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The Long Wait (Part II)

A Personal Account of Infantry Training in Britain

June 1943 – June 1944

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

The Spring 2006 issue of Canadian Military History contained the letters written by Lieutenant (later Captain) Captain Harold (Hal) MacDonald to his wife Marjorie, in Saint John, New Brunswick, between June 1942 and June 1943. This series of letters began on the troopship carrying MacDonald overseas to join the North Shore (New Brunswick) Regiment, which was part of the large force of Canadian troops massing and undergoing training in England for eventual service against the Germans on the continent. The series ended with MacDonald expressing frustration at being confined to Garnons, a Canadian convalescent depot near the Welsh border, where he was recuperating from a broken wrist suffered in a carrier accident. The following series of letters follows MacDonald's further experiences of training and of general



life in Britain, beginning with his discharge from Garnons and ending with his much-awaited departure for the continent in late June, in charge of a reinforcement detachment of 100 men. This is a prequel to the final instalment of this illuminating collection of letters, which takes MacDonald's military career as a combat infantry officer up to his repatriation from Holland to Canada in September 1945, and all of which have appeared in previous issues of CMH. For the complete letters, readers are referred to the following issues of the journal: Spring 2002, Autumn 2002, Summer 2003, Autumn 2004, and Spring 2006.

Cameron Pulsifer
Canadian War Museum

The last instalment of Hal MacDonald's letters ended with him experiencing a prolonged and frustrating period of rest and relaxation away from his unit. This was at Garnons, a convalescent home for Canadian officers near the Welsh border, run by the Massey family. It will be recalled that Hal was sent here to recuperate from a fracture to his wrist experienced in a Bren gun carrier accident. While he was there he would also have an operation to

correct a long-standing problem with his nose. He was told his nose would never be one hundred percent again and "if hit too hard it's likely to go into a funny shape or get broken. Doc warned me to always get in the first blow and hit hard," he wrote on 03 June 1943. "Very sound advice!"

A long letter of 28 and 29 June recorded a deep depression. "I just can't stand this life of laziness. Can't do a thing with this wrist in a



Hal MacDonald sitting in the backyard of the Headquarters Mess, Shoreham, UK, September 1942.

cast. Have been away [from the unit] over two months and that doesn't help any. I like to be absorbed in something and then I'm reasonably happy. Damn these hospitals and convalescent homes and broken wrists and wars and miles of ocean between us." Nonetheless, he wrote in conclusion: "Honestly I feel better now that I've unloaded off on your shoulders." And his next several letters in June reflected this, telling of long walks about the countryside, the soft chatter of the little goslings on the estate, and visits to nearby Hereford.

A letter of 30 June nonetheless reflected the kind of thoughts to which this period of enforced relaxation could give rise:

I never entertained the idea of writing a last letter, in case anything happened to me. I think it's heart-breaking enough to lose a loved one without receiving a letter months afterwards. It opens up the wound that would normally be slightly healed. Besides a last letter always seems like the final chapter whereas death really isn't 'cause the memory does live on forever. Love never dies. It fades, but true love can't die. No, dearest I'm not in that mood but I was just thinking of instances I've read of. We are born to fulfill a definite role and I do believe, to a certain extent, that our destinies are cast for us. We have to do the pushing and help ourselves. Well that's a fine vein of chatter to get into.

Hal left the hospital to have his cast removed on 7 July, and a jubilant handwritten letter of 13 July recorded his happiness at being "one out of five who gets a perfect union of the scaphoid." If it had not been perfect he would have had "an immobilized hand for a year & a half & possibly an operation and wiring of the bone." The nose specialist too had declared "everything satisfactory, so now I'm all ready for the shores of Italy or Norway or someplace." There was a celebration the next day when "three of us, all cast patients and three Ward Sisters" went to a small hotel for "inch-thick gorgeous beautiful steaks. I never expected to see one outside the London black market cafes." Later, after a jaunt into Birmingham for a meal and a movie: "It's not my imagination, people do pay more attention to Canadians. A guy is proud of the word 'Canada' on his shoulders, and me, I'm proud of the North Shore flash over it."

