

# Parachute Doctor

The Memoirs of Captain David Tibbs MC RAMC  
225th (Parachute) Field Ambulance and  
RMO 13th Parachute Battalion,  
5th Parachute Brigade, 6th Airborne Division, 1943-46.



Edited by Neil Barber



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*The author in Normandy.*

Preface

# Preface

This book, originally written for my children, is the recounting of my experiences as a front line doctor in 5 Parachute Brigade of the 6th Airborne Division, one of the finest Divisions of the Second World War. It describes various astonishing events and some horrifying scenes that should not be forgotten and is in part, a message to future generations to remind them that barbarism is always lurking nearby and that good leadership of a nation is crucial. Even a democracy can so easily become a self- extinguishing system, weakened and eventually destroyed by confused abuse of its freedoms. Free speech without integrity, quickly distorts facts for base reasons, so that truth is an early casualty - a clear warning that the slide to self-destruction has commenced. Eternal vigilance is essential if the faltering progress of mankind is to be preserved.

David Tibbs



## Introduction

# Introduction

In the field of war there are few who are allowed to walk the raw interface between man at his most sublime and his most savage. In recent years, this has been experienced by journalists such as Kate Adie, John Simpson or Martin Bell and others such as medical workers in *Medecins Sans Frontieres*. This sort of activity has occurred throughout history in various forms and to those already mentioned should be added the priest. I walked this thin line during the invasion of Normandy in 1944 and onwards to 1946, and the following narrative details some of that experience. I have tried to avoid dwelling upon the gruesome although some is inevitable and in places I give the actual words used. Fear, excitement and awe have etched memories deeply into the mind where they have simmered for half a century, but making frequent reappearance, triggered almost daily by small events. It is on these that I have drawn.



*Left: The remarkable view of the LZ at Ranville following the two glider landing operations on D-Day. Above right: Typical scene within a Dakota carrying twenty paratroops on their way to a drop.*

I remember visiting the Headmaster in his garden and as we talked a great mass of Lancaster bombers flew overhead, he fell silent and his distress was palpable... he knew that a number of old boys would be with those bombers and some would not return.

# 1

## The Pre-War Years

I always like to say that I am a true Londoner because I was born in 1920 within the sound of Croydon aerodrome, the pre-war airport for London.

I was the youngest of three boys who, to the despair of our parents were often unruly, but there is no doubt that I learnt a great deal from my brothers, Ian and especially the eldest, Christopher. My father, true to his upbringing, was a strict Protestant and Sundays were given over to religious instruction and church-going. This was rather counter-productive for three high-spirited boys and out of keeping with the changing, liberated style rapidly developing in post-First World War Britain. Likewise, his use of a cane for misbehaviour was not very persuasive, although usually thoroughly deserved. However, in other ways he was a good and kindly father, who in spite of only a modest income, provided us with constructive toys such as Meccano, Hornby railways, bicycles and good annual holidays, usually on the lovely coast of Dorset. Each day he journeyed up to London by train to run a long established family business, J.E. Tibbs Junior, importing in bulk a variety of oils required by paint manufacturers, trading through the Baltic Exchange in the City. He suffered two severe financial setbacks when clients owing him large sums of money went bankrupt in the difficult times of the late 1920s and early 30s. The family had a correspondingly lean time which decided that our education was not to be the good private schooling my parents had planned, but in the newly opened Wallington County Grammar School in 1928. It proved to be a most fortunate decision as this school was excellent, although not religiously denominational.

Father was a keen gardener and I would help in this, encouraged by a little extra pocket money. He acquired an acre of land close by and this served not only



My Grandparents, Thomas and Hannah Mundell, together with my Mother (left), Mildred and her sister Winnie. Grandfather belonged to the Salvation Army and was a very assertive Christian who attempted to spread the Gospel at every opportunity. At home every morning after breakfast there were prayers, reading from the Bible and hymns. However, in other respects he was a kindly man and very protective towards his two daughters who were only allowed to mix with selected friends. In spite of these restrictions Mildred and Winnie were remarkably broadminded and with a good sense of humour.



*Above left: My Mother, Mildred, was educated by private tutor and was not allowed to attend a school. However she became highly cultured.*

*Above right: Father had served in the Great War in the Signals Corps but after the war returned to his life's work in his family's business in the City of London. Father had been brought up in a strictly Protestant tradition but he loved gardening and walking in the countryside or by the coast. We benefitted by these walking expeditions.*

as a spacious garden but as a valuable playground for the three brothers in a way that the small suburban garden attached to our home could not.

