and reading his book, I was happy that although there was a "Captain Kerr", he was neither a Canadian nor a medical officer. A favourite trick of Waugh's was to use the name of an acquaintance for a miserable character in one of his stories, and once named a psychotic killer after a Dean who had given him a hard time at his university.

Another author, whose books I was given and enjoyed immensely, was Daphne du Maurier, again never dreaming that I would meet her, under quite unromantic circumstances, as will be told later.

Looking back over the years, it is difficult to remember just how we felt about leaving our families and our recent military companions, to serve with a foreign, though friendly force in distant parts of the

world. It all happened so fast, that we had little time to regret or worry about anything. We were warned that we must keep our date of departure secret, and when stopping in Montreal, must phone nobody. A band got up very early, and we had a formal farewell from Ottawa, July 31.

Every time that I pass the war memorial in Windsor Station, it gives me the creeps. We had all gazed at it, as we waited for our train to the East coast, wondering if they would change the inscription, which read "To the Canadian Pacific Veterans of World War I", adding "and World War II". They have done this, of course, and it is undoubtedly one of the best-designed memorials that I have ever seen.

After a brief stop at a military camp, Debert, I think it was, we proceeded to St. John to find our troop-ship. What a disappointment! The "S.S. Bayano" was an old banana boat, which after sailing into the Caribbean for many years, was awaiting recycling when the war broke out. Instead of cutting it up, they put a two-pounder gun on the stern and a machine gun on each side. A gunner was found for the big gun and the crew were to man the machine guns if needed. At night, we were told that we would take turns staying up, and were shown how to fire the things. The cabins had been changed putting twice the number of bunks in each, so we had four in our little room, but we did have a porthole.

One of our roommates was Jewish, and he explained that he had expected to have mal-de-mer as soon as we sailed, since for some reason, his people have a more delicate eighth nerve balance system than others. In any event, he almost never came down for a meal, which he was able to blame on his genes. Many others didn't go down either, since we had very rough weather during our three week crossing.

Ours was the largest convoy up to that time, and it had to wait for the slowest ship, which might well have been ours. We had two old American destroyers as escort and they sailed around the convoy, with their four smoke stacks looking so important.

The trip was quite uneventful, except for the arrival of the Battleship "Prince of Wales", which sailed through our columns of ships, its huge guns being raised and lowered in saluting us, with its flags flying (since there was radio silence) to tell us that Winston Churchill was returning from the Quebec Conference and thanked us for going to the help of England in her war effort. We must all have wanted to cry when we heard that this magnificent ship had been sunk at Singapore.

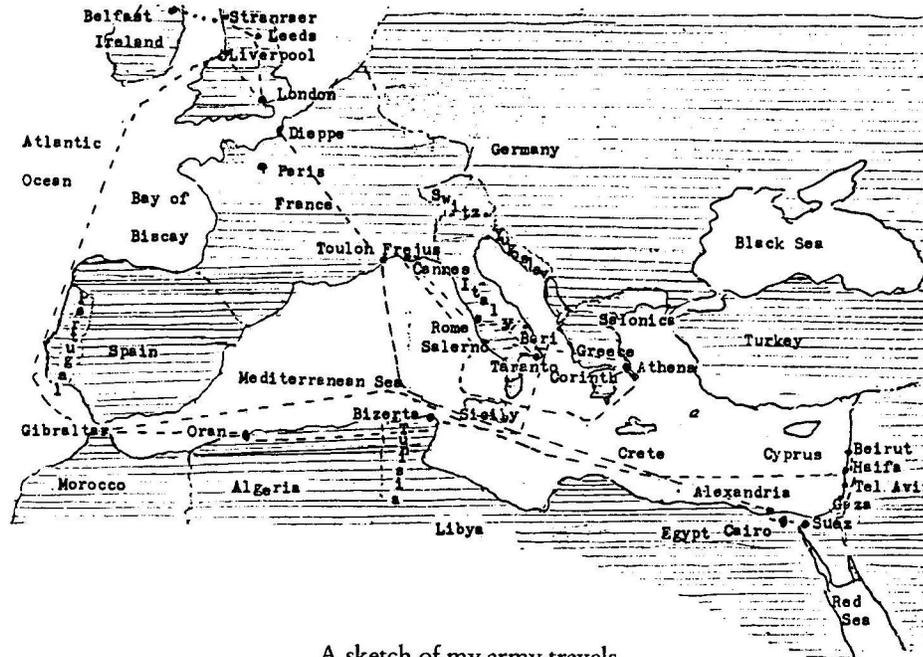
Although we saw no enemy ships, submarines or planes during our crossing, one of our little vessels had a Hurricane fighter on a catapult-type device, placed on the front deck. The pilot could rev up his engine, when a high pressure of steam pushed a piston to launch the plane into the air. Provided he was close enough to Ireland he could fly there, otherwise he would just parachute out near one of our ships.

Imagine our surprise, when we were told that we would land in Ireland. Our cargo was to be landed there, and so were we! After lunch in Belfast, we went back to our boat for the night, then caught a ferry to Stranraer, in Scotland.

2. Arrival in the United Kingdom

None of us had any idea where we were going, when we arrived on terra firma. However, the first transport officer who met us, said that he had instructions from the War Office that we were to proceed to Leeds, where the Royal Army Medical School was located, and we would stay just long enough to sort out our belongings, before proceeding on a week's disembarkation leave in London. Our accommodation at excellent hotels had all been arranged, he said.

It was August of 1941. There were few tourists in London, and it was long before the myriad of U.S. troops had landed. The English hadn't started to say, "The American soldiers are over-dressed, over-paid, over-sexed and the worst of it is, that they're over here". We very seldom heard that sort of thing said about the Canadians, though as a Captain, I made more than my Lt.-Col. Commanding Officer.



A sketch of my army travels

We had a very good time, seeing all the sights. Not only the fine shows, but the museum, the zoo, Madame Toussaud's, the Parliament Buildings and Palace all had to be seen. There was little sign of war, apart from the black-out, occasional sirens and the barrage-balloons high up in the sky, to discourage enemy bombers from flying low over London. Little did I know that I would soon be suspended in a basket from one of these, before making parachute jumps.

We found the British very friendly and welcoming, and fell in love with London, a love affair that lasts forever, it seems. Some of its early history is pretty sordid, but whose isn't. We found the underground "tube" confusing, but studied the map before taking it, and were amazed by the names of some districts, such as "Elephant and Castle". This, I found, had been "Enfant de Castille". "Rotten Row" was originally "Rue du Roi".

Hearing that Dr. Wilder Penfield was coming to England, I was as excited as he later told me he had been. His fellow neuro surgeon, Dr. Bill Cone, had been selected to head the neurosurgical hospital that Canada had sent to England, while Penfield remained at the Montreal Neurological Hospital, which he had founded in 1934. He had envied Bill Cone, but hadn't been able to persuade the Army to send him

to England. However, he obtained authority from the National Research Council to do so, and was able to see all the people he wanted to.

On the last day of my leave in London, I phoned the number I had received to reach Dr. Penfield, and when the secretary answered, she asked my name. The public phone I was using had been badly beaten by subscribers who had probably tried to get their money back, and the connection was very poor. She heard the "Kerr" and thought I was "Kerr-nel somebody". On assuring her that I was only a captain, she said, "Oh, you're Navy". A Navy captain is, of course, equivalent to a full colonel, and she must have thought that I had to be important to call Dr. Penfield. In any event, she suddenly remembered that he had told her that if I called, she should invite me to have lunch with him at Fortnum and Mason's restaurant at noon. I told her how happy that would make me.

Few of the readers will ever have had a meal at the luxurious Fortnum and Mason's, I imagine. In any event, we met there and must have chatted for more than an hour, catching up on the family news and discussing the future of the world! He was so interested in my experiences so far with the British.

As a Rhodes scholar, he had been in England during the war, before the Americans entered, and had served during his holidays with the Red Cross in France. It was while crossing the channel for his second tour of duty that his ship was torpedoed. He suffered a fractured femur, had a narrow escape when the half of the ship that he was left on, nearly capsized, and eventually convalesced in the home of Sir William Osler. That fine physician was able to help him plan his future medical training.

I should explain how I had been, briefly, a member of Wilder Penfield's family in the summer of 1939. When he was a young student, and his mother was having a busy time, supporting him, he was lucky enough to get a summer job as a companion for the two children of a doctor, whom he considered quite wealthy at the time. He spent the whole summer with them, swimming, sailing and keeping the kids out of mischief, for which he was paid a hundred dollars a month.

So he and Mrs. Penfield thought that they should hire a medical student to do the same for them, since young Wilder was going to spend the summer working in lower Quebec to practice his French, and Ruth Mary was going to France, for the same reason. Mrs. Penfield would therefore be left alone with the two young children, except for weekends when Dr. Penfield always tried to get to Magog Meadows, their fine home on Lake Memphremagog.

When I went to the McGill employment bureau to look for a summer job, the nice lady who looked after us remembered that she had sent me to the University Settlement Camp the year before, and said how lucky I would be if I could get this job. How right she was!!! I got to know Dr. Penfield so well, playing tennis with him, sailing in the "Astrocyte", named after the neuroglial cell that he had discovered after working in Spain, and occasionally driving him to Montreal for emergency operations on a Saturday or Sunday night. As we had lunch, he remembered how confident he had been in my driving, being able to snooze as we sped along.

He also remembered other things, such as the time that he was about to leave their home on Montrose Avenue one Sunday night, to catch a train to New York. His daughter and I had just reached the house after spending the day skiing in the Laurentians, and Ruth Mary hurried to give him a farewell kiss, when she started to faint. He held her up and said, "I don't think you should have skied so far or so fast." I told him that he was quite right, since we had covered the Maple Leaf trail from St. Agathe, and just reached Piedmont in time to catch the train, by that time quite full, so we had to stand with our skis.

He also remembered young Jeff's experience, when I took him horseback riding. His smaller brown

horse was usually quite quiet, but that day raced ahead of my big black one, threw Jeff off, fracturing his left wrist. I had made a splint from branches and a piece of shirt, I think, then driven him to Montreal. There we were met at the Montreal General by Fraser Gurd, the chief surgeon. He x-rayed the wrist, found it in good position, and said he wanted to leave it in the splint until the next morning, when Jeff would get an anaesthetic. So all the visitors who came that evening were proudly shown the odd-looking wrist. Incidentally, it was a tragedy that Jeff broke his left wrist, because he was a child prodigy violinist, though he wouldn't remember that now, probably, and soon stopped practicing, after being unable to use his hand for the fingering.

Dr. Penfield always talked to me as though I was his son, and I well remember his counseling me, "You should keep your emotions on ice until you're thirty. I did!" This may well have explained, as a psycho-analyst would tell me, if I paid him, why Ruth Mary and I treated each other as brother and sister whenever we had such good times going out together. He also advised me to take my later studies in internal medicine, rather than neurosurgery, unless I was prepared to fail in my treatment of 50% of my cases.

I was tempted, but didn't ask him about the bravest operation that he had ever done, on his sister, who had a malignant brain tumor. As the best neurosurgeon, all the doctors said he should operate. But on his own sister? Finally, he carried out a radical dissection, and performed an operation that has now been done thousands of times, a frontal lobotomy. They were surprised that with this amount of brain removed, she still acted so normally. Unfortunately, although she was greatly improved, about two years later, the malignancy won.

We talked so long, I worried that he might be late for something more important, however he was able to tell me about my father's accident, only a week or so after I had left Canada. He had just bought a new car, with "power glide", just before the automatic transmission came in. He was a terribly busy general practitioner and drove fast everywhere. He had tried to beat a large truck to an intersection, and the truck had won. His new car was a "total", and so was he, very nearly, with fractured skull, spine, etc. Mrs. Penfield had driven my mother to pick him up at the hospital, to take him home. Mother soon learned to drive herself!

We chatted about our fathers, something he seldom did. His mother had been left by her husband, a good doctor who found life too dull where they lived, preferring the "Wild West". What a difference from Wilder, who was a wonderful father, not only to his own four children, but others, like Ashton!

About the last time that I met Dr. Penfield, he was a head table guest at a medical meeting. Mrs. Penfield was in the audience, and she asked me to play a little trick on him. I was to approach Dr. Penfield, and she would time him, seeing how many seconds it took him to recognize me. It only took two!

