

Canadian Military History

Volume 15 | Issue 2

Article 6

4-16-2012

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Recommended Citation

MacDonald, Harold and MacDonald, M.A. (2006) "The Long Wait (Part I): A Personal Account of Infantry Training in Britain, June 1942–June 1943," *Canadian Military History*: Vol. 15: Iss. 2, Article 6.
Available at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/cmh/vol15/iss2/6>

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The Long Wait (Part I)

A Personal Account of Infantry Training in Britain

June 1942 – June 1943

**Captain Harold MacDonald
with M.A. MacDonald**

In the early summer of 1942, Harold (Hal) MacDonald, a young infantry officer from Saint John, New Brunswick, was posted overseas to join the North Shore (New Brunswick) Regiment, then stationed in Great Britain. The North Shores were part of a growing Canadian military presence in Britain, preparing for the day when the Allies would return to the continent to help defeat the armies of Adolf Hitler's Third Reich. Canadian troops had begun to arrive in England in 1939, and indeed, after the fall of France in the late spring of 1940, formed an important part of Britain's defence forces at a time when it and the Commonwealth stood alone against the combined might of Germany and Italy. By the time that MacDonald arrived, the number of Canadian troops had swelled to some 130,000, for the most part concentrated in the south of England, where they underwent rigorous training exercises and highly realistic simulated battles designed to prepare them to meet the enemy.

On 5 June 1942, before leaving Canada, Hal married his wife Marjorie by special license in their hometown of Saint John, New Brunswick. A wedding had been planned in the Officers' Mess in Fredericton, but the draft list came through two weeks before the mid-June marriage date. MacDonald's overseas draft

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embarked from Halifax for Britain on 15 June. During this voyage Hal began a long series of letters to Marjorie (463 in all), which continued throughout two active years of training schemes in Britain, followed by service as an infantry officer, company commander, and then adjutant with the North Shore Regiment through the hard-fought and bloody battles in northwest Europe.

Having been separated from his new bride so soon after their marriage MacDonald was determined to be in touch as much as possible and in a steady stream of letters (amounting to more three a week) set out to tell as much as he could, given wartime censorship, about his life as soldier and his reactions to it. Clearly, he saw these letters as a chance to analyze and reflect upon his military experience and at the same time use them as a means of letting off steam and expressing pent up stress and emotion. For her part, Marjorie, a newspaper reporter in Saint John and a future historian, wanted to hear as much as she could about her husband's challenging new life. Certainly the censor intervened occasionally, particularly with regards to the naming of specific localities, but a remarkable amount of candid commentary and specific information was let through. MacDonald was not a professional writer, but he was

well-read, was observant and perceptive, and keen to communicate. These qualities make his letters fascinating historical documents, recounting as they do the gripping and often disturbing experiences of this young Canadian officer caught up in the bloody and tumultuous events of one of history's largest wars and one of Canada's greatest military undertakings.

MacDonald's letters describing the fight from Normandy through to Germany and also his months spent in Holland after the war's end have already been published in previous issues of Canadian Military History. This installment, constituting what movie producer George Lucas would call a 'prequel,' recounts MacDonald's experiences of life and training in Great Britain before the invasion of Europe took place. Those who have read the already published chapters will recognize the names of many who subsequently would be killed or maimed in action.

Cameron Pulsifer, Canadian War Museum

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For the voyage to Britain, MacDonald and eight of his mates shared a small cabin on their troopship. His very first letter to Marjorie, written on 16 June 1942, describes a rowdy scene of late night drinking. "They're a very noisy bunch of blokes in this 2 x 4 cabin. Another night of noisy carousing. Enough is enough." Boat drills, card games, and walks on deck passed the hours, and "the bar is well patronized. The Nursing Sisters have a great time on board. Some of the boys follow them as though they were the last women on earth. They never have to pay for a drink, but the Jr. Officers buy it all."

Very good meals. In fact some of the boys have two helpings – down and up. We are not given butter at dinner & the coffee is very strong & bitter & entirely different from ours. The stewards are Chinese. Understand a great number of them had families and relatives in Singapore. Poor devils....It's a peculiar feeling to look out and see nothing but water. I've always been used to things in small quantities – a stream or lake, etc. Sort of a lost feeling.

The censor cut a section out of his next letter, which he began on 22 June. This probably referred to the convoy, as the first readable

words are: "The crews on the boats of any convoy deserve a Hell of a lot of credit. They take a job on their shoulders every time they cross." His cabin mates were still acting up. "Last night we all had to stay in our rooms from 12 on. You see, the night before we had been very noisy & our room was checked twice." The next day they sighted land, Scotland, and had their "first greeting from seagulls. Graceful creatures. Then Spitfires." They had "an interesting lecture from a naval chaplain who had seen a bit of action in Malta. These Englishmen are so bloody nonchalant. To them near death is just 'a spot of excitement.'"

After disembarkation (he does not say where) they entrained for England. Hal described the journey in a letter of 28 June: "Our trip through Scotland was beautiful and the people really gave us a welcome. You see in the larger towns & cities the train tracks practically pass thru the backyards & the natives were waving towels, dish cloths and anything at hand. Made us feel good." Their destination was a Holding Unit in southern England where, he continued:

The people and customs here are even more different than I anticipated. We are in a typical English village. Every cottage has a name – a path leading up to it – a hedge – a few rose plants and a number of kids. And there are lanes all through the camp. It is all very strange...Our quarters are fair. I am rooming with Jock Grieves & Windy McNeill. Went to Brockville and Aldershot with them. Am entitled to 7 days leave but as the 3 of us have 10 or 12 pounds between us we will have to forget it. Scotland is the place for a leave. Everything is so much neater and more scenic. Some of the old Scottish castles we passed were marvellous. A pound here goes as fast as \$2.00 at home – the storekeepers think Can Off's have money and soak us for everything. Have a b[it] of a cold. The night on the train was very cold & we all got touched. Slept just 2 hrs, too cold to sleep.

He concluded by asking Marjorie to send such familiar comforts from home as "a bottle of Wildroot Hair Tonic & a tin of Gentleman's Talc."