My mother was a wonderful person who had been brought up in a severely restricted religious environment imposed by her father, a solicitor to the Salvation Army and an active participant in its missionary zeal. At her comfortable home with its two resident maids, she was educated by a governess and was a very artistic, talented person who sang beautifully with a rich contralto voice, played



*Myself aged 3*

the piano, violin and harpsichord, and could draw and paint well. She also enjoyed composing poetry and writing short stories, some of which were published in *The Strand* magazine. However, she was restricted from many activities that her father considered 'worldly'. Grandfather had used her talent, playing a portable harmonium to accompany the hymn singing at street corners, in the hope of converting any passing sinner to his beliefs. Mother could read aloud most expressively and as children we loved listening to her reading Hans Christian Andersen fairy tales, *Arabian Nights* and later, *Tarzan of the Apes*. She generated pictures in our minds just as vivid as the television of today. She was a most kindly



*David, Ian and Christopher, 1923*

mother who had survived the repressive regime of her father, to be broadminded and a good antidote to the rather narrow views of our own father. Looking back one can see her yearning to have a broader life and share her talents with others, in a choir for example, and the struggle to overcome the restraints she must have felt. She was a mother who gave every encouragement in learning and sport so that we were indeed fortunate to have been influenced so strongly by her whilst father was away all day in his City office. How she must have yearned to escape the drudgery of bringing up three children on a very limited budget.

We three brothers were close in ages (born 1917, 1918 and 1920) and shared many of our hobbies. Christopher was brilliant at all mechanical, electrical and later, electronic pursuits. He built valve radios and later, in 1936 a television set which gave good black and white pictures. I can well remember often seeing Jasmine Bligh, one of the first BBC announcers. We must have been amongst the

earliest of families to possess a television. Christopher's instinctive knowledge of electronics led him into the development of Radar so that during the War he worked in this vital field and was not permitted to join the Forces. In his teens he rejected our father's strict religious beliefs and declared himself a non-believer, much to the alarm of Ian and myself. My father very wisely did not attempt to change his reactionary views, but was very proud of him and his achievements. His contribution to the war effort was probably far greater than Ian's or my own in the Army.

Ian did not have the same interests as Christopher and I but enjoyed outdoor activities such as the Scouts and later judo, in the Budokwai Club, London. This must have helped later on when he entered the Army. His service took him to Burma where he engaged in jungle warfare against the Japanese. He was awarded the Military Cross and mentioned in despatches. Amongst other encounters he bayoneted two Japanese soldiers who unexpectedly confronted him in a jungle pathway. His very quick reaction, taking them by surprise, saved his life.

My own boyhood was mostly a happy one. Initially I attended local preparatory day schools. I was fascinated by the constant stream of aircraft taking off and landing after an adventurous flight from Paris and easily seen through the windows of my classroom. Later on, one became ashamed of the typical British airliners, biplanes such as the Handley Page Hannibal with a mass of struts and wires between the wings, which were very slow and ponderous, but in fact very safe and never lost a passenger. In 1938 the Germans introduced a sleek, wonderfully elegant monoplane with four engines. It was very fast and heightened the embarrassment over our own wire and strut contraptions. The humiliation was complete when some German pilots hung a birdcage from the wing of an Imperial Airways biplane.

At ten years of age, I followed my brothers, who were already in the Wallington County Grammar School. My previous schooling had been so unsatisfactory that Ian coached me for the entrance exam by showing me how to set out simple arithmetic sums neatly, with summation lines drawn with a ruler, and carefully checked for accuracy.

In my first two years there I was rather inattentive and often in trouble for unsatisfactory work. However, after an essay describing a visit to Greenwich Naval College and the Painted Chapel, the English Master praised me warmly and this encouragement made me realise that good effort was pleasurable and rewarding. My work in all subjects improved greatly and I was soon near



*Above left: School photograph of 1937, including the Masters who were all first-class men. Many were dismayed by the approaching further war with Germany. Although some were frankly pacifist, they could not escape the essential decision to either accept subjugation by a brutal regime or be thrust into a war to avoid it. Ian is in the back row, seventh from the left. Above right: Myself in 1938 after becoming School Captain.*

the top in the end of term exams and found that I was enjoying lessons, in particular the sciences, mathematics and practical skills such as carpentry. I enjoyed rugby but found cricket boring with its long hours of inactive waiting and so concentrated on athletics during summer. I was a strong sprinter and was stimulated by the excitement of team events such as the four-man 440 yards circuit relay. In short I discovered the satisfaction of active participation in the classroom and sports field.