Dr. Penfield died in April, 1976, and I drove Mrs. Penfield to his memorial service, because I had an old convertible, much larger than the Penfield children's new smaller cars, and it was easier for her to get in and out. She joined Wilder only a couple of years later, ending an era, most will agree.

Fortunately, they leave many grand-children, including two who have inherited Wilder's love for writing, Wendy Penfield, Young Wilder and Berey's daughter, and Jefferson Lewis, son of Ruth Mary and Crosby Lewis. His "Something Hidden" should be read by anyone interested in the Penfield story.

3. Training and posting to field units

All good things must come to an end, and we took the train to Leeds, in Northern England, for our course with British Royal Army Medical Corps officers. A pleasant town with a fine cathedral, good hospitals and theaters. We were to spend four weeks, training very hard, taking long route marches and night exercises and learning the names of all the military units, items and jargon generally. We found that our Canadian boys were much fitter and quicker at learning things, but of course most of us had some militia training. This made us quite popular with our instructors, so we were qualified at the end of our course.

We also had quite a good time, meeting the civilians in Leeds, including attractive young ladies, whose parents invited us to their homes for dinners, etc. There were a few dances and the shows quite good. There was absolutely no evidence of war there, and I can't remember any black-out precautions, but they may have been forgotten. They were sending troops to India, Hong Kong, to the Middle East and Gibraltar, and we wondered where we would all end up. My good friend, Parker Chesney was sent to India and then to Burma, where he spent a long time.

Imagine my surprise, when I learned that I was being sent to No. 6 Fd Amb (Field Ambulance). When in the militia, in Canada, I belonged to the No. 6 Canadian Field ambulance. When I arrived in Bournemouth, August 27, 1941, I found that the unit was packing up to go on the biggest exercise they had ever had held, "Bumper", to be commanded by the new General Montgomery. He would have all the divisions in southern England in his "Army". My commanding officer was a rather elderly man, quite frail-looking, and the officers told me that they expected "Monty" to get rid of all the older men like him.

I had to pack quickly, and try to remember the names of everybody in the unit, something that happened to me many times during the next few years. We were kept on the move, day and night for the next few days and apparently our division, the 78th, fought very well, having few casualties. I had been made adjutant of the unit, since they thought I had a lot of experience in Canada. If they only knew! In any event, the result of this was that at the end of the exercise, since our C.O. was kicked out, as they had suspected, I was told that in his absence, the adjutant would attend the briefing with General Montgomery after the exercise.

"Monty", promptly at 0800 hours (8 A.M.) arrived at the school where we were to have our conference. We had been told to be there early, and to be sitting quietly, with "no smoking". He entered the hall, and we all stood up. Since we had been told to take off our caps, we didn't have to salute. He began by saying, "You have been told that there will be no smoking. I don't want any coughing either, so if you need to cough, cough now!"

He then went on to say that it was too bad that some of the senior officers had to be changed, but he wanted younger people in command of his units, and of the companies within the units. "C'est la guerre." He was satisfied with the units, and rattled off the names of them, most of whom I had never heard of, naturally. I don't think he said anything about the medicals, but stayed well out of sight afterwards, when we all had a cup of coffee. I was afraid he would spot my measly three pips and "Canada" insignia, and say, "What is this captain, a Canadian, doing here?"

The next time I met Monty, in North Africa, he had changed. He was now famous, wearing double badges, joking with the officers about the lack of beer, which was hard to get unless you gave a pint of blood.

On returning to my unit, I learned that we had heard who our next C.O. would be, a Lt.-Col, T.A. Butcher. When he arrived, things changed, with route marches, better training, and very soon plans to take commando training in northern Scotland.

One of our majors was a hopeless officer, from southern England. He had a terrible accent, and few could understand him, even when he knew what he wanted to say, which wasn't often. One day, we had a full parade, and so he had to be there, with his company. We had to do some tricky maneuvers, and he had his company make a left form. They ended up marking time, and he didn't know what to say to make them march again. He half-turned so his Staff-sergeant could hear him, and said "What should I say now?" The NCO replied, "Forward on two left feet." Thereupon, the Major shouted out, "Forward on two left feet". This brought down the house naturally.

Colonel Butcher was a fine chap, small, but very fit. He had been an infantry officer originally in World War I, wounded badly, then recovered and became a medical administrative officer, studying medicine after the war. A prominent London physician when WW II broke out, he handed over his practice to others and joined up. He stayed in France until Dunkirk, and then escaped and came back to eventually end up with us. We enjoyed working together, and had many long hikes, climbing the hills in Scotland when our unit was sent there.

Before leaving the subject of Col. Butcher, I must tell what happened to him. When his unit went to North Africa, after I had left them to become a parachutist, he was driving in his jeep, one day, to the formation Headquarters, I believe. Anyway, some parachutists had been spotted, and he, as an old infantry officer, got as many soldiers as he could to see if they could find them. Apparently they were a small detachment of German parachutists, sent to capture Randolph Churchill, who had been sent out from England to see what he could see. I think they were just trying to get rid of Randolph, who apparently was a nuisance. In any event, our poor Col. Butcher was killed. I never heard whether they did catch all the parachutists, but Randolph was O.K., as usual! This story hasn't been told to the public, as far as I know.

Another odd happening, after we had done our commando training, was our receiving embarkation leave. Only those entitled to "Top Secret" information could know where we were supposed to go, but naturally the adjutant heard that it was Murmansk, Russia. If you can remember all the ships that were going to Murmansk in 1942, it can be appreciated that Churchill might have wanted some of his troops there. Why they had to be commando-trained beats me, but he may have had some other ideas up his sleeve. In any event, we had our leave, thank you very much, with more shows in London, and didn't have to leave the country. Instead, they sent me to London again, to the RAMC College at Millbank, to take a short course on tropical medicine, which became handy later on.

4. With Evelyn Waugh in a marine commando, or... “Brideshead Revisited”

In April, 1942, the naval lieutenant-surgeon with a marine commando was suddenly ill, and the War Office looked through their files to find a medical officer with commando training. My C.O. had a message to say that Capt. Kerr was to proceed at once to Paisley, near Glasgow, to join that unit, so well described by Evelyn Waugh in “Brideshead Revisited”. What a place and what a unit!

It was situated on the outskirts of town, about half a mile beyond the end of the tram-line, just past an insane asylum, with a wire fence surrounding it, through which the inmates would shout obscenities at us, or ask us how they could join the army. We had a collection of Nissen huts and a couple of buildings which should have been part of a housing development that stopped before the war.

Evelyn Waugh was one of the company commanders, and, of course, I told him how much I had enjoyed his stories, especially “Put Out More Flags”. He was an interesting character, quite solitary, always eating alone at his own table in the mess, and the other officers quite sure that he was listening in on the conversations to make notes for a new story. He had just been told that he would be dropped into Yugoslavia with Randolph Churchill to liaise with the communists, but everybody thought it was just a lark to get rid of Randolph for a while. In any event, I believe the plane actually landed, but was smashed a little.

The unit had been warned that they were to have an important exercise, although some thought it was going to be another raid on the French coast. We were told that the enemy might have some officers and men wearing British uniforms, so we had to identify anybody we didn't know, by password or by seeing their identity cards. This led to one of my routine confrontations.

Not usually going far from my regimental aid post, I met a general and a brigadier. I introduced myself and asked if I could see their identity cards since I didn't know them. The general said, “But you must know me, I'm the divisional commander!” I replied that I was a Canadian on loan, not only to the British, but to the commando, so I didn't know anybody. The general turned to the brigadier, and said, “I hope you have yours.” The brigadier laughed, and pulled out his pocket-book. Fortunately, he had an I-card, so we all had a good laugh, shook hands and parted.

The exercise went off quite well, and it was decided to have a grand farewell party for Evelyn Waugh. I figured it would be pretty wild, and so begged off, saying that as the medical officer, I might be needed. I sneaked to my Nissen hut, and can't remember whether I was asleep, but heard some drunks enter the hut very late. They were supporting Evelyn, with one on each side, directing him to the bed of the officer sharing the hut with me. He wasn't a popular type, and they were trying to persuade Evelyn to pee into one of his boots. I must give Major Waugh credit. He said, “That wouldn't be cricket, old boy”, and wouldn't let them open his fly. So they took him out quietly.

I wished Evelyn “Bon Voyage” and hoped that he would enjoy getting away from the commando life, which he had led for some time, having been used in several raids, one to help the troops escape from Crete. Apparently, he knew Randolph Churchill quite well. In my chats with him, I hadn't realized that he had been married, once to another Evelyn, whom his family called “the she-Evelyn” while he was called “the he-Evelyn”. He then became a Catholic, and after getting an annulment, re-married. Alec Waugh tells a lot about him in his clever book, “My brother Evelyn and Other Profiles”. Alec, being the older brother, should have inherited their ancient home in England, but being quite an American by then, generously had the inheritance pass to Evelyn.

5. Meeting with Ambassador John Winant

When one has the opportunity to meet a world figure, even if only very briefly, it becomes an event to be remembered forever, such as when there has been an audience with the Pope. Some call this a flash-bulb experience.

Knowing that I was coming to London, in July, 1942, Ambassador Winant was told by his secretary, Ruth Mary Penfield, that I would be very pleased to meet him. He and Wilder Penfield had been good friends at Princeton, so he was glad to arrange for Ruth Mary to come to London as his secretary, and now that she was there, glad to meet any of her Canadian friends.

A very gracious, friendly man, big and handsome but rather clumsy, Winant had been a close friend of Franklin Roosevelt, and had, in fact, been one of those who had persuaded him to run for another term.

When F.D.R. knew that Britain needed help, but the U.S.A. wasn't nearly ready to enter World War II, he asked John Winant to accept the Ambassadorship, being the link between him and Churchill. He had been in public office a long time, having been the youngest senator ever elected, then after being elected three times, and being the Director of the International Labour Office and the first Chairman of the Social Security Board, F.D.R. knew that he could handle anything. He arranged all the lend-lease deals including handing over the old destroyers that escorted us across the Atlantic!

Any person interested in Winant's work should read the fascinating "Letter from Grosvenor Square", a book that I was fortunate enough to find in a London bookshop. He tells how sad he was to move out of his home for five years in London, spent without serious incident, "except for a bit of shrapnel-shattered glass in one of the bedrooms". He remembered all the important people he had met in London, and the many military individuals (including, but not naming Ashton Kerr!).

This man was so modest, and he was embarrassed by his grand reception in England, having been met at the station by the King, the first time that an ambassador had this honour. Worse than that, the King had him sit on the right, where the senior individual should sit, so he can accept the salutes! Talking with him, he was so enthusiastic, anxious to know what it was like being a Canadian working with the British, under their command.

It was a great tragedy that John Winant's last years became unhappy. He had been the United Nations delegate, and quite disappointed the way the U.N. was leaning towards the left. Not many people will remember what was happening in 1947, but he felt that he could no longer work with the U.N. and wanted to become a private citizen at last. Showing signs of depression, he was seen by a psychiatrist, and admitted to Bethesda Hospital. Very unwisely, he was placed on a high floor, the 17th, I think. In any event, he jumped to his death.

What a tragedy, that a man who had done so much for his country and the world, should meet so miserable an end. I shudder when I remember how happy he was when we chatted in the Embassy on Grosvenor Square.

6. Joining 1 Airborne Division

One feature of being the adjutant of a unit is that you read all the letters that arrive, and there are a lot. One day, a "Secret" envelope came to 6 Fd. Amb, and when I opened it, read that the War Office wanted any medical officers who would be willing to parachute to join the new 1 Airborne Division.



A 1942 Italian Post-Card. "From the heavens, lightning on the enemy."

They had to be fit, have perfect colour vision and be prepared to carry a pistol to defend their patients or themselves. As the adjutant, I passed the letter to all officers, but had no takers. Rather than send in a

nil return, which we never liked to do, I put my own name down.

Not long after that, a secret message came to the C.O., saying that Capt. Kerr was to report to the War Office, giving the address. I thought that possibly, since some of my letters had been severely censored, with names of cities cut out, they thought I was a double agent or something. In any event I took the train to London, 18 July, 1942, and found the address they had given.