After the usual trying and complicated train trip, MacDonald arrived back at the Holding Unit where, according to a letter of 15-17 July, he found a lot of old friends: "Cubby Morgan, Dave Doig, Ev Palmer & Cy Mersereau...Cy gave me some good news last night, told me the Col[onel] had mentioned to him the fine job I did on Spartan, and also that the Brig[adier] had mentioned my good work. Funny, I never heard that before." But life at the holding unit was tedious, and towards the end of the month he was relieved to find he had been slated for the next draft to the North Shores, then stationed near Horsham. By 8 August he had rejoined them on the Downs "where the outfit was doing a few days training. The first night was wicked, the worst night I've ever spent outside. It really poured. About 3 a.m. after a particularly heavy shower I reached up to make sure the ground sheet was shedding the water clear of my head, raised one side a bit too much and got a bucket of water right down my neck. Oh it was fun. Honestly, though, it was so good to be back with the unit that I didn't mind it." Hal had been temporarily assigned to a rifle company, but was cheered to get a warm welcome from his old carrier platoon, who "whisled [sic] and yelled to draw my attention when I was leading my new platoon past them."

After this he spent “three fairly strenuous days as Carrier Umpire with a French Canadian unit. They were very hospitable.” These war schemes and exercises made him reflect on what he was doing. As he wrote on 13 August: “Life has a purpose, tho’ the life we’re leading right now has a somewhat different purpose. How odd it is, training to kill. Sometimes I like it – sometimes no... Am listening to Dr. Goebbels weekly analysis. We have to tune in on German stations to get good dance music.”

Hal got a real surprise two days later. “The Col. told me my name had been submitted as the N. Shore candidate for the post of ADC [aide-de-camp] to the GOC [General Officer Commanding] First Army...but frankly, darling, I hold no hopes because there will be political drag entering into it, also Staff Courses. However it’s nice to know he thinks I’m capable of doing the job. Not sure I’d like it. I do want to see action with the N. Shores and I told the Col. that...I’m beyond figuring what the Old Man intends to do. Dick Palmer tells me the Col. often mentioned to him that he wanted to get me back in Carriers very, very soon. Hell, a guy gets kicked around so much in the Army. Funny, but I’ve never gotten used to it, and never will.”

A letter of 19 August described his current rifle company: “Have a good gang. They’d steal the gold fillings out of a buddy’s mouth & sell

them if they could, but they will work. Ralph Daughney, Coy Cmdr, is a hell of a good guy and a hard worker.” He then returned to the subject of morals. With regard to married officers: “Would hazard a guess of 50% playing fair, 25% playing occasionally, 25% playing.”

Later in August Hal was “called to Divisional HQ for an interview re ADC to McNaughton.” After questions about his civilian career, army work, and qualifications, he informed the interviewing officers that he would “frankly... prefer to remain with my unit at this late stage of the game. When I left I thought no more about it, ‘cause there were so many other candidates, some of them very anxious for the job. Then last night I was told by Blake Oulton, who is attached to Div for awhile, that I was the one recommended to Army by the Division. Now can you beat that.”

After a weekend leave in London, he and his unit had “a busy week, including a 10-mile hike in full equipment, or an 8-mile hike at least once a day and a lot of other training, including a swim today in all clothes & equipment in a muddy pond...[E]njoy it all though.” He asked for a jar of mentholatum, as he had “found it excellent stuff to toughen up feet. On last few strenuous Route Marches have applied it before & after & never had a bit of trouble – sounds like a testimonial.”

Canadian soldiers talk to the locals during a break in training, May 1941. The original caption to this official Canadian Army photograph stated, “‘Oh to be in England’ – These lads, who are overseas with a central Ontario regiment of the Canadian army, appear to be enjoying the famous scenery of rural England. They also appear to be pretty popular with some of the English girls.”



Laurier Centre for Military Strategic and Disarmament Studies Photograph Collection.

“Good news today,” began a letter of 2 September. “Canadians in Italy. Great stuff. Wonder if, as and when for us.” Just a week later the North Shores were in Scotland, where “the scenery just about takes a guy’s breath away.” He was even finding time to shop for Campbell of Argyll material and MacDonald Clan Ranald dress plaid scarves. Letters of 13 and 15 September spoke of his days and nights on schemes. “Scotland is beautiful when one can sit or stand peacefully and admire it, but when one tramps across moors, through quagmires & peat bogs, over & around crags, nay nay, gets very tiresome... I still feel stiff and I thought I was in condition. I was coming down a steep mountain today, very muddy & drizzly, mud up to the hips, relieving one of my men of his Bren. One of my Sgts says to me ‘Mr. Mac if your wife could see you now she’d divorce you.’ Right now we’re huddled around a fire keeping warm – there’s a poker game going on... Things didn’t work right today, a few unfortunate accidents. One chap had both hands smashed, will no doubt lose them. Another lost 3 fingers. I learned my lesson long ago and under no circumstances would I play around with dud grenades or allow my men to do so.”