In my last three years at school I took part in the school plays. I had a strong, deep voice after it had broken and took the title role in *Captain Brassbound's Conversion*, with high praise in the local press. For a short while an actor's life seemed an attractive possibility but this soon passed with a strengthening ambition to become a doctor. The experience however, gave me confidence to address and talk to an audience.

During my childhood I had various illnesses and while suffering from one of these a specialist told my parents (within my earshot) that I had mastoiditis and would die if I did not have a mastoid operation. This was an illness which was rather commonplace, in fact where I was living it almost became an epidemic. It usually started as a tonsillitis which spread to the middle ear, where a sponge-work of spaces connect the ear, and from there into the mastoid bone, which is the bony bump behind the ear. There, it was in dangerous proximity to a big vein which runs from the interior of the skull outwards and eventually enters the vein and gives rise to the bacterial invasion of the bloodstream. If this occurred, it was a very dangerous complication. The operation to cure it was to open up the mastoid bone. The infection would be drained by an incision that was left open for a while, inevitably leaving a big disfiguring scar. It was a fairly common operation and performed properly, probably saved the life of the child (When anti-biotics came in, it was easily cured and so it gradually disappeared).

My father however, realised that I did not have the characteristic tenderness or a high enough temperature for the diagnosis of mastoiditis and firmly refused to allow him to operate. His brother, my Uncle Christopher, was a doctor and father had acquired a good understanding of medical matters from him. The specialist angrily stormed out saying, "*On your head be it!*" I made a trouble-free recovery. It was probably an ordinary childhood infection of some sort. It could have been tonsillitis, but it was not too serious in the end. Well done Dad !

We both learnt an important lesson that some specialists would operate for no good reason other than to draw a substantial fee (these were pre-NHS days of course). As a result father changed the General Practitioner who had brought in the specialist for an altogether more reliable and capable one. This new doctor,



Bullcock, later saw me through the very serious illness of jaundice due to hepatitis. At one stage my mother came in weeping after the doctor had warned her that I was at crisis point and the next 48 hours would determine the outcome. In keeping with this prediction, within 36 hours my temperature fell, the repeated vomiting stopped, my appetite returned and I felt much better. This doctor was an inspiration to me, especially by his management of a serious illness my mother subsequently had and in the care of other members of the family.

Certainly these events played an important part in my decision at around the age of fifteen to become a doctor, also in part because Uncle Christopher was highly thought of and the medical profession was greatly respected. Later on, when I had seen a number of surgical operations from the galleries of operating theatres in Guy's Hospital, and with my love of practical skills, I aimed even higher to become a surgeon, but war service would have to come first !

One other factor that shaped my later school days was the move of my family from Wallington (much to the relief of our neighbours) to a pleasant new housing estate in semi-rural Banstead, five miles away. For the first four years I either cycled to school in all weathers, downhill all the way there and of course uphill on the return, or by train which had a mile-long walk at each end.

In my last two years at school I was made a prefect and then for my final year, School Captain, an honour I greatly valued. It sharpened my sense of responsibility and kerbed a distinct tendency to be rash at times. For example, a little earlier I attended a local political meeting where Sir Oswald Mosely was speaking in support of a Black Shirt Fascist candidate for Parliament. Benito Mussolini had recently invaded and was still bombing Ethiopia, and I put a question to Mosely in which I referred to Mussolini in derogatory terms. An Italian nearby started climbing over chairs to attack me for the insult to his hero and I responded by starting to move toward him. Mosely, who wanted to preserve respectability in this middle class area at all costs, wisely ordered the Italian to be ejected and said to me, *"I hope you enjoy the next war as much as I enjoyed the last."* These were times of course, when skirmishes with the Black Shirts were common as Mosely tried to strengthen his pro-German position.

When I reached sixteen I bought a Coventry Eagle two-stroke motorcycle for £3-10 shillings and travelled to school on this. I was among the earliest to carry L-plates and to take the recently introduced driving test. This entailed driving around the block whilst the examiner stood on the pavement. I was self-taught and failed my first attempt (I looked down at my gear lever, a feature of older motorcycles), but at my second test I passed and obtained a driving licence for not only motorcycles but cars and lorries of all sorts, which I possessed unchanged for the next 50 years. The Headmaster of the School, Walter Hutchins, was rather uneasy about my arrival on a motorcycle but insisted that I should

*Arriving to join the family on holiday in Teignmouth c.1937 on my first motorcycle, a two-stroke Coventry Eagle. Earlier, whilst negotiating a right angle bend in the tramway in Christchurch, with wet tram rails and surrounding cobbles, the wheels caught in the slippery rails so that machine and I fell to the ground in front of an approaching tram which squealed to stop just a foot away from me. I noted with relief that the massive tram had a primitive 'cow-catcher' at the front which would have saved my life had the tram not stopped in time.*



wear my distinctive school prefect's cap as well as goggles, instead of the usual leather motor cycling helmet of those days ! I have no doubt that all of this improved my prestige as School Captain and made up for my deficiency in cricket.