It was a rather plain office building, and I climbed the stairs to a dingy office, where another medical officer was sitting in the waiting room. We soon decided that we were there because we had volunteered for parachuting. Sure enough, when we met a nice elderly "Colonel Blimp", we were told that our applications would be considered as long as he was satisfied. He asked a few questions about our views, making sure that we had nobody depending on us, wouldn't mind being a prisoner-of-war and were afraid of nothing. We were told that very shortly we should hear that we could join 1 Airborne Division, being formed by Major General Frederic (Boy) Browning. He had just been given the job of assembling the division, with two parachute brigades, one airlanding (glider) brigade and some other troops. He already had the 1st Para Bde formed and a raid had been carried out on Bruneval, a radar station on the coast of France.

There was to be a medical support, with a field ambulance for each brigade, consisting of three or four sections, including a medical officer and about twenty medical assistants, together with two surgical teams, having a surgeon and surgical assistants, like operating room nurses. The airlanding troops would fly in Horsa gliders pulled by our Whitley bombers, while Hamilcar gliders could carry jeeps and even a small tank or bulldozer. They would need a big four-engine bomber to pull them. The War Office had promised the very best equipment. Parachute pay, two shillings a day would be paid but not to me, since the Canadian Army didn't yet have any parachutists, and I already was paid more than my C.O.!

General Browning had been a guards officer and was considered one of the brightest generals. Parachuting was a relatively new military occupation although it had been a sport in many countries for several years.

The Germans had used parachutists for several easy operations in the Netherlands, and I met a German surgeon when I was there in the sixties. He was the chief surgeon of the Hanover Hospital. He had been in their army as a medical officer, was quite bored when he was called up, and since he liked parachuting, joined a unit as their medical officer. He enjoyed the drops into Holland, and thought it was fun. They did almost no fighting, because the Dutch gave up right away. However, he was next sent to Crete. There, he was machine-gunned, with multiple chest wounds, perforated lung, etc., He nearly died, and was resuscitated and eventually boarded out of the army, so he must have been pretty low. In any event, over the years, his lungs expanded and he was quite healthy when we had dinner together. We enjoyed comparing notes, and found that I had landed on the airfield in Greece, from which he took off for his flight to Crete!

When I left my 6 Fd Amb, 16 July, 1942, I found my new unit, 17 Parachute Field Ambulance, in Amesbury, a pleasant village near Stonehenge. It had a good hotel and pub. We were in a nice old abbey, which is now a convalescent home, I found when we returned a few years ago.

I was the first medical officer to arrive, just after Capt. Alan Brown, a dental officer, who has been my friend ever since. He and his wife, have visited us in Westmount, while Gaetane and I have stayed briefly with them in. Only a couple of clerks had arrived and two N.C.O.'s. The commanding officer, Lt.-Col. Michael Kohane, a wild Irishman, was still in London, where he went whenever he could find an excuse. Naturally, I assumed that I would be the adjutant, as was confirmed by the C.O. when he

arrived.

It was only a couple of hours to London, and a short drive to Salisbury. All our interest was in getting our parachute wings, and so we had to keep very fit to be able to pass the tests before going to Hardwicke, near Chesterfield, for our training.

Two young medical officers joined the unit, Dick Sharpe and Tinker Palmer, both first class athletes and wonderful guys, followed by a major Devine, whose first name I have forgotten, but he was always "Major Devine", and he had an M.C. which he had won in Norway. He was six foot two inches, and we warned him that statistics showed that people over six feet had a high casualty rate.

Soon, word came that Major Devine, Alan and I could go for our training. We were so happy to see Chester, a pleasant little town, the cathedral having a twisted spire that had made it famous. Our training was pretty rigorous, with long distance runs, route marches, trapeze work, climbing over obstacles etc. There were a few injuries, but I can only remember having a sore knee once, which I tried to hide. Then we were considered fit to jump from the balloon. Suspended in a square basket, with a hole in the floor, we went up six hundred feet, then one after another, fell through the hole, hoping that the parachute would open. It did, 9999 times out of ten thousand. If you did 10 jumps, your odds were one in a thousand that your chute would fail.

After two balloon jumps, we were allowed to do our jumps from a Whitley bomber. This was an old plane, too slow for bombing missions by then, with the belly-turret removed, leaving a hole half-way down the fuselage, through which ten of us would jump, five in front of the hole and five behind. Major Devine, another captain, Alan and I went up, to jump in that order, followed by lesser ranks! When the



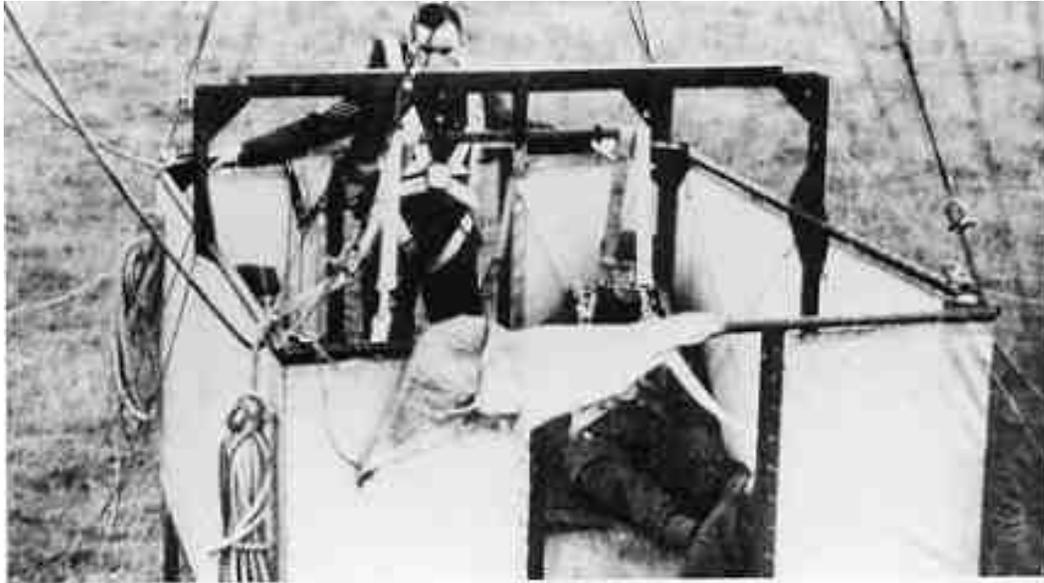
Our Barrage Balloon, with jump-basket below.

first two had jumped, Alan and I looked down through the hole, as the plane circled for another drop. As we flew near our landing zone, we saw the ambulance rushing towards the chutes on the ground. Was it our major or the captain? The two of us jumped, all the time looking down toward the

ambulance, hoping that we didn't land on top of it.

It was Major Devine and he had a fracture dislocation of the shoulder. I probably gave him a shot of morphine, because I always had syrettes in my battle-dress pocket. In any event, we went to the hospital with him, and it was confirmed that his shoulder had a fracture-dislocation. We never saw him again, but heard that he had to work in a hospital after that.

Now that we were qualified, we could wear the prized parachute on our right shoulder. The Americans soon found it looked better on the chest, and when the Canadians finally started to parachute, they did the same. Alan got his two shillings a day, and I had to wait for a while, but more of that later!



Close-up of the jump-basket, with four parachutists and instructor.

One of the more amusing little jaunts that I took, as adjutant, was to northern Ireland. The War Office wanted me to interview parachute recruits, examining them to be sure that they were really fit, as they had claimed to be. They had to report in Belfast, where I spent about a week, as I remember. They were officers and men of all services. I had been given a secret black list, of those that I should consider unsuitable, although they could have been turned down by somebody higher up. It seemed to rain every day, but there they often said it wasn't raining, it was only a soft day. That meant it wasn't pouring.

When I returned, I reached the unit at suppertime and all the officers were in the mess. I was greeted by, "All the drinks on Captain Kerr". I said how happy I would be to buy everyone a drink, but wondered if there was a special reason. They told me to read the last Order. There it was. Captain Kerr was entitled to \$2.00 per day parachutist's pay, and this was effective 28 July, 1942. Back pay of \$432.00 (L96.12.11) had been entered in my bank account.

We now began to train in earnest, with exercises and special trips. Even the R.A.F. wanted to give us some experience flying with them, and so I spent a couple of days with one of the Whitley crews. My plane was skippered by a Canadian, which was more fun. He asked me to fly as tail-gunner, and showed me how to turn the turret and fire the gun. We flew across the channel, but we didn't go far into

France, because our Whitley didn't fly very fast, and we didn't want to get into too much trouble. When we came back and landed, I found it pretty bumpy in the tail, after bouncing a few times. I got out of the tail when we had stopped, and they suddenly realized that nobody had told me I should leave the tail before the plane landed.

Needing quite a few more privates as medical assistants, our C.O. had a bright idea. There were a lot of conscientious objectors, who belonged to the N.C.C., the Non-Combatant Corps, and they were used as labourers mainly. Many were highly-educated, teachers, ministers, etc. He thought that they might be willing to parachute, provided they didn't bear arms.

In any event, the War Office agreed that I could interview a large group, and select those I wanted. This was fascinating. I met some very bright college graduates, and chose about twenty, including a teacher, who became my clerk, a theological student, who became my batman, a movie director and others, who then were allotted to my No. 3 Section, when I handed over the section I had previously trained to another medical officer. Right through the war, we stayed together, dropping in France and Greece and working our way up Italy. Our only casualty wasn't among them, but was my corporal, who was captured and spent his days as a P.O.W. in a salt mine. He was well treated, being a hard worker.

As we became better trained and better equipped, the Airborne Division began to undertake more complicated roles. We had all kinds of special equipment, including a secret signaling device, so that an agent could set up a homing signal to bring a plane to a target in order to drop supplies or parachutists. This was called a "Rebecca", after Daphne du Maurier's novel, she being the General's wife. One day, I was told that they were trying out something secret, and would drop a device from a fighter plane, giving me the map reference of an isolated spot on Salisbury Plain.



Lady Daphne du Maurier Browning, with "Mac" and "Kenzie".

I went there, and to my surprise, saw a lady and two small children walking around some trees. I noticed that her car was parked on the road nearby, so drove up behind it. Very politely, I told her that I was Captain Kerr, and we planned to have an exercise in that area; civilians were never supposed to be near an exercise in case somebody got hurt. She said, "Oh, the General thought I would be interested, and thought I should bring the children." I said, "You're Daphne du Maurier", probably gasping a little at meeting this pretty lady. She said, "Come children and meet Captain Kerr. He's one of Daddy's officers". Turning to me, she said, "You've read some of my books?" When I assured her that I had read and enjoyed them, we had quite a chat about literature, Canada, children and whatever, until the fighter zoomed overhead.

When my wife and I visited England a few years ago, we found her and enjoyed a glass of sherry and a long chat, in her lovely home, which looks like Manderley in her best-known novel "Rebecca". When I asked her if she had enjoyed watching "A Bridge Too Far", she confessed that she had not seen it, because some of her friends told her that it didn't do General Browning justice, which is quite true.

Lady Browning still kept in touch with some of her husband's veteran officer friends, and had enjoyed Michael Packe's "1 Airborne Division". I had known him quite well and also enjoyed his book, which as he states in his preface, is neither a history nor a novel, but somewhere between the two.

I think he probably quotes General Browning much better than the film, when he tells of his addressing the almost two thousand survivors of the Arnhem expedition. "You've had a bad time. You're going to be flown immediately, but before you go, I wanted to see you, and explain the bigger set up of what has happened." After describing the tragic events that had gone wrong, he ended, "You can imagine my feelings when I knew the situation that my old First Airborne Division were in, for after all, I formed you in the first place, and know many of you." Having been kept in the Mediterranean theatre, I missed Arnhem, dropping in France and Greece instead, but many of my old friends were killed or taken prisoner there.

Lady Browning told us that General Browning had died in 1965, and one of her touching articles, appreciated by other widows was written then. "Death and Widowhood". It is included in her "The Rebecca Notebook and Other Memories", which is highly recommended. What a wonderful author and a lovely lady.

Some of our exercises, planning for operations that didn't materialize were too realistic, because there were often accidents. One was meant to be a drop in Norway, I believe to blow up their heavy water plant, which the Germans hoped to use for their atomic bomb, which they fortunately never did manage to make.

We were to drop with some Norwegians, who spoke little English. A couple in my plane knew no other language. One of them was No. 1 and there was confusion about the red and green lights. This chap was standing at the door, because we now had C-47's and started to move as though to jump. The Crewmaster shouted "No!", but he thought he said "Go"! and went. He was completely lost, when he landed and of course, nobody on the ground spoke Norwegian. I forget how he eventually found us. We were also flying too low, due to some malfunction in the altimeter, or something like that. In any event, when our parachutes opened, about five seconds later, we hit the ground. Everybody was in a daze. Even worse, we dropped a crate of homing pigeons to send messages back. Their parachute didn't open, and the crate went whistling down to earth. It didn't fall like a rock, but when it hit the ground and split open, the birds just stumbled about as though they were drunk.