After seven days at the Holding Unit, MacDonald went on to join the North Shore Regiment. Soon after arrival, he was appointed second in command of Headquarters Company's Carrier Platoon, writing on 5 July:

The Carrier Platoon has approx. 65 men (double the men of an ordinary Rifle Platoon), a dozen or more Bren carriers, 1 truck, a dozen motor

cycles and 4 Jeeps. So you can see it's quite a setup. The Off. in charge is a Capt. & the 2 i/c sort of assists him. That is, we are out most of the time.... The Company Commander is a good head and the Off. i/c the Carrier Platoon is a prince – Dick Palmer of Fred'ton. Have finally caught up with Bill [Hayward] & Noel [Humphries]. Noel and I played 5 sets of tennis today. There's a big house up the road & they offered their facilities to the Officers. A lovely court, big lawn, large rambling house, etc. Yes, they even allow us to take baths there. There's no hot water here in camp. Just cold (b-r-r-r) showers.

He now requested some Dentyne and a pocket comb.

They had just finished “a 2-day scheme – a Brigade affair. Our Carrier was hit with a rifle bullet but nobody in it was touched. Got an 8 mile march on for tomorrow.” For the next 10 days, he had motorcycle training, at first on a track, then cross-country, with several narrow escapes from disaster in shell holes.

On 12 July, he wrote “sitting on top of the Downs just outside a bivouac, hungry and cold, depressed – Hell! A beautiful view across the Channel and the small towns.” He has spent the day “training, including how to deal with an unexploded bomb. We're subsisting on bread & tea with occasional piece of beef or beans. We fill ourselves with bread and corn syrup. Breakfast: Porridge, 2 slices of bacon, tea, bread. Dinner: Stew, boiled spuds, bread, tea. Supper: Beans, bread, tea. Variety tomorrow: Rice instead of stew.” He added: “Of course, I can't say where I am or anything, so you can't know as much as I would like you to know. Had a couple of tough days cross country on the bike & in Carriers – hill climbing etc. Had a spill & badly shaken up. Right now it is drizzling, and a drizzle on the Downs is most uncomfortable. Hope to get to Scotland next month on leave, but we go on another scheme as soon as we finish up these 10 days of our own.” His concluding request was now for a Dr. West toothbrush and cigarettes. “The English cigs are awful,” he noted. He also requested chocolate, Gillette blades, shaving cream, and talc.

A long letter, written in stages between 25 July and 2 August, dealt with events in their latest scheme.

Left camp this morn & started on a 6-day scheme. Heavy mist – wet, most miserable.



Harold S. (Hal) MacDonald photographed at Rottingdean, East Sussex in 1943.

During the first 4 days I had 7 hrs. sleep, made up of 1 1/2 & 2 hrs at a stretch. Then things eased up & I got about 3 hrs a day... On the scheme I had to take over the [Carrier] Platoon during 3 or 4 engagements with the Limeys... One night we were attacked at 2:30 a.m. & I had a job of taking 12 Carriers through a Bn of Limeys and scatter them. Got through and had to go back again. Some fun – a regular battle. A Thunder Flash lit right beside me & got stuck. I couldn't get hold of it to toss it out & then the thing exploded. Couldn't see for awhile. Had a lot of fun out on patrols. Getting captured & capturing. Thank God I'm with the Carriers and don't have to hoof it. It was a tough march. You should see my mouth. During one of our mad rushes a Bren Gun and HSM contacted. Result, a gash on my lips & tooth through one.

Funniest experience. Three Carriers on Patrol & we ran up against a Limey Major who was frantically pointing his revolver at us & shouting “Stop. You're dead!” We hollered “Go to hell” and kept on rolling. Landed among a whole Bde of them & all their supporting troops. After a heated argument with the umpire we got off free.

Then the Limeys asked if there were any Fr. Canadians amongst us. They're scared of them. We get along very well with the Chaudieres – more so than with the Queen's Own.

He continued the next day: "Best part of the scheme was the Rum ration. After a night of activity to guzzle a mess tin of hot Rum, then breakfast & a few hrs sleep. Nothin could be finer."

In early August the regiment moved into billets at Shoreham-by-the-Sea.¹ With the seven other Headquarters Company officers, Macdonald was quartered in a house with hot running water, a happy change from the tents and huts they had just left. They were also given access to "The Old Barn Club, a select group of civilians and officers in town." Then he was sent on a 4-day camouflage course entailing a journey on the English train system, which he found baffling because of its separate compartments and many changes at obscure small stations. His long letter of 13 August, describing all this concluded: "No wonder so many Englishmen are odd and overconfident, because if they can get from one place to another by train without getting lost – they have something to be cocky about."