War was fast approaching and the predominantly pacifist school staff (who had grown up during the First World War) had to accept the rising tide of boys joining the Forces, with the RAF claiming many of the most able. The Headmaster was

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an excellent man and must have been deeply distressed as the Second World War progressed and so many of his best pupils died. I remember visiting him one summer's evening in 1942 and as we talked in the garden, a great mass of several hundred Lancaster bombers in loose formation flew low overhead on their way to bomb a German city (this was done to let the public see the impressive force we possessed at that stage). Mr Hutchins fell silent and his distress was palpable because he knew that a number of old boys of the school would be with those bombers and some would not return. After the War, the Roll of Honour of those who had died, virtually all of whom I had known, was placed in the School Assembly Hall and contained sixty-five names, many of these from bombing raids.

In 1938 I passed the Higher Schools Exams required to enter Medical School and was accepted by Guy's Hospital to begin the initial two-year course in Anatomy, Physiology and Biochemistry. The following year when war broke out, Guys, anticipating air raids, moved many departments out of London to various centres in the South East. Several large houses in Tunbridge Wells were acquired and converted into hostels for the Pre-medical students and we continued our studies from there. It was very beneficial to be living with our teachers.

Guy's Hospital, housing the wards, operating theatres, the Medical School with its lecture theatres, laboratories and dissecting rooms, nurse's accommodation and so on, was a massive organisation that had developed bit by bit over the years. There was an astonishing collection of water, gas and sewerage pipes, electric cables and an extensive hot water system providing warmth throughout the hospital, fed by an enormous coal-fired furnace tucked away around the back, alongside the mortuary. Elderly lifts abounded and teams of truly brilliant engineers kept this entire frankly ramshackle organisation going, adapting to the requirements imposed by wartime changes and later, bomb damage, and yet finding time to improvise surgical and special medical requirements. The Hospital could not have functioned for long without them and so often overlooked, they deserve special praise. No doubt all the London Hospitals with their Victorian origins were very similar and all served the wartime needs and care of air raid casualties extremely well, evacuating the casualties



*The family in the summer of 1938. A photograph taken using a self-timer on my father's newly-acquired Zeiss camera. From left, in front, Christopher, Ian and myself, with mother and father behind. These were happy days, soon to be disrupted by the war.*

when fit to travel, to centres outside London. It was a wonderful achievement and essential for the doctors and nurses to carry out their role.

The subterranean world of cellars and service tunnels under the ageing buildings of the Hospital was inhabited by a vast population of cockroaches infesting the warm recesses amongst the numerous pipes, especially near kitchens. The wards and other above ground parts were kept scrupulously clean by the ever-vigilant ward sisters, directing an army of cleaners, but even so the occasional cockroach scampered across these hallowed sanctuaries.

*'Jumping thro' the hole, Jumping thro' the hole,  
I'll always keep my trousers clean,  
Jumping thro' the hole...'* Having successfully  
performed eight jumps I qualified as a  
parachutist and was entitled to wear the  
coveted parachute wings on my right arm.

## 2

### The Blitz – Joining Up

I was present at Guy's during many of the major air raids, sleeping in the hospital cellars amongst the cockroaches. During a raid I was required to help as necessary, doing such things as transporting patients or assisting in the operating theatre. I also volunteered to be a Firewatcher, patrolling an area of the hospital roof in order to extinguish incendiary bombs which frequently came in groups. These required quick action by dumping sand on them. This was very exciting with spectacular scenes of searchlights, anti-aircraft shells bursting overhead and fires starting up all around, accompanied by the characteristic drone of the aircraft dropping the bombs and the sound of explosions. High Explosive bombs were usually dropped at the same time and especially frightening were the 'screamers', those fitted with devices that made a fearsome noise as they fell. In moments of silence you could hear the thud of potentially lethal fragments from our anti-aircraft shells falling to the ground, a reminder to take cover as soon as possible. Later, very large explosive mines drifting down on parachutes were used and I had one moment of horror when one was clearly visible, drifting in our direction, but passed over harmlessly. I must admit that I was often scared, but in fact casualties amongst rooftop Firewatchers were uncommon.