My own closest escape was due to an attack of severe sinusitis, my first since landing in England. With a high fever, I couldn't possibly fly, and so on our next exercise, phoned the medical officer in one of our battalions to take my place. He said he would be glad to go, since he had just returned from his honeymoon. Sitting in the mess, taking aspirins and coffee, I watched the time and expected a call from my friend, Alan Brown, as soon as the unit had landed.

When the phone rang, I answered, but instead of saying that everything was all right, he told my that my chute hadn't opened. Poor Capt. Spicer was dead. I had to phone his widow, and the local undertaker to arrange a funeral right away. Our poor little colonel was completely beside himself. Never have I complained about sinusitis since then!

I already mentioned that the C.O. knew how to get things done at the War Office, where he had a few friends that he would drink with whenever he went to London. Our unit had no regimental funds, having just been formed the day I arrived. Others had fine silver accumulated over the years, paintings from previous members and thousands of pounds in their officers' and sergeants' mess funds. He asked if he could be posted back to his previous unit, 127 Field Ambulance, persuade as many as possible to become parachutists, and then have the War Office close out 17 Para Fd. Amb.

They bought the idea, and he did convert quite a few to parachutists, the others being posted elsewhere. So we now had silver and quite a lot of money in the bank. He then had everybody, except me, transferred from 17 to 127 Para Fd. Amb, I then being responsible to close the unit.

Imagine my horror, one day, when a bright young lieutenant, Royal Army Service Corps arrived at my office, where I had one clerk, fortunately a very bright sergeant to say that he had brought me all the transport for the field ambulance. On the road was a row of ambulances, jeeps, motorcycles and a beautiful big Humber Pullman, the limousine allotted to generals and brigadiers. He apologized for the Pullman, saying that they had no Snipe available, and he realized that a staff car would be needed, and it would be changed as soon as possible.

I told him the War Office had made a mistake, that the unit wasn't being formed, but was being abolished. He looked stunned. It was a Saturday, and he said they all had to return to their base unit right away, and he would send drivers for the vehicles on Monday. I told him that I had only one driver to act as guard for all the vehicles, but would be able to drive the Pullman myself that night, a pleasure, even though it had no flag on the front! He went away laughing.



Amesbury Abbey, Home of 127 Parachute Field Ambulance.

Speaking of flags on the front of Pullmans reminds me of the misfortune which befell one of our new young officers right after joining the unit. Lieutenant Dick Bonham-Carter (now a prominent London physician) knew very little about the army, and was walking down the main street of Amesbury, when a military policeman stopped his motorcycle, saluted him, and asked his name. Poor Bonham told us that he didn't know why the policeman would want to know his name, but we did. He must have failed to salute the General's car! Sure enough, the next day, a call came to say that Lieutenant Bonham-Carter should report to General Browning.

When Bonham went to Divisional Headquarters, making sure that his Sam Browne was polished, he waited for a few minutes in the reception area, and was summoned to enter. He saluted smartly, and immediately said how sorry he was that he hadn't noted the General's flag. General Browning smiled,

and said, "Oh, we all make mistakes. How is your Aunt, Lady Violet?" Bonham was made a prisoner-of-war at Arnhem.

On the subject of Headquarters, when we eventually knew that we were to proceed to North Africa, I thought that on my next trip to London, I should stop at our Canadian Military headquarters to be sure that they knew I was leaving the country, because my mail was always delayed anyway. I met a corporal in the appropriate office, and when I told him my name, he said, "That's funny, I saw your name in the "Dead" file. Anyway, he told me that I had been posted to West Africa some time ago.

When I said that I was just going to North Africa, he looked in a posting file, and there it was. Captains Jessel, Kerr and Knox will proceed to West Africa. Suddenly, I remembered reading in the "Times" military obituary column, that a Captain A.L. Kerr had died of blackwater fever in West Africa. The War Office had pulled out the card of the wrong Capt. A.L. Kerr!!

7. Off to North Africa

Eventually, we were told that the 1 Airborne Division was to go to North Africa. Actually, the First Para Brigad had already been sent, and had been used as infantry troops quite successfully. We were to land just as the Germans were being defeated, in order to drop in Sicily and Italy. Only Capt. Kerr and a few clerks would stay behind as “Rear Details”, to close out all the accounts and hand in the transport and equipment. Then he would catch the next troop ship to Oran. This job cost me the “Africa Star”, which all the others won, since the last Germans were still fighting a rear-guard section. However they had surrendered a few days before I arrived. Too bad!

It wasn't too difficult to drive from Oran to an area, largely American where my unit had found a patch of sand. Once again, I became adjutant and was back with my section of conscientious objectors. My staff-sergeant, corporal and I were the only ones with 45's. It was good to be “home” again, but what a country. Apart from a few historic sites, such as Carthage and towns like Souse and Bizerta, there was nothing but sand. We were advised not to become friendly with the local ladies. That was before Aids, but there were lots of other diseases.

Parachute stories can be boring, even though most are true. We had to practice for our jumps in Sicily, which would be at night, so parachute training started again. The British weren't able to buy C-47's then, and tried using Albermarles, a ply-wood plane made like the Wellington, but not nearly as well-designed. The tail wagged all the time, making many of the parachutists airsick, and there were other faults. In the end, they gave them to the Russians, who used them on one-way missions to support the army when they were desperate.

My first drop was my hardest landing ever, on the only paved road for miles and miles on the desert. The next was easy, but two of us landed on the very edge of a salt lake. The pilot had lost his way in the dark.

Our last site on the desert, near the holy city of Keirouan had a few olive trees, but was otherwise nothing but sand. We each had a small tent, which we erected over a square hole about a foot deep, to give us more height. This reminds me of a silly prank that I played.

Between our tents, there was a square space of sand, and in the centre of this I made a neat little cemetery, with a cross for each of us, and a large one, of course, for the C.O. We all thought this very funny, although I don't think Lt.-Col Kohane laughed very hard. As it turned out, of course, I was quite prophetic, as my tale will tell.

It was terribly hot, and we drank huge quantities of water, sometimes adding salt, but seldom had to go to the bathroom. For amusement, we used to drive across the desert in our station wagon, with a hole in the roof, so a soldier could hold a tommy gun and shoot, apparently. We used the hole to climb back along the roof and in the back window. This was good sport, and only one of us ever fell off the roof, but I can't remember who it was. He didn't get hurt, just covered with sand.

At last we were told that we were to drop in Sicily, near a town called Augusta, where there was a bridge to capture. Containers were packed with our medical supplies and a little food. We loaded our surgical instruments and blood plasma very carefully, because the containers hit the ground quite hard. We were glad that the Americans would fly us to Sicily, in C-47's.

At last our D-Day arrived, and we drove to the airfield and found our planes. We waited in the dark, eager to get into action at last. Suddenly a staff car stopped beside our plane and an officer told us that we would have to wait. There had been a hitch somewhere. The next time he came, it was to tell us that

the operation had been canceled. We heard that an agent had sent a message to say that a German panzer division was on our landing zone.

8. The invasion of Italy

That was the end of our Sicily invasion, and we had to wait until the next job could be found, which was to make a landing at Taranto, on the heel of Italy. It was the largest naval base, used by the Italians, and the British had been told that the Italian navy would be happy to surrender, sailing to Malta, so we could make an assault landing against very weak German troops. Our general was sure that our casualties would be light, never dreaming that he himself would be killed by a sniper.

We wondered what kind of boats would take us to Italy, and were amazed when we reached Bizerts to find we were to board the Cruiser Abdiel, which was said to be the fastest ship in the Royal Navy, used for mine laying. The Welsh Parachute Battalions and the anti-tank gunners boarded first, then the field ambulance climbed aboard. Just as I brought my section to the gangplank, the captain called down, "Not another man aboard", My C.O. begged him to let me come, possibly in exchange for the padre, however he said "No!". That was it, and we had to march back along the wharf to find what other ship could take us. The next in line was an old commando troop-carrier. We marched on board, and couldn't help feeling sorry for ourselves.

Early next morning, at first light, we were put on small assault craft to go ashore. One of the sailors said, "Too bad that big ship went down. She hit a mine." As we moved toward shore, we passed bodies floating on the water, picking several up. It was only when we got to shore, that we learned that the Abdiel had split in two, taking hundreds of men down with her, and many of those on deck had drowned. My best friends, Dick Sharpe and Tinker Palmer were missing, while the colonel had a broken spine and we never saw him again. As soon as I could, I sent letters to the next-of-kin of all our officers and men who were missing.

We were stunned by the loss of so many of our unit, but we still had a job to do, and fortunately the general had been right about what little resistance we should have to meet. We spread through Taranto and the surrounding district immediately. The most amusing event the first day was when one of our boys saw a man riding a bicycle, and stopping him to take his bicycle, asked him where he was going. He said he was going to open the German commissary liquor store. Whereupon, our bright man, I think he was a corporal, went along and said he would look after the place. So we all received bottles of Chianti. Somebody tried to say that it should have been seized officially, then sold to us in the name of the Crown. What an absurd idea!

Volumes have been written about the Italian campaign, and in the minds of those of us who went from the initial landings to the final surrender, there must be a great variety of memories. It is the first of everything that tends to stay clearest in ones' mind. We captured quite a few Germans, but usually only those who were wounded, the others retreating carefully.

Our first such casualty was a German sergeant-major, whose spine was fractured by a bullet, leaving him paralyzed from the waist down. He was a fine gentleman, speaking English quite well, and anxious to let us know that although he was a loyal Deutschman, he was no Nazi.

Our next was a very young, ex-Hitler Youth, who refused an intravenous, which he badly needed. He said that he would rather die than live in a P.O.W. camp, and he might well have had his wish, since he had to be sent by boat to North Africa to the nearest hospital, since we couldn't afford to keep anybody. Since our surgeons had fortunately been able to swim, they were both saved and could operate, but we did very little surgery in our dressing station, which I should explain always resembled the American MASH, made popular by the TV story.

Gradually, we worked up the eastern coast of Italy, through a number of villages and small towns, the names of many now forgotten. Bari was one town well remembered, because it was at that fairly large harbour that the ship carrying our transport and heavy supplies was struck by German bombers. They also hit an American vessel, blowing it up and sinking it, with many crew members having to swim to shore. One man complained of his skin being irritated right away, then developed blisters. The smart old doctor who was called to look after him, a veteran of World War I, thought the lesions looked like the mustard gas cases he had treated in his war. Imagine the embarrassment of the Americans when they had to admit that the ship was carrying many cans of lewisite, their brand of mustard gas. They were bringing it to Italy, just in case the Germans decided to use theirs!

Histories are always boring to me when they go into too much detail about every stream crossed or hill climbed, and how many rounds of ammunition were fired or tanks destroyed. The Italian campaign was very slow, and Monty insisted that it should be won mile by mile. Many of us amateurs thought that airborne troops could have hit behind their coastal defenses, allowing our commando types to rush ashore followed by tanks, but the one time that this was tried, at Anzio, it was a failure, though they had to admit after that their planning was poor. In any event, we moved slowly against very strong German defenses.

Our 2nd Parachute Brigade was part of the 1st Airborne Division, but then it was decided to send the rest of the division back to England for the major attacks on the continent. Our brigade was to be kept for the Mediterranean theatre, as an independent brigade, to help the Americans land in southern France and then invade and hold Greece. Each time we were moved, it seemed that we were fighting alongside different nationalities.

First we came under the New Zealanders, then the Indians, then the Canadians, when they were having their battle of Ortona. At the time, we were sitting just South of Orsogna, which we gazed at, watching their big guns fire at us.

I was able to drive to Ortona once, in my jeep, to visit an old friend, Dr. Harold Midgley, from Galt, Ontario, though its name is now changed. They had just installed a mobile bath unit, so I was able to have my first bath for months, except for occasional showers when it was warm enough from a British fighter's little auxiliary petrol tank, which it had dropped, when empty. We had set it up, so we could fill it with water, with a make-shift shower below. Our area was terribly muddy, and our jeeps often had chains on all four wheels. It was a terrible place, but there were tragi-comedies too.