On a more cheerful note, he had put his “Runner on the NAAFI detail the other day and he was in charge of the beer. Needless to say he was feeling pretty high all day. Heard afterwards half my Pl[atoon] had gone to bed drunk... Cripps had only charged the boys once for a glass of beer and then kept refilling their glasses for nothing. They had glasses of beer hidden behind barrels, blackouts, etc. in anticipation of NAAFI closing. They are a hell of a good crowd but they can also be very annoying when they want to be, but also can be amazing for the same reason.”

Writing on Sunday, 20 September, he related that they had had their “toughest job yesterday... Dick Palmer, the best guy in the Unit, stepped on a live grenade and his foot is badly mangled. He’ll be out of it for a long time and may be lame for life.” Hal’s “A” Company had gone “through the show first & didn’t have a single casualty – well, only a couple of minor ones from heavy explosive charges. We were lucky. The area was swept afterwards & large number of live grenades picked up. A helluva interesting afternoon.”

“These lochs are lovely, but the bloody drizzle never ends. Have seen porpoises, some lovely

fishing villages, the high peaks of ever-changing mountainsides, the high clouds unrolling across their tops. All lovely.” He had more stories about the men: “One of the L/Cpls had a date but no money & my Runner told him he’d get some dough & sold the Cpls’ sweater & loaned him the money. Fighting & arguing all the time.” The next day, 21 September: “This p.m. we climbed a very high hill... [T]hought I’d never hit the peak, a beautiful view from the top, though. We went up in 15 minutes and came down in 5. Just couldn’t walk down, had to keep running & grabbing at tree trunks to stop progress.”

“Have gone 24 hours on one sandwich and no sleep,” he recorded on 22 September. Hal was also depressed, having been told that his turn at the holding unit, which he had avoided for some time, would soon be coming due. Then “the door burst open and Hugh Poley, my Sgt., insisted I go down to their Mess. So down I went. Had a few beers and a swell evening, including a sing-song... Got to bed at 1 a.m.” After church parade on 25 September he “walked down along the Loch & you should have seen the wee lads (2 1/2 or 3 years of age) in kilts & sporrans. Gosh they looked cute.”

MacDonald was back at the holding unit by 2 October and two days later reported happily: “At last I’ve got a job here in this rat race. I’ve been angling for it the last few days.” He could not yet say much about it, and groused about his current shortage of Canadian cigarettes: “right now I’m smoking Limey cigarettes and they’re frightful. In fact worse than that.” A series of letters described routine activities: going to movies in Aldershot; sending off a box with his Scottish purchases, including “3 1/2 yards of a nice tweed for you to have a suit made;” housekeeping chores like darning socks, and reminiscences. A letter of 16-18 October had a flash-back to Scotland: “Did I tell you I was parked right beside the Castle of the chief of the Campbell clan? It looked like a Walt Disney Castle, numerous sharp-pointed towers, from which, at any moment, I expected to see either witches or brooms emerging.”¹

At the end of the month, on 28 October, Hal disclosed what his recent job had been. It was to arrange and supervise the training and equipping of some 450 men and officers about to go on draft for service in Italy. His current company commander, he heard, had told North



Hal MacDonald sitting in a jeep with his driver, Sergeant Rennie, Shoreham, England, September 1942.

Shore Col. Buell “about the great job I’d been doing... [A] nice remark – far better than a kick in the pants... But I miss all the boys who left here very much. They were the pick of the crowd.”

Early in November, he was “very tired and snappish” because of overwork. “In the past 42 hours I have had exactly 2 hrs. sleep” He had to clear one draft by himself when the officers assigned to help had not showed up, “then again Tuesday it started with a bang & has never stopped.” On 4 November he described some of the procedures including medical and dental boards to ascertain who was fit, verification of nominal rolls, clearance sheets and so forth. A leave in London was very welcome. He and his friends found rooms at the Kenilworth, a temperance hotel, although the hotel clerk at first refused them. Then, finding they were Canadians, she said: “Oh, Canadians! Of course we have room for you.” She added: “I thought you were Americans & if you once harbor them, you never want to again.” They took in a stage show, ate at Lyons and, after an air raid, saw a nearby dance hall that had taken a hit: “very messy”. Hal shopped at Libertys, remarking: [G]osh it’s a beautiful store. Never imagined anything quite like it.”