On the 29 December 1940 the Germans carried out a massive raid on the City area of London using mainly incendiary bombs. These, mixed with some high explosive bombs, caused huge fires. Guys was sufficiently far away to be spared any great damage, but the firestorm across the river was all too evident from the vast smoke clouds obscuring the lurid night sky. That night, my duties were mainly within the hospital, transporting casualties around. Towards dawn I took a brief rest, sleeping on the floor in the Pathology Department. I woke to go to breakfast



The No 1 ready to jump from a Dakota. His leg-bag is clearly visible.



*Guy's Hospital, just after the turn of the century.*

and here learned that the City of London had suffered extensive damage. My immediate concern was for my father's office in the centre of the City, in the basement of 51 Lime Street. I asked permission to leave Guy's and cross London Bridge to see how much damage the office had suffered.

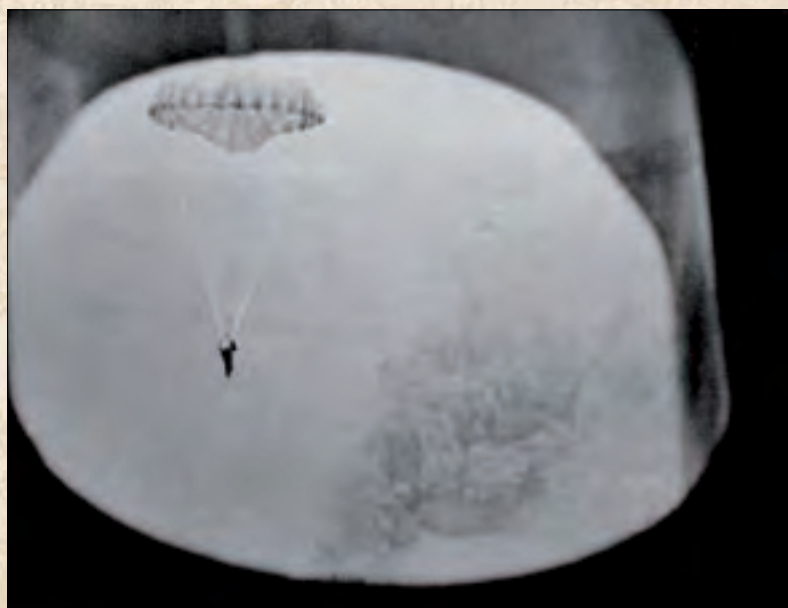
The bridge itself was undamaged, but looking downstream the view was of widespread destruction, with fires in numerous wrecked buildings north of the Thames and a great column of smoke over the whole area. I passed close to the Monument which commemorates the Great Fire of London in 1666, but I did not reflect on the irony of this, although I was witnessing another fire of even greater magnitude.

Lime Street was partially blocked by fallen buildings and Number 51 was severely damaged, with the upper part on fire. The main entrance was impassable, being filled with fallen masonry, so I walked to the back entrance in Leadenhall Street which to my surprise, was easily approachable and offered a possible way of reaching the basement and my father's office. Half way along, it was filled with dust and some debris, but as I hesitated to go on, there was a tremendous rumble of falling timbers and masonry, some of which fell just ahead of me, blocking the corridor leading to the office. I realised that even if I could scramble through this to reach the office, there was little I could do and it was clearly dangerous to remain inside this burning and collapsing building.

The walk back to Guy's was through smoky streets, past teams of men trying to control the fires, but few casualties were evident because the City of course, had been largely empty overnight. Back at Guy's I had a shower and phoned my father to tell him that his office was lost, but to my relief he was not daunted by this and I learnt that he had made preparations for this possibility and soon found new premises near the Baltic Exchange. Many months later, when all the rubble of fallen buildings had been cleared, father's office was exposed and found to have been devastated by fire. The office had contained hundreds of samples in glass bottles of the inflammable oils that he imported for his business. These must have burnt with great intensity because when the massive iron safe in the office was opened, a gold watch within it was found to have melted.

The importing of oils for the paint industry was much needed for wartime production. This determination not to give up was so typical of the time and saw Britain through these perilous days.

**I passed close to the Monument which commemorates the Great Fire of London in 1666, but I did not reflect on the irony of this, although I was witnessing another fire of even greater magnitude.**



*Above left: The first two jumps were through the floor of basket of a static balloon at 800 feet. Above right: "Looking through the hole in the Elephant's bottom". The view through the circular jump hatch on a Whitley bomber. The previous man's parachute can be seen, but looking for this meant looking down, which invited 'ringing the bell'. The aperture was not much bigger than the average dustbin. Tricky !*

*When we did our jumps from a plane, the dear old Whitley bomber was still in use.*