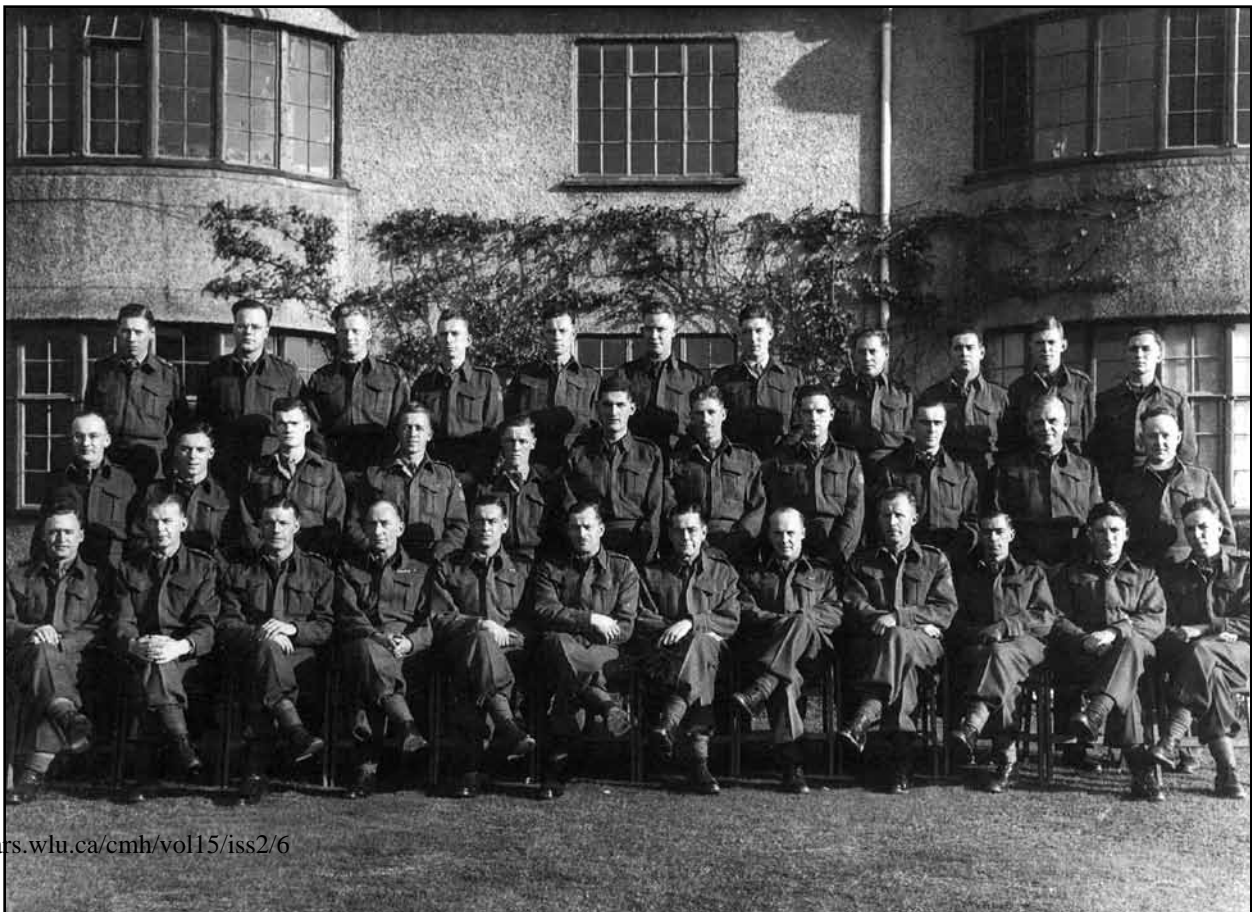
Soon after his return to Shoreham, Hal was "rudely awakened by the house shaking" – his first air raid. "Planes roaring overhead, the roar and chatter of ack-acks, etc. Pretty fireworks & rather nerve-wracking. Gotta hand it to these Limeys. Most of the members of the [Old Barn] Club have at some time or another been bombed out. Can't give you their stories right now, but they can take it." He continued on 16 August: "I was thinking last night, no doubt our folks could stand up to it too. They would get more excited at first but then they would calm down & be very determined. That's the Canadian way." He concluded with a cryptic remark, expanded in later letters: "Remind me to discuss with you the morals of the English. They aren't what they should be. Far from it."

A letter of 26 August carried the first allusion to the Dieppe raid. "At last the Canadians have done something..Well you've read of it in the papers. We were all tensed, hoping our outfit would go, but no. We had to stand by and watch

Officers of the North Shore (New Brunswick) Regiment, Shoreham, England, 1942.

Front row (l. to r.): Capt. Gammon, John Gough, Al MacMillan, Maj. MacNaughton, Maj. Stothart (2 i/c), Col. Buell, Capt. Bob Forbes, Maj. Bill Sullivan, Capt (Uncle) Ern Anderson, Lt J.A.L. Robichaud, Doc Duffy, Capt Frank Maher (Swing). Middle row: Edgar Thibodeau (Aux. Services), Lt Paul Cogger, Lt. Bill Harvey, Capt. Bill Pell, Lt. Ralph Sansom, Lt. Bob Ross, a/Capt. Walt Lawson, Lt. Bill Teed, Lt. Louis Roy, Doc Murray Logan (dental), Padre Hickey. Back row: Capt (pay) MacLetridge, Capt. Dick Palmer, Lt. Lloyd Watling, Lt. Ned Russell, Lt. Syd Heckbert, Lt. Bill Corbett, Lt. Barnaby, HSM [the author - Hal MacDonald] Cy Mersereau, Don Moar (Ears) Willie Parker

[note: names given are as recorded on the back of the photo.]





These two photographs show the North Shores' Carrier Platoon during training on the South Downs, Summer 1942.

the other outfits go on board. It was quite a show.” In a few days they would know the actual results of that disastrous raid and witness some of its consequences, although he could say little about it in censored letters. In the meantime, training continued: “Ken Ferris, the Q.M., and I are going out towing targets for Artillery one of these nights. Should be interesting! We did get part of the retaliatory bombing from Dieppe. No damage. They dropped them in the channel. We did get some very good first hand reports though.”

Later in the month the weather was hot while training on the Downs continued. He wrote on 29 August: “working all day, into camp at 5.30, then out again at midnight. What a nite. Very warm and clear – with the moon, a perfect night on the Downs. Had a couple hours sleep after sunrise and then got in about 10.30 or 11. Went to bed & got up about 4.30.” The next night there was “a bit of a party. Drinks at a pub, met Dick Palmer, Walter Lawson & Robbie [Robichaud] then up to the mess & sat around ‘till 12, singing & sipping.

Today we all look & feel very tough.” The next day he was to leave on a course and spend three weeks living in tents.

That night, as he reported in a letter written on 2 September:

Walt Lawson asked me to go to Brighton with him. Picked up three others about 9 p.m. & met 2 down there. Went to a night club. Just a bunch of Offs there, a small dance floor & a bunch of Pond St. [Saint John's redlight district] looking dames. Moved on to one of the Dance Halls. They certainly go in for dancing in a big way. A good band, 2 shillings admittance, very crowded – mostly Can. soldiers. You know, I was a bit disgusted. So many of our lads were too drunk.

He continued on 5 September:

Have had one tough week. We never walk, we DOUBLE. Spent Monday running and took our innoculation of fire. It seems tough when you're watching others go through it, but when it comes your turn you are so intent on getting to the bottom of the hill as soon as possible (on

your stomach all the way) that you are oblivious to the explosions in, over & under you and the rifle firing coming at you & the Bren guns from the sides a ft. off the ground. Those instructors are very good shots & thank God they don't see double as one lad said. The first 50 feet you're afraid they'll hit you & the next 50 ft. you're praying that they will hit you.