On 18 November he wrote of the recent death of one of their young corporals which had really distressed and disturbed him. “An accident of course, but when he ran out into the open air he was a living torch. From head to foot. Went quite a way before he was caught. Most miserable. Well, shan’t upset you with the details. It’s just life and the risks taken.” A week later, on 28 November, he was still depressed: “Do wish I could get back with the Unit & then go into action. Yes, I know I’m doing a job but it’s not the job I left you to do. I came over for one reason. Hope it comes.” He went on to relate the events of a mess dance and the misadventures of several officers who over-indulged, “got lost and fell asleep in a tangle of bushes, or on the floor beside their beds and so on. It sounds stupid doesn’t it – but it’s a release. Of course it shouldn’t be carried too far. There’s a limit.”

Early in December he and some friends had attended “an excellent concert, Tommy Kinsman & his band, with a cabaret. Coulda listened to it all night.” Hal’s report on another entertainment was less favorable. “Last night went to an ENSA show. Not bad, but not good.” This referred to the British Entertainments National Service Association, whose shows were usually disliked by Canadians. The men had various



A Canadian soldier, armed with a Bren gun, talks to a young English boy during a break in training. The Canadians were practicing assault tactics used to storm a village, 24 February 1942.

interpretations of the meaning of the acronym ENSA, such as “Every Night Something Atrocious,” and “Even NAAFI Stands Aghast.”² Hal and Paul McCann had put in for a future London weekend, “a chance to get away and I do feel browned off. Maybe mingling with a crowd will cheer me up.” On 18 December, at the holding unit, he related that the “one time I felt disgusted with Canadian soldiers was Friday night. Went up to the Garrison Theatre to see a Concert Party. It was mostly Ballet, with Russian and French dances. Also a swell baritone & a very good contralto. Well, most of it was over the heads of the boys & the heckling & shouting & foot scraping really disgusted me. It was a heck of a good show & trained dancers. On the other hand the English troops were quiet and

appreciative. It once more brought to mind how much more refined the average Eng. is than the av. Canadian. The Canadians all appreciate a good song show & crude jokes though.”

On Christmas Eve, he and Doug Morton saw a concert then went up to the mess, where a boozy party with questionable women was in progress. “All I can say is ‘My Gawd how can they associate with such things and how can they get so drunk & disgusting’.” When back in the room, however, he “heard carol singing outside my door. Gave them encouragement & joined in. Gosh they were lovely voices. Then Doug came and opened a box of Chocolates & treated them.” The group asked the two to join them, and they all went on to visit other rooms where several

more officers “came out & we all sang & then bid them good night. Honestly they were so clean-looking & such nice voices. I really appreciated it. Gave me a decided lift.”

On Christmas Day 1943, the unit’s officers took extra beer, chocolates, and cigarettes down to the men’s dinner, then had their own. “Menu very imposing – Turkey, Duck, Pork, Goose – but no choice. You ate what you got. However twas a good dinner.” Then he opened parcels and walked into Fleet with friends. “Saw Clive of India, & Youth on Parade. It’s been a nice Christmas but I’m glad it’s over. Wish New Years was over too.”

The next few days he worked late into the night on drafts and, wanting refreshment after one of them, he and room mate Claude Savoy “took a large can, put a long handle on it (made from a coat-hanger) and now we can stick it right in the stove & water boils fast so we can have coffee or chocolate in a couple of minutes.” The work drive continued, and on New Year’s Eve Hal wrote, as he waited for a can of cream of tomato soup to heat up: “Have been working every night this week, but maybe Doug & I can get off to London tomorrow & stay overnight.” Referring to the progress of an anti-V.D. drive in Canada, he commented: “Apparently it’s tied in with the present one over here – though it’s an ever-present enemy to the boys’ welfare and also to some of the so-called officers. At one time had 2 Sgts & 5 O.R’s [other ranks] in Hosp[ital] from my Pl[atoon]. Now however we dish out quite drastic punishment & they are more careful. It’s a big problem, though, to try & teach control when they’ve been away for years & the war has loosened morals or possibly just made the immoral bolder.”