By late 1940 we students progressed to Clinical Medicine and the next three years were divided into three-monthly appointments that often required temporarily moving out of London to Farnborough, Orpington or Tunbridge Wells. However, by 1943 I had begun to feel unhappy at not being able to play a more active role in the war effort, especially as the conflict was at a very critical stage. Usually, it took five years to train a doctor, but a wartime measure allowed us to qualify six months earlier, so I took advantage of this and decided to join up. The top preference amongst young doctors at the time was the Royal Navy because the Medical Officer's dark blue uniform with its gold braid was much more fetching than the other services and thought to be better at 'pulling the

birds'. More importantly, the Senior Service had more prestige and the war at sea was critical. However, there were no vacancies for Medical Officers in the Royal Navy at that time, so I entered the Army, joining the Royal Army Medical Corps (RAMC) and applying to be a parachutist in the newly-formed 6th Airborne Division. I was assigned to 225 (Parachute) Field Ambulance, put in charge of a Section of twenty RAMC men, and together we took the parachute jumping course during July and August 1943. This consisted of an initial two jumps from a static balloon at 800 feet. During this jump there was an agonising delay, waiting for the rate of descent to become sufficient to blow the 'chute open. This was followed by five jumps from a Whitley bomber, exiting through a centrally-placed hole in the floor, about the size of a dustbin. Five men sat on each side of this and jumped alternately, from front, then back and so on. The legs had to be swung into the hole and the head kept well back to avoid 'ringing the bell', which was clouting one's face hard against the far side of the hole as the slipstream

caught the legs, especially when facing forward. It was a fairly common occurrence and the cause of a monumental black eye, resulting in much derision from those not so afflicted. There were many bawdy songs about 'the hole in the Whitley's bottom', one refrain being '*Jumping thro' the hole, Jumping thro' the hole, I'll always keep my trousers clean, Jumping thro' the hole.*' Successfully performing these eight jumps, we qualified as parachutists and entitled us to wear the coveted parachute wings on the right arm. As volunteers for parachuting, we were paid two shillings a day more than normal Army pay, no small amount.

There were two Parachute Field Ambulances in the Division, each having roughly 120 men, and I think unique to Army Field Ambulances, both had two surgical teams as it was felt essential that Airborne troops should have them in their midst. This was because initially, such troops are inevitably isolated and evacuation of the wounded therefore impossible. Consequently, they were needed to carry out surgical treatment until the link up with ground forces occurred, which would allow much of the load to be passed on to a Field Hospital.

The 225 (Parachute) Field Ambulance had two fully qualified and experienced surgeons. On D-Day these were Arthur McPherson and Peter Essex-Lopresti. McPherson replaced a man called Daintree-Johnson, who broke his wrist and so could not jump with us. In the months leading up to D-Day they assembled two very good surgical teams, each of five people comprising a surgeon, an anaesthetist and three Operating Room Assistants.

The Field Ambulance was commanded by a fairly keen disciplinarian and former Grenadier Guard, Lieutenant Colonel Bruce Harvey. I liked and admired him although he could be a very difficult man and pretty unpleasant at times, but he had lots of guts and drove us on well. He used to drink an enormous amount of whisky in the evenings which I don't suppose helped him much! The first time I met him we were in a small Somerset village called Castle Cary and I was quartered in the Vicarage. At about 11 o'clock each night I would hear a window opening and closing and initially could not work out what it was, but eventually found that this was Bruce Harvey wooing the vicar's daughter! I kept very quiet



*The interior of a Dakota. Paras prepare for a training jump*

about this but gave urgent warnings to my fellow officers not to make passes at the vicar's daughter.

The Second-in-Command, Major Dennis Thompson, was soon moved to take command of 224 (Para) Field Ambulance in the Division's Airlanding Brigade and was replaced by Major Robert Maitland who in turn was then moved to work with Divisional Headquarters. He was finally replaced by Major Pat Hewlings, an excellent man, who joined us relatively late on. He was very experienced, having served in Africa, and was a good doctor and very likeable; the Field Ambulance greatly benefited by his presence.

The bulk of the Field Ambulance comprised three main Sections and a Reserve Section. Captains Tommy Wilson and John Wagstaff were in charge of Numbers 1 and 2 Sections respectively, while I commanded 3 Section, and we

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were the Section Medical Officers who would jump into Normandy with the Parachute Field Ambulance. Each Section was designated to help a specific Parachute Battalion, Wilson's was the 12th Parachute Battalion, Wagstaff's the 7th and my Section, the 13th Battalion. The main purpose of these Sections was to assist in any way they could in the recovery of the wounded from the battlefield. If necessary they could go out and assist the medical personnel within the battalions when there were a very heavy number of casualties.