As I mentioned, the Germans had big guns in Orsogna, and regularly hit the main road near our lines. We called it suicide road. One day I was racing across that road in my jeep, when the jeep in front of me was hit. We slammed on our brakes, as their little car went up in the air and stopped. Their jeep wasn't really damaged, nor was the driver hurt but our intelligence officer's head was sliced half off, as neatly as if cut with a scalpel. He was still sitting in his seat, neat as ever, with a scarf around his neck. His driver and I just placed him in the back of the jeep, and we left fast, before the next shell might hit. What struck me and still remember so vividly, was the strong smell of perfume. He was quite a dandy and was driving to the nearest big town to meet an Italian girl.

We were a rather unruly wild group, the parachutists, interested in daredevilry rather than the traditional military values! Honours and awards struck us as rather silly, being for people thinking of their days in retirement, when they would be Colonel Blimps, with O.B.E.'s which we called "Other Buggers' Efforts". We used to say that the War Office could put their medals "you know where". None of my unit ever won an award, although I came pretty close. It was a typical Kerr venture.

One night, when our section was in a rather miserable hilly area, we had no serious casualties to

watch and things seemed very quiet, so I went for a walk, with my cook, a bright corporal, who had given us a good supper. We wanted to see if we could find an artillery unit that had moved a little too close to our location. It was a counter battery, long-range guns used to aim at enemy artillery guns as soon as they could be located. Which is why the guns had to move frequently. In any event, we thought they were too close to us, and wanted to see where they were. We had only gone half a mile or so, when there was an explosion just ahead of us. We knew it was a shell, and each moved behind a tree. Then we heard a man crying in pain. He was only a couple of hundred yards further, so we ran to him. His leg was cut and he obviously had a compound fractured femur.

I put on a shell dressing, and we asked him how far it was to the nearest shelter. It wasn't far and we carried him around an embankment and through a door. There were his pals, not realizing that he had left and was missing. So we splinted his leg and sent him straight to the nearest military hospital.

The next day, our victim's C.O. came to my section, thanked us for saving his man's life and said that he was going to make a recommendation. Of course we said that it was nothing, and heard no more about it. Somewhere in the War Office files, there may be a report about a Canadian medical officer and a cook who helped an artillery man!

Having spoken of the German defenses, Casino must be mentioned. We were sent up into the hills, just east of the castle, under the Indian Division at that time, and with a Sikh mule team to transport all our heavy supplies up the trail, which was quite mountainous. Amazing beasts, they carried loads of mortar ammunition, food etc, on flat saddle-like little platforms on their backs. Quite a few were hit by mortar shells, unfortunately, so were some of us, and the smell was terrible, since they were hard to bury.

However, when there was no shelling or machine gunning, it was very quiet, and there I heard my first cuckoo-bird. We didn't stay too long before being moved down, right in front of the castle. This was a terrible place, where we could be shelled.

Many of the British there were very fed up, and I remember one man, who after several close calls, committed suicide. The padre wanted to bury him in the temporary cemetery, where the others had been laid to rest, however the "higher-ups" said that a suicide had to be buried at a cross-roads, suitably labeled as a suicide. I never saw this, but some of the men claimed it was so. We fortunately left there when a way around Casino was discovered.

The next important stop was Rome and now life changed. However, I nearly forgot one village that we went through. We were pretty hungry, and seeing what looked like a restaurant, we stopped. Not wanting wine and forgetting to begin by saying "Non parlo Italiano", I told the waitress, "Nous avons faim". She smiled, recognizing my English accent and said, "You want a lady?" I smiled too and suggested pasta. Anyway, we had some spaghetti, so all was well and asked her to join us for a drink. Incidentally, my boys all thought that we should have an Italian motto, so we had a contest, making use of words that we had all seen repeatedly. "Non sputare par terre" won. In case you don't speak the language, that means "Don't spit on the floor!"

I can remember only one exercise that we held, while in Italy, when we flew from Rome to Naples. At one time, they had planned to drop us there, ahead of the troops who landed but that was canceled. This time, the countryside was peaceful, and it was decided that we would land in farmland not far from the city.

Our plane did very well, and we all dropped where we were meant to be. The next plane wasn't so lucky. It had been used to carry mixed cargoes including bottles of sulphuric acid, one of which had

cracked, splashing the corrosive liquid on the parachute straps. The first jumper left the plane and his strap broke, so his "chute" didn't open. Fortunately, the jump master saw this, and stopped the next man and all the others. In another plane, a more amusing incident occurred when one of the men realized that he was heading for a barn. He landed on the roof, but it was rotten, and he went right through, onto a cow's back. Apparently the animal wasn't too concerned, but might not have given as much milk as usual that day.

It was almost forgotten that we had an interesting experience, while camped near Naples. Vesuvius erupted in 1944, for the eightieth time since A.D. 79. It was like a blizzard, but instead of snow, a fine ash fell on our tents and on us. We had to wear masks at one time. Having wandered through the ruins of Pompeii and passed Herculaneum, which has since been excavated, it made us appreciate the history of this part of the world. Not being professional sightseers, we were glad to get back to Rome.

We were very fortunate in having a Catholic padre who had studied in Rome, and knew people at the Vatican. He arranged for us to visit several times, and heard that the Pope planned to hold an audience for the Free French parachutists. He asked if I could join them since I spoke French. His request was granted, so I went to the Vatican to meet Pious the Twelfth, or "Pie Douze", as we called him, naturally. It was easier to remember him by that name, since I grew up near Pie Neuf Boulevard, where my brother and I had our worst motorcycle accident!

Meeting the Pope, for anybody, even though not a Catholic, is a momentous occasion, and he tried to speak to each of us, almost two hundred, I would think. He was most interested when he saw my "Canada" badges, wondering how I had ended up in Rome. I began to wonder too! Speaking French with a perfect accent, we heard that he had served for many years in France, on his way up from Bishop to Cardinal. A very learned, scholarly individual, but rather shy and unlike the more recent popes.

9. The invasion of Southern France

Having been blessed by the Pope, and having thrown three coins in the fountain, the parachute drop in France was looked forward to without fear. There were many other odd happenings. We had a very unusual RAF liaison officer, who, of course, would not jump with us, but was interested in all the preparations. He came out to our airfield to say good-bye, etc. and parked his little Austin beside one of the planes. He stayed to talk, and was shocked when he heard a crash outside. One of the pilots wanted to move his plane to line it up better for take-off, and had no idea that anybody would park his car there. His plane was bent at the tail, so they had to tow it away and find another plane for him.

As many will remember, Patton planned to make the southern France landings “a piece of cake”, using his tanks with such vigour, and having us protect the bridges that he would speed up toward Paris. In fact, they did go so fast that the front-line tanks ran out of maps, and had to have more dropped to them, along with tanks of gas.

As we flew from Rome (August 24, 1944), in the dark, we could barely see the Mediterranean in the moonlight. As we approached our dropping zone, the pilot called out over the loudspeaker, saying that due to an electrical failure of some sort, he had lost the plane that he was supposed to be following. He was afraid we might be some distance from our target, but assured us that we would be in France.

When I jumped out, I wondered if he was right. In the moonlight, I could see the reflection of the moon below, and thought he had dropped us over the sea. Nobody had told us that when you are above a cloud, it reflects light. In any event, as soon as we dropped through the cloud, it was dark and the silence was broken when I crashed through some branches of a tree. The landing was quite soft, and there was silence again, broken only by an “Oh f___!” when one of the Scots fell. Soon we all had gathered together, nobody being hurt. As the only officer, and also the only one who spoke French, they thought that I should lead the way in case we met somebody.

We found only a path at first leading eventually to a clearing where we saw a large target, obviously a German range. There was no other sign of civilization until we came to a small road and found a house with a light on. I knocked on the door, saying “Bon soir” to the gentleman who stood there. He was happy to see us, saying that they had heard on the radio that parachutists would likely come, with Patton, but he thought they would all be Americans. He told us how to find a road to take us to where we wanted to go, about twenty-five miles walk! He didn't think there would be any Germans on the way, and luckily and he was right. Strangely enough we passed a building that we later used as a small hospital for our MASH-type dressing station.

Without going into the details of our first and most important day, our only tragedies were the loss of my corporal, who landed in a tree and was captured by the Germans. Fortunately, they didn't shoot him as he hung there, but he was a P.O.W. until the armistice, spending his time in a salt mine.

Our only other casualty was our small surgeon, Capt. MacMurray, son of the famous doctor, whose MacMurray instruments are used by orthopaedic surgeons. His parachute had become twisted with the parachute of a container that was released by mistake at the same time, and he and the container descended to earth at an alarming rate. He was badly shaken but operated well, and it was only when he was in hospital a few months later with amoebic dysentery, that they x-rayed his spine and found he had a well-healed fracture!

There were fortunately few casualties. The glider troops didn't do as well as we did, quite a few gliders striking trees or poles that the Germans had placed in the fields, in case we did use gliders. We

were amazed at the success of our operations, having no infections, because our operating rooms had never been used before, so were pretty sterile. We had blood plasma and intravenous fluids and took our own bloods from volunteers, with no RH reactions, since none of our boys had ever been transfused before, and were in good health. And we operated on no ladies. Speaking of which, we were amazed the first day or two, when they cut all the hair off the heads of the most beautiful young ladies. They had obviously been too popular with the Germans, who gave them everything they wanted, in exchange for their "love at any cost" and the Frenchmen had had enough of that!

After about a week, the tanks had moved fast and Cannes had been freed, so we were told that one of us could go there for a day, staying at the best hotel, used by the Germans until two days before. I won the lottery, so went off in my jeep, with another officer, as passenger. Just outside the town, there was a small stream, the bridge over which had been blown.

We had to use our four-wheel drive and go down a steep hill, across the stream and up the other side. Just as we got to the top, there was an explosion and we turned to see the jeep that was following us, fly up into the air, the passenger being thrown out. The driver stayed in the car, holding onto the steering wheel. We ran down to them, found an officer, a Canadian, named Capt. Brown, badly shaken but not injured. The jeep had only one wheel smashed and the spare was put on. They turned back, but we naturally went to town, had a very good time, but didn't have any bathing suits!

Strangely enough, years later, I had a call from Ottawa. The Pension Commission asked me if I had been a Captain Kerr, serving as a parachutist who dropped in France. A Mr. Brown, previously an officer in the Canadian Army was applying for a pension, due to continuing backaches, which he blamed on an injury. However as he had been with an airborne force under the British, they had no record of the injury. He had remembered my name. I was able to give them an account of the whole thing, so hope that they gave him the pension, but I never did find out.

It was fun going back to Cannes with my wife and four children, although we didn't afford the luxury of staying in that hotel, having a trailer behind our station wagon. That was in the sixties, when I was a colonel, the senior medical officer in Germany, a slight change for the better.

After we packed up all our equipment, we caught an American ship back to Italy, sleeping on the deck. We had an interesting passage sailing past Capri to Naples, which we were very glad to leave for Rome. Back there, our accommodation was again deluxe, being at the Lido di Roma, a suburb on the Mediterranean, in a modern apartment building. It was only a short run into the city, where we again visited cathedrals, went to the opera, enjoyed going to the Canadian Officer's Club, called the Chateau Laurier, and generally feeling far from the battlefield. Of course, we had to train quite a lot, keeping very fit and preparing for our next operation.

10. The liberation of Greece

While Churchill considered it most important to regain the Balkans, Roosevelt thought that no American troops should go there, saving them all for the main European theatre. As a result, Churchill said that the British would attack the Germans in Greece alone.



Ready for our jump in Greece. My clerk, Private James Stone B.A
His parachute behind and his pack in front

After studying all the information provided by their secret service in the Balkans, which was really efficient, they planned to send a small force, consisting of only one parachute brigade, ours, and one armoured brigade from Italy. This was considered enough to defeat the Germans, since they had secretly reduced their troops, sending most to the eastern front.

Two Top Secret operation orders were prepared. One was genuine, and was sent to us. The other was a fake, and was given to a double agent who then put it into the hands of the German secret service. Their order showed us as being parachuted on the Athens airport, with the armoured brigade landing at Piraeus, and two infantry divisions being brought from Italy, where they were actually fighting at that time. This was to frighten the Germans, and make them hurry northward out of Athens.

However, since they were sure that we were coming, the Germans, according to our agents, had planned to blow up the Marathon dam, which holds the water in a lake, acting as the reservoir for Athen's water supply. Once fires were started in that city, the town would burn with no water. So the British dropped enough gold to pay off the people who were supposed to blow up the dam.