Then we had a little cross country jog. Only 5 miles up & down hills. We got behind & had to speed up. In that speed up we covered 2000 yards in 12 minutes & 'these yere' boots get heavy. Then we took the assault course. It was tough. Damn tough. I lit on my rear in three rolls of barbed wire. You should see me – I look like a piece of pinpoint. It's the toughest course you can take in England. Now we have branched off into Carrier work which is more interesting & also hard on the shins, rolling into & clambering out of Carriers. My legs are covered with bruises. Lordy, was I ever stiff the first two days.

[For] some unknown reason the next day's work was called off. So methinks I'll walk down & look over Bessborough's estate. [Bessborough was Governor-General of Canada from 1931 to 1935.] Saw the old boy on the road yesterday.

Guess I told you we are in tents down here. 'Tis most uncomfortable. We walk all day till 6, then have 4 or 5 night lectures a week, so we don't have much time to study notes. Therefore I'm sticking around this weekend & will do some reading & writing tomorrow. Guess I'll have to stop now 'cause I can't see what I'm writing.

On 15 September, MacDonald was on another course, this time with live ammunition.

Got a crack on my leg. The MO says it's a piece of steel, a ricochet and as it's a small hole he won't remove it. This morning was a bit of a nightmare. We went through the Daddy of all obstacle courses. Walking on logs 20 feet in air. Hand over hand on ropes over barbed wire & swamps. Twenty-five minutes of it. Four times we had to jump 15 feet into mud – all kinds of it. Wet, sticky, greasy & just mud. Then waded through a swamp. Well, on one part where we slide down a knotted rope, my muddy hands slipped on the muddy rope & knocked my middle finger out of joint. It was right back into my palm. I thought it was broken & didn't fool with it. Finished the Course & then the MO snapped it back into place. Right now it's swollen & stiff. Hence the scratchier-than-usual writing. Otherwise darling I'm in the best of health.

Funny thing though: In one jump I sat on my rear in the mud. There I was. My rifle over my head, my feet in mud to the knees & sitting in mud to my waist. One of my men started laughing so I laughed, though at first I was swearing.

Several days later, on 20 September, he was pleased to get a good report on his part in the earlier Carrier scheme. The instructor said he had "showed initiative and nerve, improved 75% and got more out of the course than anybody else." His leg wound had been probed, a few particles of metal removed and was now very sore.

He again took up the subject of English morals on 21 September:

whether they had been affected by the war, or if they had always been loose. I've been told they were always that way. Of course it's been exaggerated by wartime conditions. Was talking about it with Alec McLaurin. He lived here for 3 years before the war and he said it was quite noticeable then. Not quite as bad as husbands exchanging wives etc. but, after all, husbands are away once in a while. An odd country. Very broad-minded.

Hal went on leave soon after this, and, on 29 September, wrote from "The Brown House, Warwick-on-Eden, Cumberland," which was four miles from Carlisle, and the home of the parents of an army friend in Canada. After leaving camp, Hal had sent flowers to Marjorie from Portsmouth, and then once more confronted the intricacies of the English train system, as he made his way up to Carlisle by way of London. This twenty-one page letter contained an on-going narrative of the leave, "an Oasis in the Wilderness of what is actually another existence. Life did stop when we left Canada & our army life seems in some ways so unreal. That's why there's so much drinking among Can Off's. Thanks to the Ferris family I seem to have been given a new lease on life." The family consisted of Captain Ferris, "a retired army off; a former A.D.C. [aide-de-camp] to the late King, and the A.R.P [Air Raid Precaution] supervisor for the county, Mrs. Ferris, their daughter in law Mary, a hospital nurse, a brother-in-law [and] Mrs. Ferris's mother."

The next few days included a tour of Carlisle: "less war-torn than most other places, the City was originally walled and parts are still well preserved." Hal went for long walks through the country lanes with members of the family, shopped for Christmas presents in Carlisle and had wonderful meals. "I think I've been eating steadily since I arrived. Yes, I even had an egg for breakfast." One evening was "spent at home



Canadian soldiers undergo training in England.

Left: Two soldiers climb over a log wall obstacle at the Canadian Assault School, Bordon, Hants, England, 4 November 1941.

Below: Soldiers negotiate a rope line high over a group of senior officers during a training exercise at No.5 (Battle) Wing, Canadian Training School, Rowlands Castle, England, 8 June 1943.



LAC PA 177349

LAC PA 132776

in front of the fire, chatting. I never realized how much I missed that home-like atmosphere. They made me feel at home immediately. I've had a lovely few days...This is like a second home & they've urged me to come back & spend all my next leave here. Mrs. Ferris will take me to the Lake District – one of the beauty spots of England.”

Back again with the regiment in early October, his letters now fretted about a dearth of mail, which was affecting everyone. He reminisced about home, then turned to giving a description of the officers in his mess and of their quarters. The mess had acquired “a very temperamental wireless, tho' we got Jack Benny's Overseas Broadcast this noon.” One frequently-heard song “really gets me down. It's 'I'm Dreaming of a White Christmas'. It really does hit me.” After 27 days without mail, Hal's letter reports the arrival, first of a parcel, and a few days later of letters. He had just finished a route march of 20 miles, which left him stiff and limping. Then he “was up at 5.15 and off on a scheme with the Carriers.”

On 20 October, he asked Marjorie if she would,

like an account of an average day? Started off at 7.30 a.m. Everybody trying to shave at the same time. The batman wakes you & while you're getting dressed he sits on the foot of the bed & gets your boots polished & cap buttons. Down to breakfast – a mixed affair. First three down get the papers & the ones following do a lot of neck-craning. Usually a poor breakfast. Down to Coy HQ & check on any new developments. Up to Pl. HQ & check on the clerk. Give any necessary new instructions. Check Sgts on training, arrange any special lectures or Parades. Check on parts, what Carriers are running, etc. Right now have an MC course on and I'm trying to get that organized every day.

If things aren't too rushed we manage to get downtown for 5 minutes for a cup of tea or coffee. Everyday something crops up and we are on the go. Do a heck of a lot of walking back and forth. However tonight we ran from Coy up to the Mess as it was pouring.