The Field Ambulance also had a Headquarters Company that performed the administrative work and included a Dental Officer, George Holland and a Catholic Padre, an excellent man called Bill Briscoe, plus of course the two Surgical Teams.

There was another group of unusual volunteers. While forming, the 6th Airborne Division was getting few volunteers from the RAMC. Colonel MacEwan, the Assistant Director of Medical Services (ADMS) for the Division, was very astute and realised that there was a whole number of conscientious objectors who had been working on bomb disposal, not a safe occupation by any means, who might be willing to come along as parachuting medical orderlies. These conscientious objectors were mostly people with deep Christian convictions such as Quakers or Plymouth Brethren, very fine men, most of them well educated and hard working. He put it to them that they could come with us in the RAMC to help look after the wounded. The response was *"Only on certain conditions. These are that you do not ask us to ever carry arms or handle ammunition and that we can treat German wounded exactly as we treat the British."* The reply was *"Fine, that's our policy anyway,"* so they came along. About 190 joined the Airborne Division and around a third of 225 (Para) Field Ambulance were such conscientious objectors. These men were not allowed to have any rank other than private, but they could not have been any more exemplary. You just asked them to do what was required and they did it without the need to bark orders and indeed Christian names were often used. They managed to get on very well with the others and were a huge asset to the Division. Such was their competence that the surgeons gathered up many of them very quickly, making up the majority of people who worked in the surgical teams. Six of these men were in my Section.



*The officers of the 225 (Parachute) Field Ambulance soon after its formation in 1943.*

*We all look very serious and did in fact work hard to have a good unit.*

*Back Row: from Left to Right. Capt Nicholson, Quartermaster, Major Daintree Johnson, Surgeon Specialist (Broke wrist and was replaced by Major Arthur McPherson, who jumped with unit on D Day), Capt David Tibbs, MO, Capt David Clark, MO. (Recent arrival and remained in Bulford for Normandy campaign), Capt Leslie Hill, RASC Transport Officer, Major Peter Essex-Lopresti, Surgeon Specialist.*

*Front Row: From Left to Right. Capt. Bill Briscoe, Padre (Catholic), Capt Holland, Dental Officer, Major Dennis Thompson, Second in Command, (became Commanding Officer to 224 Para Fd Amb shortly before D-Day but was dropped well off DZ and eventually taken prisoner). Lt Col Bruce Harvey, Commanding Officer of 225 Para Fd Amb, Capt Maitland (later Major as Second in Command, and then on to deputy to ADMS. (Died of wounds in Normandy), Capt John Wagstaff, MO, Capt Tommy Wilson, MO.*

## Parachute Doctor

A very happy respite came in October when I was allowed ten days leave to be married to Paddy O'Meara, a much admired nurse at Guy's Hospital whom I had known throughout my time there. Early on, she had been engaged to a young RAF pilot who sadly was killed in the Battle of Britain, but now three years later, our friendship had progressed to engagement and marriage. The wedding took place at St Joseph's Roman Catholic Church, close to Guy's Hospital. The austerity of the time allowed only a small reception of family and friends. Our first night

*The wedding of Lieutenant David Tibbs RAMC and Patricia O'Meara at St Joseph's Church, close to Guy's Hospital in Southwark, Sept 5th 1943.*



## Chapter 2 | The Blitz -Joining Up

*Right: Cutting from the Sunday Express the morning after our wedding. Paddy did not like her description as a "pretty little nurse" but we had a kindly reception from those who recognised us.*

was spent at the Strand Palace Hotel and when I came down in the morning to the spacious sitting area I was puzzled to notice that several people, reading their Sunday newspapers, looked up at me with a smile of amused recognition. I then realised that the front page of the Sunday Express had a large photograph of Paddy and myself leaving the Church after the wedding, with a large caption 'YOUNGEST PARACHUTE DOCTOR WEDS NURSE HE MET AT GUY'S'!

The honeymoon was spent in Arrochar, a village beautifully situated at the far end of Loch Long in Scotland. Paddy had particularly wished to go there because her father, Lieutenant Commander Daniel John O'Meara MBE RN, had been the Senior Officer at the nearby Torpedo Range when Paddy was born. Sadly however, two years later her mother, Laura, died from a cerebral tumour and was buried in the Arrochar Church cemetery. Soon after this Lieutenant Commander O'Meara was transferred to take charge of *HMS Dolphin*, the Torpedo School in Portsmouth and Paddy had not returned to Arrochar since then, obviously now a place of considerable emotional attachment. Moreover, Paddy's elder brother, Lieutenant Commander Dan O'Meara OBE RN, was stationed at the Torpedo Range and it was a great opportunity to meet him. While there he kindly arranged for me to visit the Range and have a short trip in the Submarine *Telemachus*, which was then undergoing commissioning trials. The Commanding Officer of the *Telemachus* was Lieutenant Commander WDA King DSO DSC RN, a