We all looked forward to the Greek operation. None of us spoke that language, except our padre, who had taken Greek at college. Several of us had taken Latin, and it wasn't much use in Italy. It turned

out that modern Greek isn't the same as the ancient variety either! I'm afraid that we had a terrific party the night before, since this was to be a daylight drop, and there were quite a few hangovers.



Our Hamilcar glider, carrying a light bulldozer.

Our flight over on October 14th was uneventful, and we enjoyed looking down on the Corinth Canal, before fastening up our parachute straps. As we approached Megara, the little town on whose airfield we were to drop, and from which the German parachutists had flown to attack Crete, the pilot told us



Our Dakotas flying to Greece, near the Corinth Canal.

that it was pretty windy, and we might have rough landings. How right he was! Many suffered fractured arms and legs, concussions and so on. I had a sore neck for quite a while but couldn't x-ray it to see if anything was cracked. There were no Germans to be seen, and we were soon met by a group of Greek citizens, who welcomed us.

My first meeting was with a young man, who introduced himself as "Aristotle". I immediately remembered my course in Logic and Scientific Reasoning...Aristotle is a man. All men are mortal. Therefore Aristotle is mortal...This was known as a perfect figure, with three absolutes ...A-A-A. We had to remember this by thinking of BARbArA, who had a perfect figure!



Our Jump at Megara, taken by an Anonymous Photographer

In any event, Aristotle told me a lot. He said that the Germans were now concentrated around Athens, and were planning to move out, only fighting a rearguard action to keep us from catching up too fast, blowing up the bridges and cutting the power lines and telephone wires. He thought that the communists would try to take over, so the Russians would win politically rather than militarily. How right he was!

As we moved toward Athens, the population came out by the hundreds of thousands, waving and cheering. Our General Scobie moved his headquarters into the Grande Bretagne Hotel and we had a small post on the Acropolis to prove that we had won. Their currency was almost worthless, nothing less than a 500 drachmai note being of any value. We had

new British Greek money, which soon became accepted as official currency.

We had few casualties, other than those hurt jumping initially. Some of the troops moved up the eastern coast of Greece, while my section went with an assault group who were to take Salonika. We had to pass through minefields, and this was fun, in a way, since nobody got hurt, and they blew up the mines as they were located in front of us.

We landed at the harbour without much shooting, and found the town in a pitiful state. The Germans had eliminated the entire Jewish population, which had been large and had destroyed their cemetery, bulldozing it after taking the best stones for use in walls. The rather nice house that I was allotted for my section had been

some sort of army headquarters, and they had poured cement, about a foot thick on the upper floor, to



A rough landing at Megara, near Athens.

make it safe against bombs below. As a result, the doors upstairs had all been shortened, cut off a foot above the floor, and the ceiling seemed lower.



One of many knocked out. An Engineer Officer.

A tragi-comedy was the decision that we should collect all our "escape money" American one dollar bills (they were the only ones accepted as being equivalent to silver) given to us before leaving Rome. My section being very democratic, thought we should buy a musical instrument that all would enjoy, several playing the guitar. Accordingly we afforded one and it had no sooner been purchased when it was stolen. Immediately a search went on for the culprit, the friendly Greeks coming to our assistance. In no time, a young chap was found with the guitar. He was promptly shot. Whenever I heard the soft strains of music, I couldn't help but feel a little sorry.

After Salonika, our little group went through Drama then Kavalla, close to the Turkish border and not far from Bulgaria. We were in communist territory and just tolerated because my group consisted only of engineers to repair the bridges and my medicals, who helped look after the civilians. There was practically no medical care other than midwives and nurses. The Red Cross sent medical supplies but when they arrived, there was no doctor to tell people what to do with them. There were some real nightmares.



Our wild welcome to Athens.

In one village, we heard that the communists were holding a regular Greek Army officer, considered a Royalist, prisoner, and were killing him slowly by kicking him. We were told that we mustn't interfere or we would just disappear. Since the communists were in control, our presence was just barely tolerated.

We soon moved back to Athens, where it was decided that all our troops were needed to control the communists there, or they would seize power.

At this time, Churchill heard how dangerous the situation was, and brave man that he had always been, decided that he should fly to

Athens, to meet with the communist general, who had previously received help from the British, and had fought the Germans through the underground. His flight is described in "Clementine" the biography of his wife, which is beautifully written. In any event, the communist general was not prepared to meet Churchill unless his safety could be guaranteed, and I was asked to send an

ambulance for him.

I kicked myself afterwards, that I hadn't gone as co-driver or something, in the hope that I might just see the dignitaries, at least. Their meeting must have had a good effect on the E.A.M., the communist party and its army, the E.L.A.S., since things quietened down afterwards.



Wild enthusiasm for the communists. E.A.M. and E.L.A.S..

It is hard to imagine what the fighting was like in Athens, since the communists usually wore no uniform, or else they wore one of ours, taken from a soldier, or officer they had killed. One of these was a fellow medical officer and friend, Capt. Phillip Irwin, whose body we never recovered.

When we returned to Athens, we first went to Rouf Barracks the night of December 5th a fairly secure block of buildings, easy to defend. We had an operating room and a few rooms for patients. There was often

gunfire outside, and I remember one night, while I was giving an anaesthetic for a patient with a bullet in his brain, there was a shot and a bullet came through the window and hit the wall above my head.

I was most interested to read “On Wings of Healing”, the very complete story of the Airborne Medical Services, by Lt-Col. Howard N. Cole, OBE, TD, FRHistS. Describing our experiences while we were operating in the barracks, he quite accurately related “The next day, Captain A.L. Kerr, acting as CO of the field Ambulance decided to try and make contact with the RMOs with the battalions in the Piraeus area in order to make arrangements for the evacuation of casualties back to the ADS in Rouf Barracks. It was a difficult task in a city under the tense atmosphere of civil war. He passed through several road blocks guarded by heavily-armed ELAS “troops” but was unable to get through to the Battalions”. What he didn't report was that they nearly made me prisoner, but by pointing to my “Canada” badges and the Red Cross, they remembered the Red Cross Hospital that Canada had given Athens, and let me go free. (Incidentally, I had my '45 well hidden. I was sitting on it.)



A formal portrait of our Enemy. An E.L.A.S. soldier and local beauty.

He again quite vividly described the subsequent trip, “Later in the day, whilst crossing Omonias Square, he was fired on by ELAS”. Incidentally, the jeep suffered only a few bullet holes, none life-

threatening and all missed me.



A five thousand drachma note, worth about five cents.

We moved from the barracks to Athens University, on December 14th, which was in a safe area and had more room for our operating room and wards. We were also able to acquire the services of two excellent nurses, "Sally" or Miss Salonopoulos and "Pappy" or Miss Papandreou. Both spoke English, Sally with a Canadian accent, having trained briefly in Toronto and Pappy with a New York accent, having trained at the Columbia Presbyterian Hospital.

We did all kinds of major surgery, abdominal, thoracic, many compound fractures and a couple of brains. Our results were excellent with no infections, except for the compound fractures, since our operating room was so free from infection. We did many transfusions, taking blood from our own volunteers.

At Christmas, our nurses brought decorations from their families and friends, and in spite of the heavy workload, we all had a good time. Our most important visitor was Field-Marshal Alexander who was glad to make rounds and see all our patients. Meeting him years later, as our Governor-General he remembered that occasion vividly. We even had some unusual helpers, a dozen Russian soldiers, who had arrived mysteriously, and we used as gravediggers, since they had to be given "safe jobs". As soon as peace was agreed upon with the Communists, they disappeared, presumably back to Russia by some route.



In Peace or War, the Evzones always look like this.



Our Landing at Salonika, with no Germans to be seen.

Returning to Greece with my wife about ten years ago, I asked about our casualties, but the embassy was able to tell me nothing, and it was a long way out to the little British cemetery, so we didn't see it.



At last. Rafts made to carry civilians and jeeps etc.



Kavalla, near the Turkish border. Men Carrying tobacco.



Many Bridges destroyed by the Germans.



Two Engineer Officers, proud of their Row-Boat.

11. Back to Italy

After Greece it was decided that we should go back to Rome again, until another airborne operation could be planned. They thought that we should drop North of the Po, holding the bridge so that our tanks could then move across quickly. We were just starting to get ready for this when Capt. Kerr was no longer a player.

After an evening in Rome, at the "Chateau Laurier", as I remember, I awoke in the middle of the night with a severe pain over my kidney, radiating down to my private parts. This I immediately diagnosed as renal colic and immediately gave myself a shot of morphine, from a syrette which was always kept in my pocket. It was easy to understand why people like morphine. What a relief. I fell asleep but when I awoke the next morning, the pain was back. The surgeon said I should go right to hospital, and I agreed but the hospital that he wanted to send me to wasn't admitting that day, so I had to go to the second choice, another British Military Hospital.

When doctors are admitted to a hospital, you would think that they would be treated royally. Not so! I shouldn't have told the admitting officer that I had given myself a shot of morphine, because that was the first thing that was written down. I was a marked man, right away. However, the medical officer who examined me seemed sympathetic and ordered all the tests that they could do.

The first was an intravenous pyelogram, and the technician injected the corrosive substance, not into my vein, but into my soft tissue. She apologized and said she would try the other arm. That one worked. The test was negative. My temperature went higher and higher, as did my pulse rate, white count and other things. They didn't know what was wrong, but after a couple of days, the surgical Lt-Col. examined me carefully.

He thought there was dullness over my chest that the medical Lt.-Col. had missed. The x-ray now confirmed this, so he stuck in a needle and drew out a syringe full of clear fluid. I asked him if he was going to see if it burned with a clear blue flame, and he said that it wasn't something to joke about! Anyway, he thought that I had a sympathetic pleurisy, due to a subdiaphragmatic abscess. I was glad that something was sympathetic, but he didn't think that was funny either. Some doctors lack a sense of humour.

He intended to operate the next day, unless my temperature and white count went down. They did!!! Slowly I began to improve, being able to get out of bed, then walk around the room, and finally down the hall. After about two weeks, I could walk outside, by which time I knew an attractive nurse, and since V-E Day had been declared, decided to take her to dinner.

There was a very nice British Senior Officers' Club not far from the hospital so we walked there. When we went in and I said that we would like dinner for two, the nice lady at the desk said, "But you are not a senior officer." However, since it was V-E Day, she said, "Oh, I guess it will be all right". So we had a beautiful dinner, with generals and brigadiers at the surrounding tables.

The medical consultant decided, by then, that I was fit to go to a convalescent depot for a few weeks, and sent me to Sorrento. What a beautiful place! We had the complete use of the Hotel Tramontana on the edge of a cliff looking across to the Isle of Capri.

My wife and I enjoyed staying there with our children in 1964 while we were posted to Germany for three years and were fortunate enough to meet the eighty-plus year old owner, who lived in a suite below the hotel. He had heard me play the piano, and asked us to visit his luxurious accommodation so I could play on his Steinway. He had treasures, including original manuscripts from Byron and other

English poets who had visited Italy during the Romantic Revival.

After about a week at Sorrento, I was fit enough to accept an invitation to sail on a 35-footer to Capri. When we arrived nearby, just at the mouth of the Blue Grotto, two of us decided we could swim in, along with the little rowboats that were taking tourists to see this amazing sight. We dived in and had the fun of swimming underwater a little to see the blue sunlight coming up from an aperture well below sea level.

When there with my family, we had to pay for the privilege of riding in one of their little boats, and it wasn't nearly as dramatic.

I had been careful not to tell my family that I was in hospital, and it was only when I left that I confessed this, although they would have thought that I was there to give anaesthetics or use my stethoscope. All things must come to an end, however, not before we had our most important visitor, Lady Mountbatten, who threw a sherry party for us. A charming lady, she had been very active in the St. John Ambulance Society, which was partly responsible for running our convalescent home. It was a pleasure to meet this lovely lady, whose husband was so famous and like so many others, she wondered how a Canadian happened to be a British parachutist.

With V-E Day, everything had to be rearranged, and many troops were going back to England. There would still be a need for airborne troops against the Japanese, but we were all to get a month's leave, and I was allowed to go back to Canada for my leave, when I enjoyed seeing my parents and sister and brother again. Ethel had taken her B.Sc. studies along the lines that I had followed, but continued taking higher work in atomic physics and eventually became the one woman working on the atomic bomb in Canada. She moved to Chalk River and married another atomic scientist.