Hal’s letters during the following week record the welcome arrival of parcels and letters, and a brief visit to the North Shores on 9 January, for “a grand reunion with the gang — months since I’d seen them.” In answer to a question about his clothing needs, he replied: “only officers get clothing coupons. About 86 a year. Will just about cover a uniform, a Trench Coat & a few odds & ends.” The holding unit adjutant called him on 11 January “& offered me the opportunity of being attached to the Air Force for a week. It’s a regular thing, rotation of officers between services.” Hal turned it down because he

expected to be called back to his unit soon “and am taking no chances of being absent. Also one just lounges around for a week observing – no activity.”

By 17 January, he had had a London leave again and wrote of leaving a show “on a heavy, foggy night. Walked along Picadilly to see the crowds. They were terrific, half drunk & shouting – the prostitutes out in force. What a place. Doug & I got lost in the crowd & we both got back to the Hotel at the same time.” They got to bed “about 11 and Sunday slept in till about 11 a.m... It was still foggy that night. Visibility nil. Five buses nose to tail simply crawling along & guided by a blazing torch to penetrate the fog. Numerous accidents during the fog.” And their train back was “1/2 an hr late leaving and 1 1/2 hrs late arriving in Aldershot.” Later letters answered questions posed by Marjorie. “You ask about wages. A Sub gets \$5.00, Capt. \$6.50, Maj \$7.25, Lt.Col. approx. \$8.00, but they also get a number of allowances in various cases.”

On 24 January, Hal told a story about exercises on the Downs. “We used to sleep outside. Very comfortable though, ‘cause we all made lean-tos with the Carrier Tarpaulins and mattresses of boughs. That’s the advantage of being with Carriers – one always has a tarp to protect one from the elements. On a scheme in ‘42 we had two tarps together and about 10 men under them. Dick and I were at one end. We were handy an old house at the time. Noticed during the night that quite a few of the boys got up out of bed and went out but didn’t think much of it ‘cause we were quite dopey from lack of sleep. Next morning found the men half cut. They, or rather one of them, had discovered some old wine in the cellar of the house and told the others and they had sneaked out one at a time. The owner discovered the loss and it was traced to us. After the Bobbies had interviewed the men, the Colonel bawled them out and dismissed them, but they were worried for awhile. Only thing that saved them was the fact that they had not stolen anything else. Things like that give us something to talk about and keep us happy.”

He had again been working late for the last four nights he related on 26 January. Then “came the pay-off – we’re told all rotation [to units] frozen, not allowed to leave camp. It’s discouraging, kicking around here till some

Brass Hat decides on whatever it is.” He had had saddening news. Good friend Cubby Morgan, who had been serving in Italy “has died of his wounds. Cubby had too much of everything to be killed like that. However casualties must be expected.” On 9 February rotation was still frozen, also the coal ration had been cut and there was “no coal, no fire, no hot water.” He was cold, miserable, and cranky. But cheerier news came on 15 February, when he was told the North Shores had applied for “and got special permission to recall me.” Continuing on this positive note Hal had also seen “a unit of the Cdn. Army Show – very good. The whole show came over & then split into five parts. We’ve had three of it here so far & they were all good. Gosh it’s good to see & hear Cdn. gals again.”³ His demanding job “for the past 3 weeks had been to assemble & outfit another overseas draft, only 5 times larger than before...What a headache. It’s now 9 p.m. and I still have work to get out – and then we’re having a party. That’ll be around 12 o’clock. “He was expecting to leave for the regiment in a few days, and indeed by 2 February was back with the North Shores as 2 i/c of the carrier platoon. He was “working at getting back into the swing of it...It’s months since I’ve done anything but administrative work and 10 months since I’ve done Carrier work. But it’s coming along.”

He would soon be taking a hospitality leave, Hal wrote on 29 February. It would be “to a little village called ‘Mouse Hole’ (pronounced Muzzle). It’s about 25 miles outside Penzance & near St. Ives. Noted as one of the quaintest villages in England, nestled on a hillside overlooking a harbor & small fishing & sailing craft.” He added: “Had the honor & privilege of being within arms reach of ‘Monty.’ He gave us the once-over. What a marvellous personality & clear piercing eyes. Looked right square at him – eye to eye. A fluent speaker.”