A further instalment of the same letter continued:

Last night attended a Concert Party and it was darn good. A little Scot was formerly an understudy to Harry Lauder & there was a Dutch girl in the Show. Boy, was she cute – married,

though and her husband was there. After the Show Cy Mersereau, Ken Forbes and HSM went to Bn mess to help entertain the entertainers. Had a very pleasant 2 hrs chatting with Jock (the Scot). Wanna hear a couple of their jokes? There's the story of the poppa bird who came home & found a strange egg in the nest. The momma bird, when accused, sd. “Don't be cross, Darling, I only did it for a Lark.” Of course you've heard of the honeymoon salad, 'Lettuce alone and no dressing'. One girl had on what the MC called her Grenade Dress. Pull a pin & every man for himself.

Mail from home was again in short supply. When, by 26 October there was still none, Hal was “really worried. Last letter I had from you was dated Sept. 10. If I don't receive any mail tomorrow will cable you Wednesday morn.” The cigarettes mailed to him were also not getting through. “Have despaired of ever receiving them and have not enough nerve to continue borrowing 'smokes' as I now have borrowed about 3000 – so I'll stick to a pipe and Limey tobacco.”

Some days one seems to be on top & others you're way down & wish to God things would break...Anyone who says letters from home aren't important to Morale is nuts...Shall hope I get one tomorrow. Adrian Michaud will be back in Canada soon. He has my parcel and I do hope you receive it OK and like it.

The next day he at last got a letter, dated 25 September, and also a parcel.

[A]fter that everything was rosy. All your parcels are swell – fruit juice, meat spread, coffee, chocolate, candy, gum. Have enough blades for about 2 months. ... 'Twas funny tonight – two of the boys with dates with WAAF officers in Brighton, no money, no liquor, no cigarettes. By 7 o'clock they had borrowed everything. You see, this month everybody's broke.

On 1 November he reported that he had an assessment from “my Battle Course. Got an 'excellent.' Intelligent, keen, good leader. Enthusiasm, good application of principles. Quick decisions, sized up situations & acted with initiative. Physical condition good. Not quite enough fighting spirit. Very keen & with a bit more experience will make a very good Carrier officer. Col.'s personal remark 'Well done.' So everything came last week.” On 4 November, he had “a cold, head stuffed, eyes blinky & heavy & to top it off, have had 5 hrs. sleep in last 48 hrs & it is now 11 p.m. & I am off again at 2 a.m. &

if I try to doze for 2 hrs I'll only oversleep. Out all day Monday umpiring."

On 9 November he reported:

Got back from London last night. We went down on Friday, Bob Ross, Frank Maher and I. Rooms reserved for us in the Regent Palace Hotel. Then we located our lecture house – Chatham House, former residence of Wm. Pitt, Earl of Derby & Gladstone – 3 former Premiers. Did some shopping & had lunch. We had the pleasure of hearing some of the finest authorities in England on International Affairs. Sir Frederick Whyte, Gov't advisor Br. Int. Affairs, Sir John Russel, expert on agriculture & loaned to Russia for 6 years. Maj. Morris, Japanese representative of 'The Times', Brig Firebrace, chief liaison Off. to Russian Mission. Two others, one Chungking correspondent for 'The Times' & another Russian correspondent. It was really a pleasure to listen to them. This Sir Frederick Whyte was the smoothest guy. We had lectures all Friday p.m. till 6. Then from 9 a.m. Sat. till 6 p.m. – tea at 3.30. The lectures on Sunday till 12.30.

They went to movies in the evenings. Their hotel was "right off Pic. Circus & what a mob there Sat. night. We had to walk in the middle of the street & even then dodge around people & avoid taxicabs. I wouldn't spend a leave in London. Possibly a day or two in the middle of the week to do some sightseeing. Too crowded & rushed & standing in a queue for hrs. for a meal." He did manage to see London Bridge & St. Paul's, "but what I did get a kick out of was to watch the crowds, especially in the Hotel. What a mixture of races & breeds – Indian, Jewish, American, Canadian, English, New Zealanders, Australians, Poles, French, Czechs." He had even run into some friends from New Brunswick.

The week described in a letter of 22-23 November, was "a bit hectic." It included "umpiring on a Bn scheme, mortars & Brens banging away" and "a visit to the Chaudieres. Had supper with them – a darn good crowd... I saw an English Bn scared to death of the Chauds when we were on the Scheme." By 25-27 November, he had received a bonanza of letters & two parcels from home and a total of 1300 cigarettes from family and friends. Early in December he found that his bothersome finger, dislocated during the battle school obstacle course, had actually been "chipped & is now healed & didn't knit properly. Result is a sort of funny kink in it."

As a result of "some problems in the outfit, minor breaches of discipline Dick & I decided to clamp down. Talked to the Sgts & other N.C.O.s. Really laid down the law & cleared up some small misunderstandings... Dick & I have a pretty good outfit now. The boys are working hard & playing hard & have to be jumped on quite often." In a letter of 4 December, Hal mentioned the passing of an important milestone: "It's only been in the last two weeks that I feel I have been accepted as a member of the unit instead of being treated as just another reinforcement." The colonel and the 2 i/c were now calling him "Mac." The C.O. (Lieutenant-Colonel D.B. Buell) "is a prince. A hard worker, a disciplinarian but just, and friendly & understanding."

By 11 December, they had moved to a new location: "a big barn of a place, mud & filth. Had to wear gum boots all the time. Rooms were drafty & cold. (It was a big country mansion – in fact the owner still lived there.) At night we would go down to the kitchen for a cup of tea and it would sound just like a field of crickets – the chirping of the cockroaches." On their last night there, packed and ready to leave, "Dick, Merle & I felt sorta carefree. We chased cockroaches for awhile, sang together, then fabricated this story of the 'murder room.' We got upstairs in the empty bare rooms & corridors & started haunting each other. Just a bunch of kids."

A change of location brought considerable improvement. This was "an old 15th century hotel. Kept fairly modern & one of the best in England." The personal diary of the future commander of the North Shores, Major J.E. Anderson, reveals that they had in fact moved from Shoreham to Rottingdean in East Sussex. Hal's own large room had dormer windows and an electric heater.

Three days ago in a big, old mansion, dirty & muddy, 70 rooms & only 2 bathrooms & practically a route march each morning in order to get a place to shave. Today a modern heated room, sink in room & bath 20 feet away.