It seemed strange to be returning to Europe, when all the Canadians were coming home, though some were supposed to form a Japanese force. This time, travel was on a luxury liner, the New Amsterdam, quite a contrast from the S.S. Bayano.

Back in England, we worked hard to get ready for our new mission. Suddenly, the atomic bomb was dropped and the war was over. However, the War Office had new ideas for us, and although the 1st Airborne Division was being reduced, the 6th Airborne Division was re-formed to go to Palestine.

So, Capt. Kerr again set sail, to keep the peace between the Arabs and the Jews and also to be ready to fly to any other country around Russia where there might be trouble.

12. Final days with the British

This time, we found our ship, the “Ascania” in Liverpool, which was in the midst of a strike, so loading was done by us. We had a very rough passage, around the Bay of Biscay, few of us going for meals, and then the dishes would fly off the table and crash on the floor. We landed at Haifa, after an interesting passage past Gibraltar, Algiers and the coastline I had flown over before.

We had to take an armoured train, with a small self-propelled vehicle running in front of the train to detonate any bomb that the Jewish terrorists might have placed on the track. Our trip was uneventful, though there were men throwing rocks and bottles.

The American Press kept saying that the British, with all their guns were only up against crowds without weapons, and our people were quite anti-American, because they claimed the press was controlled by wealthy Jews. Our general was on the “Black List” and had to be carefully escorted when in public. We had an armoured car, with a Red Cross on it, at our field ambulance, with barbed wire around our officers' mess, to keep others out, not to keep us in!



The Wailing Wall,
with a religious Hebrew.

Life in Palestine was as different as night and day from previous service. A British officer whom I met on first landing said, “You don't have to be crazy to be here, but it helps!”

Gaza was a small town on the coast, part Jewish and part Arab, and we tried to make friends with all. Our officers' mess funds were in the Tel Aviv Bank, while our other funds were in the Arab bank, and the two were so different, the first being like any Canadian institution, while the latter was pure Middle East.

I looked after the funds, and when I entered the Arab bank, the teller immediately invited me to come behind the counter. The ordinary citizenry lined up outside! One day, an assistant teller, dressed in their clumsy garb, with a large seat, in case the male wearer might give birth to the next messiah, dropped a bag of coins. They flew under the desks and chairs, and I wondered if they found them all.

During our first weeks, we saw all the holy sights, the Wailing Wall, the Dead Sea and the Jordan.

We had to train, of course, but keeping fit was important, and we swam twice a day. There was often quite an undertow, but we were pretty good swimmers. Unfortunately, about a week after leaving my unit to move

to an airlanding unit as second-in-command, one of my friends was drowned after being caught in the undertow.

It was sad to leave my parachute unit, however after spending the entire war as a captain, I was promoted to “Major Kerr”, which somehow didn't sound as good, however that was to be changed again.

My new unit was in Nathanya, a town half-way between Tel Aviv and Haifa, famous for its diamond cutters and for the nearby port, Caesaria. The Mediterranean at that point had changed its level by about twenty feet, and the harbour of the old Caesaria could be seen by diving down in the brilliantly clear water.

The Commanding Officer was quite a character, an alcoholic who had been an Italian P.O.W. for two years and hated the Italians, some of whom were our P.O.W.'s there, as much as he hated the Jews. Being an anti-semitic in Palestine was not the best thing! The 2 i/c, whose place I was to take, was a New Zealander, who had just been told he could go home and so we had to organize a farewell party for him, when he let me know all about the commanding officer.

After only a couple of weeks, it was obvious that my C.O. was hopeless, so I went to the Senior Medical Officer in Palestine whom I had known before, and told him that something had to be done. He told me to just declare him mentally unbalanced, send him to a psychiatrist, and have him admitted to a hospital. The nearest psychiatrist was in Cairo, so there he went and we never saw him again. I have often wondered if he was still there. Anyway, the result was that Ashton was promoted to Lt-Col, and made C.O. Colonel Kerr sounded much better!!



Another wall, with two irreligious officers.

We had a good time. The sights of Palestine could be seen, Haifa being a fine town, not unlike Montreal, with its Mount Carmel. I arranged an educational trip for the boys to all the holy places, and I was able to take an educational trip myself to Beirut, then a lovely city, though now devastated.

We stayed at the Normandy Hotel, quite deluxe. People spoke French mostly, though there was a lot of arabic. We drove up to the Cedars of Lebanon Ski Club where we were welcomed by the G.O.C. British troops, an incredible ride up thousands of feet, with the temperature falling until we were driving in snow. The view can't be imagined, looking straight down to the Mediterranean and its beaches. We put on skis just to be able to say that we had skied, and drove down again, with a night in town, going to the Chat Botte (Puss in Boots) Night Club.

Back on duty in Palestine again, training is not remembered as much as the parties that we had. I would send ambulances to the British hospitals to bring some nurses, and trucks to Haifa and Tel Aviv for young ladies. The only disaster resulting from our parties was on one occasion when my sergeant-major must have had too much to drink and passed out briefly, to find that his favourite nurse had just left in an ambulance to return to her hospital. He jumped on a motorcycle, to catch up but forgot that there

was a T-junction down the road. He ran into a barbed-wire fence, and we had to send another ambulance, which we fortunately had standing by, to pick him up. When he came back, he looked fine, but his face was like a jig-saw puzzle.

As mentioned, we had to keep fit and so there were all kinds of sports. One day, the officers were playing rugger against the sergeants and a staff-sergeant fractured his clavicle. Collar-bone fractures

are easy to treat, so we just put a figure-of-eight strap on and didn't send him to hospital. If we had, since he had only an acting rank, he would have been reduced to sergeant. He didn't break his clavicle, officially.

I remember filling out a form sent to all medical officers by the War Office. They wanted to know what branch of medicine we were interested in, just in case...

So, I wrote down "civilian". In any event, not long after, a message came saying "GHQ 02E MEF have authorized the release of acting Lt-Col. A. Kerr, who states he is a Canadian subject on loan to the British Army".(!!!) I was to return to London.

My instructions were to report to the transit camp in Alexandria. Since the occasional train was still bombed, and it would be a miserable trip, I thought it better just to take one of my small trucks for the journey. Two other officers wanted to go to Cairo, so we planned the trip, taking a driver who would have a tommy-gun and plenty of cans of spare gas.

Another farewell party, and we left Nathanya at first light, the first week of February, 1946. The drive across the desert was pretty deadly, with the odd camel and nothing but dry sand for miles and miles. Finally the Suez Canal, where we had to wait for some barges to be pulled through. Once on the other side, we stopped at a nice little restaurant, with a garden and grass all around. What a change. We had been warned that there might be trouble in Cairo and were surprised that we saw nobody in uniform.



Last "Stop" before Egypt

We found the Officers' Club after asking our way, where the manager was surprised to see us, since the city was "out of bounds to British troops". He said we shouldn't have driven through Cairo, and said we could spend the night sleeping on couches or phone the military police, which I did. The provost marshal, or whoever I spoke to, said we should have dinner, then drive straight to the transit camp in Cairo, without stopping. After an enjoyable meal, we departed and found our quarters for the night.

The next morning, we visited the pyramids and a camel station, then headed for Alexandria, everything being peaceful in Cairo by now. However, when we reached that beautiful city, we were stopped at the entrance by a police corporal, who told us that we proceeded at our own risk, since they were having an anti-British day. However, as long as our driver waved his tommy-gun at them, we should have no trouble. But he mustn't shoot anybody, or we'd be at war.

Alexandria was most interesting, much more civilized than Cairo, and with a fine harbour. Incidentally, since it was the largest naval base for the British, there were some

fine stories, the best being of the huge battleship that was sunk there by a midget Italian submarine. The two submariners came to the surface after fastening their bomb on the bottom and were made prisoners. The ship sank only about ten or so feet before settling on the bottom, so when the Germans flew over, they thought it was still active, and although it couldn't move, its presence was still a threat to the Germans. One of the submariners went to the U.K. as a prisoner, worked as a bomb disposal expert for them and was awarded a medal for some dangerous jobs that he did. They managed to find the admiral of the battleship he had sunk, to present the award!! This is a good city for shopping and I bought a beautiful prayer rug, which now hangs in our living room. I sprinkled sand over it, before rolling it up, so it would go through Customs.



Waiting at the Suez Canal.

The trip back to Toulon, France, on the “Empire Mace” a funny little boat, was quite rough, and we passed between Sicily and Italy, with fond memories.

Then a miserable train ride to Dieppe, shades of the unfortunate Canadian raid! There wasn't time to view the historic battle ground, before crossing to England. No time for more sight-seeing and my return at last to Canada, after four years and nine months. So that is the end of my war story, but a post-script might be of interest.

Postscript

Although the war was over for most people, there are some for whom it will never be over. These are the veterans who have been permanently disabled. When I looked for a residency, I couldn't get one at the Montreal General Hospital, but they needed a resident in internal medicine at the Queen Mary Veterans Hospital, so I jumped at it.

I was told that since the Montreal Military Hospital was to be kept active for a time, it was combined with the veterans' hospital, so I could remain in the army, being paid more as a Lt.-Col., provided I also acted as Commanding Officer, a job taking only an hour or so a day. Two jobs are always better than one!

We had some very good patients, and one of the most problematic was an ex-major, who had tuberculous meningitis, always fatal until then. They had just discovered streptomycin, and we had a very small supply. It was thought that by inserting it into the cerebrospinal fluid, the disease might be controlled. However, spinal punctures didn't work, so he had to have a cisternal puncture. To do this, you put a needle in at the first cervical vertebra, and come within a fraction of an inch of the brain, so you must be careful.

I knew how to do cisternal punctures quite easily, and each time a nurse, all gowned and with mask, had to assist me. The same nurse helped me three times, and after the third technique, she came out while I was still there, taking off her mask, so I was able to recognize her. My last joke in this regard is that she had to get my permission, as her commanding officer, to marry me. I've kept her letter. That was forty years ago. Time flies!

Gaetane now finds it more satisfying to be a semi-professional painter in oils, rather than a professional nurse. Ashton still practises medicine. "Practice makes perfect" they say, however for me perfection is still distant.

This postscript is in danger of getting too heavy, however, if you insist.

My daughter, Madeleine, was born in Montreal. After getting her master's degree in nursing she is teaching at the Northern Illinois University in Chicago. Pierre, born in Quebec, is running computers for our Treasury Board in Ottawa. Richard, born in Whitehorse, is a diesel electrician with the Canadian Pacific Railway in Montreal, and Andre, born in Oakville, is a student at Concordia University, hoping to graduate soon in research. Gaëtane is naturally proud of her children but glad that there was one born at only four of the eight army postings we enjoyed. Some things are hard to explain!



My Favourite Portrait
Lieutenant Nursing-sister Gaëtane Labonté

Post-Postscript

It was only in 1976 that I considered sending a questionnaire to all the members of our “Q” List, to find out what they were doing, and to learn a little of where they had served after we all dispersed on completion of our brief training at Leeds, England in September, 1941. We were the first Can-loan officers.

Accordingly, a letter to the Directorate of History at the National Defence Headquarters produced a simple nominal roll, seen in Annex A. Further enquiry revealed several deaths, but they could not be sure of some doctors who had gone to the U.S.A. The Canadian Medical Directory provided leads which I followed. So, at last, I received replies from all who could be located, although several apologized for delays.

To the reader, who may not know any of us, the first and probably most interesting letter was received from Dr. I. Shragovitch... “Shrag” to all of us. Unfortunately, he died in 1982, but I have just contacted his widow, now Mrs. Syd Segall, who was glad to have me quote his entire letter. He wrote:

“Dear Ashton,

I was intrigued by your letter seeking information of the “Q” List. It brought back lots of memories. I met with a couple of the officers in my battalion a couple of years ago in London and they reminded me of a number of episodes which my sub-conscious seems to have buried.

I suppose my curriculum for the “Q” List should be in two parts — a summary of my “military career” and the other of my “professional career” as they had a minimal amount in common.

After basic training in Leeds, I was assigned to the 2nd Battalion, The Buffs in the 44th Division and after training in the South East England, was transferred to the 8th Army in Africa. After the battle of ElAlemain we were transferred to the Persia and Iraq Force, waiting for the Germans to come around the Black Sea. A year later, I moved on via Egypt to Italy with the 4th British Division which stayed in the field until after the aborted attack in northern Italy and subsequently we were transferred to Greece to mop up.