He was back in London at the Rembrandt on 5 March for a weekend with friends before the Cornish leave. Hector Leblanc had memberships in several of the exclusive bottle clubs, to which one took one’s own liquor. They went to Murray’s “a very swish place, lovely lighting, small dance floor, stage for the cabaret

General Sir Bernard Montgomery addresses Canadian troops awaiting the invasion of Europe, England, 1 March 1944.

shows & a 5-piece band, really good too, could have listened to it all night.” After a few dances with girls from the cabaret, and a chat with “Abdul, the coffee boy from Baghdad,” they left just as the club closed, at 3 a.m. and slept till noon the next day. Then Hal turned his attention to a very different aspect of London life – the Underground. “Gosh it makes one realize what these people have gone through, when you see them lugging blankets & lunches to the subways to sleep – and they’re up early the next morn & at their work. These last weeks of raids have done a lot of damage & it’s as it originally was – the tubes are jammed with people and one has to pick one’s way over beds & blankets in order to board a train. Some of the stations have steel beds along the walls. Seeing these people makes one appreciate the war & its meaning. One can’t escape it. We take leaves to get away from it & go to nightclubs, but even there you sort of feel it’s forced pleasure. This thing is, and has been, a strain.” Then he told of a walk “thru Hyde Park. A country of free speech. One crowd listening to an oration against Protestants next to one against RC’s, next to one against all religion, and next one all for Socialism. Then at the gates of the Marble Arch, pamphlet peddlers of Socialist literature – all with beards & nondescript clothes. What a country.”

At the end of the London part of the leave, he and Paul (Bones) McCann had a 10-hour train



Photo by F.L. Duberville, LAC PA 129049



Canadian troops board a British train for a training scheme in Scotland, c.1943.

Some Canadian soldiers enjoy a pint of beer and a bite to eat with some locals in an English Pub.





Officers and Sergeants of Support Company, First Battalion, North Shore (NB) Regiment, Boscombe, England, 1944. **Front Row** (l-r): Sgt. L.A. Eslinger; Sgt. A.D. Edwards; Sgt. J.E. Springer; Sgt. A. Drapeau; Sgt. J.J. Bertin; Sgt. H.D. Pettigrew; Sgt. A.W. Fitzgerald; Sgt. J.W. Stymiest. **Second Row**: Lieut. B.J. DeWolfe; Lieut. W.B. Parker; Lieut. B.A.J. McElwaine; Major J.E. Anderson; Capt. C.H. Murphy; Lieut. J.A. Currie; **Lieut. H.S. MacDonald**; Lieut. W.H. Hayward. **Third Row**: Sgt. V.P. Morrison; Sgt. M.E. Sullivan; CSM W.A. Gillingham; CQMS A. Mann; CSM F.E. Daley; Sgt. W.H. Morrell; Sgt. H.J. Gilland; Sgt. H.E. McIntosh. **Back Row**: Sgt. G.J. Hickey; Sgt. F.C.D. Beebe; Sgt. W.M. Dwyer; Sgt. J.K. Rennie; Sgt. R.W. Davidson; Sgt. L.G. Morrison; Sgt. O. Oliver; Sgt. G.J. Wood.

trip to Cornwall, then a half-hour drive to Mouse Hole. "It's set on a hillside around a small bay...Only about 50 houses in the village, all stone, & they're all fishermen – the pub-owner, the baker – everyone." Their host family, the Dick Sansoms "are typical. Comfortable home, a son in the Royal Navy school, a daughter in the A.T.S." That night "we sat around the fire talking" then had "an evening meal of fish & chips & bread & jam, with real heavy cream over the jam. Very good." The next day they paddled in the ocean and got soaked by a tidal wave, watched gulls wheeling and circling over a Cornwall palm tree and talked to the fishermen, "all in rubber boots & turtle-neck sweaters." Hal enjoyed the Cornish "crisp yet musical speech & quaint phrases & their pride in their longevity. One old chap of 84 says 'We don't die down here – they have to shoot us.' Then he said, 'Well, I must go home & put my mother to bed.'" Hal and McCann took long walks, played darts, drank whiskey at the pub, and ate copious meals ("their whole system of cooking was frying in grease"), then spent evenings chatting by the fireside. "Mrs.

Sansom said the family had entertained numerous boys, but we were the first officers. She sd. she had been loathe to take us at first 'cause there was no style & she thought we would be snobbish. We changed that though."