I'm duty officer tonight & had to check report that a mine had washed ashore. It had. No, didn't play around with it, just sorta said 'Hello – what beautiful horns you have', then came back & confirmed report... This is a very picturesque town. [Note: In his personal Diary, Major Anderson, records on 8 December that the North Shores moved from Shoreham,

where they had been stationed for four months, to Boscombe. Then, after a few days they went to Rottingdean, where the officers were quartered in the Tudor Close Hotel. Anderson describes this as 'a wonderful old place and very comfortable.'^{2]}

MacDonald provided further details on 13 December:

an old farmhouse built in 1490, then converted to a Hotel about 15 years ago, wings added & constructed as exact replicas of the old building. Carving on the ceiling beams, fireplaces, etc. A lovely spot.

One of the main points of discussion amongst the civilians is the Beveridge Plan. If the ordinary people are promised partial security it would go to make a happier nation. That is the main struggle of the human race – security...I would like to see a similar plan adopted by Canada. It more'n likely will be.

The Report by British educator and social planner Sir William Beveridge, issued on 1 December 1942, called for the creation of cradle-to-grave social security in Britain which, in many ways set the agenda for the creation of the post-war Welfare State. Its provisions became a symbol of the hope and aspirations of British service personnel for an improved post-war society. Hal was correct in his prediction that it would have an impact on Canada, for it directly inspired the formation in this country of a committee led by economist Leonard Marsh that recommended



a program of sweeping post-war reforms, very much in the spirit of those outlined in the Beveridge Report. Many of its recommendations would become a part of Mackenzie King's 1945 election platform.³

Hal had been notified he was to go on a course starting 26 December. "That is not good. God knows it's bad enough being away from you for New Years, but to be away from the unit & my friends will be worse." Then, a few days later they were bombed:

the closest they've been to us – one casualty, the roof came in on us. Our Air Force got the bastard. So help me, I was scared, getting 3 & never knowing when the others were coming, if any. God, what a feeling of helplessness. Admiration for the English has gone up 50%. Just to see them cleaning up & blocking off streets, taking care of slight wounds. They're marvellous, from the oldest to the youngest.

A number of funny incidents. One boy standing by the window in our billets reading & the mag taken out of his hands by a piece. My windows were all blown out completely. Dick's batman was pressing his trousers when it went off. He ran out into the hall – result, shape of iron clear through his trousers. Dick went into his room & there in the middle of his bed was a ½' diametre rock, came right through the sloping roof. Lucky Dick wasn't in bed. Merle & I have met some nice people in the village & been asked out a couple of times. Lovely homes.

By 10 January, he had returned from the course to the unit, tired out. "The past two weeks were not physically tiring but very mentally tiring. Couldn't sleep at nights." Instead, he spent them thinking, "and thinking is bad....Am enclosing snapshot of John Baptiste Berubé, my batman & a hell of a good guy." His mood had improved by 14 January. "Spent all morning on the Downs with the Jeeps, doing a job," and three days later things were even better. "Have had a very busy week and glad of it 'cause then I don't have time to get depressed....One of my boys was hurt last week, however it's not very serious. Bad leg fracture & fractured knee. Went in to see him Saturday morning." Friends in the room were having a varied discussion. "Started on cliff-scaling & climbing, on to circus acts and now discussing age and its slowing-down effects. Well, we must talk about something & it's not the war."

In a letter to his wife, MacDonald enclosed this snapshot of his batman, John Baptiste Berubé.



A 3-inch mortar crew training in England, February 1943.

He went on to remark that he had “cut down on drinking. Haven’t had a Scotch for a month & only the odd beer.”

After more training on the Downs, by 24 January 1943 he was away again on a 3-inch mortar course. He found the constant cold rain trying, the course boring, and that it was hard to concentrate on the studying. By 7 February, exams were over and he and his chums left on leave for the Waldorf Hotel in London. Two of them picked up girls and there was some heavy drinking in the bar. “Respectable-looking people looked patronizingly amused at our, by this time quite drunken party & I don’t like people laughing at me.” So he left for a walk outside the hotel by starlight. He and roommate Joe Steinhoff “had breakfast in bed, shaved & washed & all met in the lounge at 1.30. Got back to the course in time for supper. I hear the Bn had been changed a bit.

Don’t know just where I’ll fit in yet. I’ll be going back next Saturday.”

Tributes to an old friend, a sergeant pilot in the air force who had been shot down and posted as missing, prompted wider reflections on the meaning of his service.

Was thinking of Harry Taylor today. What that guy went through just for the honor of serving his country in the Service he knew he’d been of best value in. He was turned down so often & sometimes unkindly & ungratefully that he would have been justified in chucking all. But no, he kept at it. That guy had nerve & guts & was a swell friend to have & it’s tough on all of us if he’s a “goner.” However, it’s a chance we’re all taking. If we go, well it’s part of our job & we are leaving something behind us, a struggle & victory for peace & justice & Democracy. If we live, we have just that much more to be thankful for. Nothing we do is done in vain. We are hurt,

lonely, sometimes discouraged & depressed but, Gosh, can we sit on the sidelines, reap the benefits of others' struggles & be justified in calling ourselves men? No, we can't, and any family that has not given somebody, or done their part, or been hurt in the effort, will not be justified in reaping the benefits – An odd letter, isn't it?

During March Hal's unit participated in a major training exercise, "Spartan." This large-scale scheme, designed to test the army's ability to break out of an established bridgehead and make the transition to open warfare, took place over a large area of southern England, engaged more than ten divisions of Canadian and British troops, and lasted two weeks. The exercise was plagued by delays, confusion, and major traffic jams, and the performance of General A.G.L. McNaughton, general officer commanding the Canadian Army in Britain, convinced his British superiors and important Canadian subordinates that he was not competent to command troops in battle, which eventually resulted in his being replaced.⁴ MacDonald's account gives us the point of view of a minor participant, which, despite the hardships, was not quite so negative as that of high command.

"What a fast two weeks," began his letter of March 11.