*HMS Telemachus was a Triton class submarine, built as P321 by Vickers Armstrong, Barrow, and launched on 19 June 1943. She served in Far Eastern waters for most of her wartime career, and was responsible for the sinking of the Japanese submarine I-166.*

submariner of great distinction and with many successful attacks to his credit. This was a great privilege although Commander King was no doubt amused to meet a youthful officer of the newly-formed Parachute Regiment. I was enormously impressed by the *Telemachus* and her crew. This was heightened when the submarine took a short journey down Loch Long and submerged briefly to test fire a very secret, recently developed, electric torpedo. This torpedo behaved impeccably and later entered very successfully into general service. One of its features was a silent approach to its target without any warning wake. I was duly warned of its secrecy and promised not to talk about it but was startled the next day in a public bar in nearby Dunoon to hear a drunken woman, employed locally in the factory making the secret electric torpedo, loudly proclaiming its merits to her embarrassed submariner boyfriend!

Arrochar and its surroundings were enchanting, especially with the strong O'Meara family attachments, but alas, after an all too brief ten days it was a return to the Army and further parachute training.



*Above: Jumping from a Dakota. The static line pulls the parachute from the pack after exiting the aircraft. Standing tightly together, up to 20 men could jump in this way at the rate of about one a second. The plane is travelling at 200 feet a second and any slow jumping will result in wide separation of the parachutists when they land. Note the kitbag on the man's leg.*

*Left: This is how our stick would have looked standing at the doorway ready to jump.*

Throughout late 1943 and early 1944, energetic training continued in the care and transport of the wounded, in field craft (such as map reading) and in attaining a high standard of general physical fitness. I was fortunate in having first class men in my charge and we learned a lot from each other during this training. There were eight further parachute jumps with several at night, and later on, from C47 Dakota aircraft which carried twenty men and had a large side exit and was incomparably better than the dear old Whitley. Its replacement was a great relief.

Dakotas usually dropped parachutists in a series of 'V' formations, each of three planes, and stepped upwards so that they would not run into the parachutists dropped just before them. In the role of a Duty Medical Officer I attended many parachute drops and saw a number of accidents, some fatal such as those caused by a 'roman candle' when the parachute failed to open. This was rather daunting if you were to jump the next day ! We were conducted around the parachute packing centre to raise our confidence, but the girls seemed more interested in winking at us than packing the chutes properly and seeing what these girls got up to out on the town was alarming ! However, parachute failure due to faulty packing was very rare and we trusted them implicitly. Parachuting was great fun once it had all happened.

There was one particularly unhappy event that I was involved in. We were being dropped from a Dakota and the pilot was doing his first unsupervised dropping of parachutists. Unfortunately, he dropped us at too slow a speed, very near stalling and from too low a height. To make matters worse, the ground had an upward gradient and the distance between ground and plane was rapidly reducing. I was jumping number five. The first four chaps jumped, their parachutes opened and they probably had a very heavy landing because of the parachute oscillating from having just opened. A parachute needs something like four hundred feet to open satisfactorily. I jumped and almost at once hit the ground very heavily and was mildly concussed. The rest of the stick was disastrous. The next half-dozen men suffered broken bones or fractured spines and about six at the far end of the stick died. There was an official enquiry but it appeared to be just written off. I was not called to give evidence. I don't know what happened to the pilot. As a consequence

*We were conducted round the parachute packing centre to raise our confidence. However parachute failure from packing was very rare. Note the large sign in the background, 'Remember a man's life depends on every parachute you pack.'*

of my heavy landing I suffered from considerable back pain but did not report it in case I was taken off the approaching drop into Europe.

During the winter our training continued with various exercises making it clear that we were to play a leading role in the invasion of the Continent, without any indication of when or where this was to be. By May, tension had risen but the general morale was high with an eagerness to get going. This was heightened by a visit and inspection of the Division by General Bernard Montgomery, the D-Day Allied Ground Force Commander, soon followed by one from the King and Queen together with the two Princesses, Elizabeth and Margaret who looked charming. It was a great occasion and well received by everyone.

Early in the year I was very happy to know that Paddy was pregnant, but a little uneasy about the uncertainties we both faced. Opportunities for us to meet were few, but I took comfort in knowing that her many nursing friends in Guy's and later, her loving stepmother living on the Isle of Wight, would take good care of her.