By 14 March Hal was back with the unit, "under canvas, in the woods, no extra blankets & cold, cold, cold. I had no sleep last night, it rained most of the day. I have a cold & the After Leave Blues." He had been talking to friend Dave Gerrard, just returned from Canada, who told him about the easy-going training of the called-up troops there. Hal compared this to what "all our men are undergoing over here – the discomforts, the loneliness, the yearning for their loved-ones & the Fate, the unavoidable Fate in store for them one of these fine days – all for loved-ones & their country. However can Canada repay them – certainly not with a pat on the back when it's over & a \$1.30 while it's in progress. I say ship those damned Reservists over and we'll train them the way we want them."

The next night, still with his cold, “the siren went & we could hear Jerry & a couple of dogfights. So often he just drops his eggs, hit or miss, & you never know when one might be a hit. But by the sound of things upstairs we’re pasting him tonight.” Two nights later, 17 March, the All Clear had just sounded. He was to be in charge of the carriers for a week, “an awful lot to be done & we don’t know how much time we have to do it in.” Nonetheless, referring to what would become their task in the anticipated invasion of Europe: “There are tougher times coming. We all know it. It’s the culmination of our efforts. None of us are proud of the job we have to do – slaughter human beings, but it has to be done.” The action overhead continued night after night. On 22 March: “Just got in when the Ack-Ack started up. Very heavy. Stuck my head out to watch the bursts in the sky – a very dark night. Unstuck my head and tried to get to sleep when the sound of the Jerry drew near. You could hear him weaving and also hear the stuff coming down – a most unnerving sound. Wondered what he was thinking about – all by himself.”

Later still in March: “I wanted to lay a concentration of gas to test the respirators. I left

mine by the truck & went down wind to light the Generators. Gave a very heavy concentration & some were caught before they had a chance to adjust respirators, myself, I got quite a whiff of it and coughed my fool head off. Then used a lot of various types of smoke. Decided to toss a few grenades just before leaving, and my gosh that’s when the trouble started. Threw three [carrier] tracks in half an hour – one on a side hill, & worked till 4.30 getting them repaired. It’s rather exhilarating to drive fast in a Carrier on a warm day. The noise of the tracks & the wind pressure. But also very dirty – flies beating in one’s face, etc.” They had just heard that two more of the unit had been killed in Italy. “Paul Cogger & Bill Corbett got it down there. Gosh I feel bad about it.”

Early in April, MacDonald left for a week’s course on mechanics, near Chanctonbury Ring in West Sussex. “A swell trip. Such a difference now in travelling. Majority of road signs are up and Map Reading is practically nil, so one arrives at one’s destination reasonably fresh & not tired & strained from following a map.” It was a good course, he said and, not having much of a mechanical background, which was needed for

A group of army and air force officers at Rottingdam, Tudor Close, England, February 1943.

Back Row: J.E. Anderson; Saisman (RCAF); Merle Keith; Sherman (RCAF). **Front Row:** Blake Oulton; Mickey McCallum; Stronach (RCAF); Bill Hayward; Bob Forbes; **Hal MacDonald**; “Bones” McCann. **Kneeling:** Jim Currie.





Canadian soldiers in the UK undertake a landing exercise while training for D-Day.

command of carriers, he was learning a lot. Also, "It's really been fun. We're all from the same Div & no Zombies amongst us so morale is high & we all agree on our jobs, etc." A letter of 13-14 April described a carrier run on the course: "First run was a bit difficult as we got into cross-fire but after that it was o.k. Only one casualty, & that was Bob Grant who received a nasty burn & had his lashes & brows singed a bit." Hal was studying for exams. "Another one tomorrow, then work on Sunday. That will wind things up & Monday we're acting as observers & critics." That evening they "had a couple of drinks & just engaged in a Bde competition of Indian wrestling. Made so much noise the Mess Sec. came in to see if anything was wrong. The other guys, mostly Zombies, look on us with disgust & loathing - acting like Indians in a Mess. Stead of that we're just whacky and it's an outlet for spirits."⁴

"There's so much to tell you & so little I can," he began on 17 April. They had spent a drenching day on the Downs, with a minor carrier accident. Then they "had an end-of-course conference," which he considered somewhat futile. "All our formulas & drills etc. will only be proven in action & other & better ideas will be formulated. F'rinstance, what was practical in Africa was not practical or even possible in Italy." All the instructors & students had a wind-up party at a favourite rendezvous, the Roundabout Hotel and, as he said goodnight to the proprietress, who had "lost her son six months ago (Army), she gripped me by the shoulders & started sobbing - I reminded her of her Bill. So Bob & I tried to comfort her." They saw her back to her cottage, when "she took me to one side and swore by all that's holy that I was coming back safe & sound. She knew it. She sd. when she last said Good-bye to her son she knew he wouldn't return."