Don't know how long I have to write now, everything's all set to roll and here I am sitting in the back of my Carrier. The location for a rest yesterday was a beautiful spot. A lane off the main highway, a rambling brook, the taste of wood smoke in our tea & bully-beef. Oh, was in Oxford the other day – a lovely place & if I am here in Eng. long enough I shall spend part of a leave there – so much to see. Was in a church built in 1450 the other day – what a country to roam about in. I am a lucky man – had 4 hrs sleep last night after 3 a.m.

One night it was very cold & Bill H. [Hayward] and I had a can of coffee & a fruit cake left over from mother's Christmas box. We went down to a nearby house & asked them if we could make some coffee. Made it & sat around & ate cake. They told us we could wash or bath there if we wanted to, so next morning Bill & I went down & had a bath & a decent shave. Very nice people. Hell & damnation, it's starting to rain. Will finish this at first opportunity.

"Now here's the opportunity," he continued on 14 March:

Arrived home about 1 a.m. The convoy got lost but came out of it OK. When I had my group on the way to our Billets we ran into an Air Raid. Gee, it gives you a funny feeling to drive along and the Ack Ack, searchlights overhead and the roar of planes – never knowing when one's going to drop. A convoy's such a swell target, soon as I heard the Siren and the planes I doused all lights. Gee, Hon, I was a tired guy. Tired & ugly.

Matter of fact, never knew I could be so ugly. What with keeping control of the Platoon, being tired as Hell and still going, taking all the convoys on night moves, being so wind & sunburned that I could hardly see – well it all tied up to make me very touchy & when I had been up all night and got into bivouac & found no breakfast saved – I got sore and a hundred and one things all tied up. It's a battle in itself to keep all my stuff together & co-ordinate jobs. However, it's all over now, and we were the victors. You'll no doubt be getting reports of the whole thing.

You know, in spite of the long hrs. and freezing mornings, I really enjoyed the Scheme. Two weeks of sleeping under stars, being asleep and, on getting orders, being on the move in 5 minutes, cooking own meals at all hrs, riding along in a Carrier on a frosty morning, everything white with frost, watching the sun come up. Out on patrols till Dawn, reading a Map by Flashlight. Everybody tired & everybody's nerves on edge. Drinking tea 10 or 12 times a day – guess I'm a tea-drinker now.

He had been planning a leave in Scotland, and Hal's next letter, of 23 March, was from "the writing room of the Caledonian Hotel, Inverness, Scotland." He and Paul (Bones) McCann had left for London "on Saturday, no reservations, no time schedule or plans." They stayed at the Waldorf, enjoyed hot baths, sleeping in, a hair cut, and hot oil shampoos with head massage, saw several movies and "wandered around London, getting lost & getting back on our route ...time meant nothing. Saw the usual crowds around Trafalgar & Piccadilly & listened to the gutter entertainment while waiting for tickets. Went to bed at 9.30 p.m. Sunday – got up at 11 a.m. Monday."

Early that evening they caught the Scots Flyer for Inverness, and sat up all night, chatting with others in the compartment, including "a Captain in the Merchant Navy who kept us all amused all night, and had interesting discussions on the after-life." From Inverness they went to Fort Augusta, from which he wrote on 29 March, while changing buses: "Asked an old chap if there was

a Restaurant or Tea Room handy. He says, 'No, Laddie, but I can give you a wee droppie if you're thirsty' and proceeded to extract a pint flask of 'Old Dew' or 'Morning Mist' or somepin. No, of course we didn't have a wee drop on the street, in front of a crowd. It's a beautiful spot. Nestled between high, snow-capped hills, a narrow part of the Loch, an ancient church, a large hotel and the small village street framed with stone cottages. Old as old."

They got to Fort William, found rooms in a small inn, then "went for a walk and sat on the stone wall at the edge of the Loch (Loch Lunney). While we were there the local school got out and it's really pretty to see them, all the girls in pleated skirts, all the different tartans. Gee these kids were intelligent & well bred for their age." They went on next day to Oban and then to the shore of Loch Leven, "at Ballachulish Ferry. Took a small ferry across, then walked a 1/2 mile to a little train, for another 2 hr. trip through the valleys. The country's lovely."

After checking in once again at the Waldorf on their return to London, Hal met some North Shore friends and they "went to see the 'Road to Morocco,' enjoyed it very much. After dinner we came out to unit. Spent about £15 (considered by most a cheap leave) but seems to me quite expensive. However it's been 6 months since I had one & I did get a lot of good out of it....Got back here and immediately started on the old grind. Finished up at 8.30 tonight and must get up at 4 a.m." They had been bombed again. "I see where Jerry hit the childrens' clinic" and one had just missed Paul McCann, walking in the village." On 1 April he had "a hectic day. Platoon inspection. Working my bloody heart out, and for what – a beautiful crop of sarcasm. However we do learn something by it, so it's not lost effort. Not much to tell you, nothing stirring. Paul is still shivering after that Air Raid." A letter begun on 5 April stated with regards to the bombings that he didn't "believe in adding all the nasty details of what I see – such as a Jerry pilot's head 200 feet from his crashed plane. Don't like that stuff so why write about it."

On 18 April, MacDonald was studying for the carrier course he was to conduct soon, and over the next few days, 19 and 20 April, reported good progress on the platoon's current training: "They're coming, slow but sure. All in all quite

satisfied with them." They had a 30-mile march the next day and Hal found the men "in quite bad shape. Tired, & blistered feet." Nevertheless "every one of my Platoon came in – not one dropped out. Believe me I was proud of them, he related on 25 April. Then he gave the bad news: "The colonel told me he was in a spot. Had to have a reinforcement for me in case anything happened, & he was going to send me to Holding Unit for 3 months & bring someone else down. ... He sd. not to get the idea it was inefficiency – he was pleased with my work and did mention eventual 2 i/c of a Coy." Although polite to the colonel, Hal took the news hard, "cause I despise the HU and feel as if at last I had the makings of a good Platoon & was accomplishing something." But matters were about to take an unexpected turn.