Post War, I resumed my training at the Royal Victoria Hospital and at the Montreal Children’s. I became a pediatric surgeon at the Children’s in 1949 and subsequently joined the staff at the Jewish General Hospital, doing private practice in both. In 1964, I went full time as Surgeon in Chief at the Jewish General Hospital, which position I have just relinquished, and am continuing in private practice at the J.G.H. retaining the rank of Associate Professor at McGill. Married Lillian Rabinovitch, 1946, with three sons and one grandson to show for it, as well as 2 myocardial infarctions and an AC Bypass in 1972. Hobbies, keeping/it, golf, swimming and collecting objets d’arts.

I guess that about wraps it up. I will be pleased to assist you in your effort to put this all together.

With kindest regards, Shrag"

To editorialize, sufficient to say that it hurts to realize that people like "Shrag" are no longer enjoying things here. However, his spirit lives on in his sons and grandchildren, whose name has now followed his example, being shortened to "Schrage".

As the reader will realize, all of us belonging to the "Q" List are in our seventies, so quite a few have retired. Many of the letters received in 1976 are out-of-date and I had to check by telephone with the correspondents. However, a brief review of the histories will be of interest in telling of the great variety of experiences enjoyed (?) by our group.

Parker Chesney left Leeds along with Bill Caven to join the 132 Field Ambulance in Deal, Kent, waiting for the German invasion of England, which fortunately never came. General Montgomery was the Corps Commander. They both decided that it was too cold there and volunteered for service in India. After a course in tropical medicine, they sailed via the Cape of Good Hope and landed, after ten weeks at sea, in Bombay. Bill went to Peshawar and Parker to Calcutta for service in a British Military Hospital, then to a field ambulance. Finally, his division was transformed to the long-range penetration units, the Chindits under General Orde Wingate, a very tough commander. Fighting behind the Japanese lines, theirs was a remarkable story. Parker finally served with a British General Hospital before returning to England in September, 1945. When he reported to Canadian Headquarters, as in my case, they had lost track of him. Happily married to a life-long sweetheart, Peggy Williams, they still enjoy living in Montreal, with four children in various places.

To follow Bill Caven's wanderings, he left Burma to command a hospital in Bangkok, Thailand. Following discharge he took one of the last courses under Dr. Edward Gallic at the Toronto General Hospital, specializing in surgery at the Ottawa Civic Hospital and becoming the Chief Surgeon at the Riverside Hospital. He married Ruth Goodman and they had five children. Unfortunately, he died in April, 1988.

Dr. Eric Chapman also became a "desert rat", going on the same boat as Bob Aikens, ending up in Cairo, then to Tobruk. After that, Bob went to a 25-pounder unit. Apparently, Harold Chestnut arrived a little later with the Grenadier Guards, going on with distinction to Italy. I understand he has been a surgeon in White Rock, B.C. Eric told me of the hard times that his unit had while with an anti-tank regiment in the retreat to El Alemain. Only those with war experience have any idea what it is like to have guns blazing at you. They lost most of their regiment. He then had pneumonia, but recovered to get back into action for Sicily and then to Salerno, Italy, for that invasion. He ended up serving with a British hospital. After the war, he spent some time in Vancouver, until the rain there got him down and he moved back to the dry climate of Esterhazy, Saskatchewan with his wife, Pat, and family. He too, passed away, in 1982.

Bill Hurlburt told me of his wanderings after we parted, beginning with service in England attached to a Field Ambulance, then going to the Middle East with a general hospital in Gaza about December, 1942. To think I was there four years later, under different circumstances. After that, he went to Sicily with a field hospital, then returned to England and back to Europe after "D" Day with a field dressing station. He ended the war as a D.A.D.M.S. embarkation unit. Returning to Canada, he trained at Toronto General and the Banting Institute, then to England. Back to Canada, he settled in Vancouver, to become the Head of the Department of Medicine at St. Paul's Hospital, and Professor at the University of British Columbia. With his wife, Betty, they have five children, covering the fields of medicine, marine biology, sailing around the world and flying with Air Canada.

Word from Dr. S. Parlee was my first in thirty-five years. I had not realized that another Canadian had been sent to West Africa. Jessel, Kerr and Knox were supposed to go, but they sent an English Captain A.L. Kerr by mistake, the poor chap who died of black-water fever. In any event, Captain Parlee went to a motor ambulance convoy with the West African Frontier Force, and then as commanding officer for the 28th casualty clearing station.

He was at Tamale, Northern Gold Coast and then Ilaro in Nigeria. He developed malaria and amoebic dysentery, for which that area was famous, giving it the title, “the ass-hole of the empire” and was subsequently sent back to England. Then to Normandy with 8 Corps on D + 8, to land with the first casualty clearing station. He then transferred to a medium artillery regiment and he stayed with them until the end of the war. After marrying a Dutch girl who unfortunately died in the early seventies, he settled in Edmonton, getting his F.R.C.O.G. He became Professor of Obstetrics and Gynecology at the University of Alberta. With one boy and three girls, he re-married.

A surprising letter from Corpus Christi, telling of our Barney Solomon’s wanderings, should win a prize, and deserves a quote.

“Although my memory is somewhat faded by the 35 years that have elapsed, I can still remember the excitement, the apprehension, the route marches, our stay in Ottawa, our voyage across the Atlantic, our course in England and the final dispersal of this small group of men throughout the various theatres of

He was posted to the Far East, while Singapore fell and he was diverted to India. He was sent to a British General Hospital, was trained as a surgeon, and considered a surgical specialist. However, he was fascinated by Orde Wingate’s expedition to Burma and volunteered to join his group as a medical officer. He went behind the Jap lines in the jungle where he developed malaria and amoebic dysentery and finally landed back in Assam, which is now Bangladesh.

Like others of us, he had a hard time getting back after the war was over. The British Army said that they had no jurisdiction over a Canadian officer. In desperation, he sent a wire from a civilian post-office to Canadian Military Headquarters, and they sent him a ticket on a private airline back to England. Barney spent twenty years in private practice in Fort Frances, Ontario, then got a license to practice in Texas. His wife, Alice, is a descendant of Robert Fulton, the famous American inventor, and is an optometrist. They have three daughters, one of whom came back to Canada.

When a letter came from Alan Traynor, it was a shock to know that one of our number had actually been seriously wounded. Most of us had close calls and thought we were just lucky. He spent most of his time with field ambulances in the Middle East and Italy. He took part in the ill-fated Anzio attack, where he was quite seriously wounded and sent back to England, after spending about six weeks with 15 Canadian General Hospital in Casserta. After a convalescence in England, he was returned to Canada after “D” Day and proceeded with his training in internal medicine, finishing in 1948. He then went to Vancouver with his wife, Helen, two sons and a daughter. Fortunately, he knew a little about Morton Hall, who had gone to Teheran, then trained as a surgeon. He died about 1972. Alan Traynor and Bill Hurlburt saw a lot of each other in Vancouver.

A very brief note from Jack Hildas told of his passage to India, like so many others, where he served with my old 6 Field Ambulance, then the 14th Army in Burma, ending the war in Singapore commanding a field ambulance in the 5th Indian Division. He studied internal medicine in London and in 1949 accepted an appointment at the University of Manitoba, becoming a professor of Medicine. He was in charge of the northern medical unit and was most interested in their art. Two of his three

children are doctors. His wife, Marianne, has been a widow since 1983.

The message from Sandy Souter was in his own hand-writing, but he was on holiday on Grand Cayman Island in the Caribbean at the time, so had no typewriter handy. My interpretation of his account was that he began with a field ambulance in Scotland, and in the summer of 1942, volunteered for the Middle East, ended up with a field ambulance and a field regiment at Alemain, then with a general hospital in Tripoli, Libya. After that, to Italy, looking after the Yugoslav partisans. Then he volunteered for India and the Far East, ending up in Kamptu and Naypur before getting a job on a hospital ship until May, 1946, going to Singapore, Hong Kong, Java, Burma, etc. He returned to Halifax for discharge, worked in Newfoundland and got his L.M.C.C. and married a nurse, Maureen Green, a South African whom he had met in Italy. They had two daughters. Unfortunately, Maureen died in 1967 and Sandy remarried, another nurse, Marlene McCabe and they are still enjoying Kirkland Lake.

Another brief epistle from Jack Roddick told of his going overseas with the 14th British Field Hospital, originally intended for Beirut, but changed to Java. However since it was over-run by the Japs, they went to India, like so many others of our boys. He stayed there until repatriated, however didn't give any details about the medical work he did. He admitted to marrying a Q.A. (for those who don't know military jargon, a Q.A. is a nurse, belonging to the Queen Alexandria's Military Nursing Service, equivalent to our term, "nursing sister"). They returned to Canada and he went into general practice, then limited his activities to anaesthesia until retiring. They live in Lyndhurst and have three children.

That leaves quite a few of our "Q" List unaccounted for, however it is interesting to know a little about those who are still active and some of us will almost certainly make a point of meeting at opportune times. One advantage of retirement is said to be that you can take the time to travel and see distant places and faces that you didn't have time for before.

Appendix "A" RCAMC Officers on loan to British

Lieut.	Aiken,	R.L.	Lieut.	Knox	H.C.
Lieut.	Aiello	E.	Lieut.	Lmdsay	P.B.
Lieut.	Bernstein	B.	Lieut.	Malen	D.S.
Capt.	Brooks	G.	Lieut.	Rennie	G.S.
Lieut.	Cohen	B.H.	Lieut.	Roddick	J.E.
Lieut.	Caven	W.H.	Lieut.	Rubin	M.
Lieut.	Chapman	E.F.	Capt.	Solomon	B.W.
Lieut.	Chesney	LP.	Lieut.	Slemon	H.V.
Lieut.	Chestnut	H.W.	Lieut.	Swartz	MJ.
Lieut.	Cole	AB.	Lieut.	Traynor	J.A.
Lieut.	Graham	A.F.	Lieut.	Parlee	S.S.
Capt.	Pine	R.	Lieut.	Reeves	RL.
Lieut.	Fell	W.A.	Lieut.	Nutik	H.L.
Lieut.	Goodman	B.	Lieut.	Wilson	Jc
Lieut.	Hall	ME.	Lieut.	Smolkin	S.
Lieut.	Hamilton	E.F.B.	Lieut.	Shragovitch	I.
Lieut.	Hildes	J.A.	Lieut.	Squire	J.B.
Lieut.	Hollway	R.W.	Lieut.	Macintosh	A.S.
Lieut.	Hurlburt	F.W.B.	Capt.	Matas	J.I.
Lieut.	Hoover	MP.	Capt.	Soutar	A.W.
Lieut.	Jessel	S.J.	Capt.	Wilson	J.I.
Lieut.	Kerr	AL.			

SOURCE: "Q" LIST OFFICERS
 Rec/34/Q LIST/1 dated 22 December, 41 Directorate of History, National
 Defence Headquarters Ottawa, Ontario K1A 0K2 22 July, 1976

OBITUARY



Col, Ashton Larmonth Kerr, M.D.

Canloan Officer (1941)

January 2, 1916 - April 8, 2004

Ashton, resident of St. Donat, Quebec, formerly of Westmount, Quebec died peacefully in hospital on April 8, 2004 at the age of eighty-eight after suffering a heart attack. He is survived by his wife Gaëtane (Marc-Aurele/Labonté) Kerr of Granby, daughter Madeleine (Dave Shanteau) of Minnesota, son Pierre (Anne Tufts), of Ottawa, grandchildren, Heather and Robert; sons Richard and André of Montreal, sister, Ethel (John Steljes) of Deep River, and several nieces and nephews. He was predeceased by a brother, Robert (Nellie Shaw) Kerr of Lachine. Ashton graduated in Medicine from McGill in 1941 and enlisted, volunteering for immediate service on loan to the British with the 101st Airborne Division as a parachutist and doctor. He served two years in Palestine after the war. When he returned to Montreal he worked at the Queen Mary Veterans Hospital, and was the director at the Reddy Memorial Hospital. He was the Director of Medicine at the Royal Victoria Hospital and was a Medical Director of Canadian Pacific. A memorial service will be held in Montreal at a future date. Many thanks to the staff and doctors at the Ste Agathe Hospital. Condolences may be sent to Gaëtane Kerr, Halte aux Petits Oiseaux, 631 rue Allard, St. Donat, Quebec J0T 2C0

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