Two days later he began a brief letter, awkwardly typed with the left hand. "Bad luck Harold they call me. Yesterday started off with a bang, my sgt & I went on a recce and first thing we ran over a grenade that some other outfit had left and it blew the tire off the jeep. Gee I was glad we hit it because 30 minutes after, my platoon was all over the same area & surely to goodness one of them would have struck that thing & lost a leg." They carried on with training. "THEN the Carrier I was with hit a sunken track, impossible to see 'till we were right on top of it and bamo, we took to the air and when we had righted I was holding part of the Carrier in my hand. Thought I had slightly sprained my wrist and finished the day and then noticed the wrist was swollen." An X-ray the next morning showed a "fracture of the scaphoid. Got it in a cast from knuckle to elbow and gosh, did it ever hurt when the Doc set it. Will have to go back to hospital tomorrow for two weeks or longer." The good news was that this accident "will be a rest ... possibly avoiding the Holding Unit." He added: "I've got on to handling the Shift Key with my cast. It is a nuisance though. Takes ages to shave and I can't write but I sent a cable to you today – the lady in the Post Office wrote it for me."

Hal's next letter, on 1 May, was from a ward in hospital. "One of my lads broke his back Tuesday and he's in the same ward, so I go in and keep him company. Have almost finished 'Have His Carcase' [A Peter Wimsey mystery by Dorothy Sayers]. It's a good medium to keep me from going stir-wacky... The M.O. says it will be



To recover from his broken arm, MacDonald was sent to the Vincent Massey Foundation for Convalescent Officers, in Herefordshire, near the Welsh border, known familiarly as "Garnons."

Left: Showing off their casts: (l. to r.) - Ian Matheson, Hal MacDonald and Cubby Morgan.

Below: "Firing gun on Terrace": Standing, Hal MacDonald; sitting on swing, Cubby Morgan and Stu Adams; behind cannon, Tim Armstrong and Gerry Keeper with bow.

Opposite: "On Porch Swing": (l. to r.) - Hal MacDonald, Cubby Morgan, Tim Armstrong, Gerry Keeper; Stu Adams is sitting on the ground.





twelve TWELVE 12 weeks before I'm through with Hospitals and Convalescence Homes." He was soon given a private room and said he would write again "as soon as I can get near a typewriter. Am becoming quite good at doing everything with my left hand and teeth. Can tie my own boots. Dress myself entirely, comb my hair, shave, tie my tie, but can I write with it – NO! ... One thing I do enjoy is to hear the Can. nurses talking. So different from the English."

It was a week and a half before he next wrote, on 11 and 12 May "not from lack of thinking of you, rather a lack of typewriters....Last week in hospital I damn near went nuts. Had been so wrapped up in my Platoon that the sudden changeover to relaxation and rest was almost too much." He had learned that, in a change of policy, "the carrier officer is now to be a captain." He was asked to the nurses' mess for afternoon tea, which made a break. Then the doctor took additional X-rays, changed the cast, and arranged

for Hal to go to special recuperation facility. This was the Vincent Massey Foundation for Convalescent Officers, in Herefordshire, near the Welsh border. Established by the wealthy son of the famous Massey family of Toronto, who was then serving as Canadian High Commissioner in England, it was known familiarly as "Garnons." "Finally beat my way to 'Garnons,'" wrote Hal,

by dint of quite a few shillings to Porters and Taxi drivers as I had to change in London from Victoria to Paddington. ... Shall I tell you about the estate itself? Rented by Massey for just this purpose and a number of the original servants retained. It's a large estate, comprising 24 farms besides the original farm. Its nearest town is Hereford, quite a few miles away. It is off by itself and has a beautiful view over a valley, cut by the river, the whole panorama seemingly framed by the Welsh Hills. Innumerable wood and country lanes. Located in very historical country, dating back to the Roman era, old Roman sunken roads now graded and paved and making typical narrow country lanes....

Amazing how one gets accustomed to certain ways of living, I was perfectly happy with the Unit. Sleeping on a canvas cot between Army blankets – eating food prepared by male cooks and all the other things which make up life in the Field Unit. Yet when one is suddenly transplanted into a home atmosphere, lots to read, comfortable couches and chairs and fireplaces, lovely lawns and terraces – marvellous meals – never dreamed of such food in England, and every vegetable and green fresh from the Gardens and in unlimited quantities, one suddenly realizes what one has missed in the last year.

“About 35 here altogether,” Hal continued, “and all good heads. Feel sorry for a lot of them who have been here for months – result of brain injuries, etc. I’m thankful I got off as lucky as I did. My driver who has the broken back will be in a cast for three months but is now able to walk a bit.”

Despite some pleasurable excursions into the local countryside and a trip to Worcester, within a week Hal was writing that he was “sick of this place.” On 23 May he was “pretty well fed up with the whole thing. Guess I was never intended to lead a life of luxury, ‘cause after two weeks of nothing I’m ready to chuck anything and everything.”

On 26 May he reported that he had just “seen the M.O. He said I would be leaving a week from Friday and going back to the hospital for another cast and then back to Garnons. That doesn’t make me happy. I want to be doing something and improving my war technique – not sitting

around listening to a lot of cheap talk. Actually, I give all credit to you and other wives of absent warriors. True, you have your work but you have more time to think. With us, when on duty, we just haven’t the time to let our minds wander. Now, however, it’s different. Tomorrow I’ll take a long hike and tire myself out and then study and sleep. Do hope it’s fine and hot.” In fact, Hal’s stay at Garnons became quite prolonged. It was not until late June that he got back to his unit. Another year of intensive training awaited him before he would get his chance to play an active part in the hard-fought battles that would lead to Germany’s defeat.

Notes

1. Will R. Bird, *North Shore (New Brunswick) Regiment*, (Fredericton, 1963), p.147.
2. This diary remains in the hands of the Anderson family and was loaned to the author, M.A. MacDonald, for this series of articles.
3. On the Beveridge Report, see Arthur Marwick, *Britain in the Century of Total War* (Boston, 1968), pp.307-314; on the Marsh report and its impact for Canada, Desmond Morton and J.L. Granatstein, *Victory 1945* (Toronto, 1995), p.137.
4. John Nelson Rickard, “The Test of Command, McNaughton and ‘Exercise Spartan’, 4-12 March 1943, *Canadian Military History*, Volume 8, Number 3, Summer 1999, pp.22-38. Also, J.L. Granatstein, *The Generals: the Canadian Army’s Senior Commanders in the Second World War* (Toronto, 1993), pp.71-72.