Back at the unit, still in tents, the days passed with games of softball, a demonstration (of what he does not say), and “a Yank show, a corker, perfect band, good vocalist & very good Comedians. The sky was clear and two planes playing games, leaving only vapor trails behind. Then all the boys sitting around. M’Gawd but they’re a fine-looking, clean-cut group of fellows. So young & keen & good heads.” He had “bought a \$50 Victory Bond in this sixth loan” in Marjorie’s name, to come out of his pay over the next six months. He could not say much: “everything’s censored & what I’d like to say I simply can’t, but some fine day I’ll be able to describe everything in detail & what a story it will make.” His enforced silence on activities continued. He did note, however, on 1 May: “See McK [Mackenzie] K[ing] is over here, Don’t imagine he’ll come near the Troops. They gave him quite a razzing in Aldershot last time.”

He found a previous night’s sleep in a carrier “chilly & uncomfortable,” he wrote on 3 May. Something caused him to reflect on his and his companions’ reasons for being there and what he thought they were owed. They were “fighting in order to have freedom & a free country. Those who have given & will give their lives die in a glorious cause and the world owes each & every one a debt. What I do want to see is that the children of those killed in action get a fair break. That is what those men died for – that their children might have freedom & live their own lives & we can only partially repay their sacrifice by helping the ones left behind.”

The next few letters gave brief glimpses of life on the move “with one of my carrier sections.” The weather was still “bad & very cold, heavy frost this morning. Days like that are hellish in Carriers, wet & cold...Had 2 1/2 hrs sleep out of 24.” On 7 May they were halted for half a day in a small town, vehicles parked along a residential street. “Lovely homes & gardens. It was pouring rain, driving straight down. Looked across the street & saw into the living room of one of the houses. They were just having tea & kids around the fire & lights & everything comfortable...Gosh it got me down. But then our spirits rise & fall so rapidly.” Back under canvas again, he was enjoying reading material from the last box. “Bystanders & Judge. And the Old Bill cartoons are priceless. At least a dozen have congregated in the tent to look them over – even the Colonel

was in.” He went on: “Frankly, this 2 i/c business gets me down. Now that I’ve done the job by myself I can’t appreciate this business. Then too that was my one opportunity of promotion as this seniority rating covering promotions means that a guy has a long wait. However, there’s nothing we can do.” It was not until 9 May that Colonel Buell explained the situation. He had expected that Jim Currie, the carriers’ commanding officer, would be transferred to another post; but the posting had fallen through. Otherwise, Hal would have had the carrier command. “Have no fear that you were unsatisfactory in any way, Harold,” said the colonel. “I consider you one of my strongest & most capable officers, but you are quite junior to some of the others.”

Everyone knew that the day of the invasion was approaching. But on 17 May, Hal wrote: “Sunday night the Col. came into my hut & spent a 1/2 hr. reading Coronets [the popular magazine]. Then started talking. He told me to be ready to move Monday as I was taking over a tough job.” Hal’s next three hours were spent with the 2 i/c and the colonel, who broke the news to him that he would not be going in with his carrier unit when the North Shores hit the beaches as part of the first wave in the forthcoming invasion. Instead, he had been given the job of returning to the holding unit and bringing over the regiment’s reinforcements, 100 men with equipment and vehicles, when they were needed after D-Day. “I was really angry & didn’t waste words telling him so; hate to leave my boys at this stage of the game. Was told this was the toughest job I’ve yet had – and most responsible. Really a Capt’s job, but Col. sd I’ve done good jobs at everything he’s given me – he wants to be perfectly certain this is done properly.” In the end, Hal gave in, saying: “I hate to leave, but you’re the Boss and this is the Army.’ Was so downhearted that I couldn’t settle down & started pacing the rd. thru the Camp. About 10 p.m. the Col. came along & walked with me, at one time had his arm around my shoulders. I felt some better.” He ended this section of the long letter with the thought that he would not “be away too long & should join my gang a few days after – so that’s it’s not too bad, but it’s such a crucial time to be away. Darling please believe me when I say don’t worry about papers

or radio talk. I'll be o.k. You aren't to worry on the day."

He continued later, when he and his contingent were in "a bunch of huts high on a windy hill, above a wind-swept plain." He was going to start "fairly strenuous hardening training" and "hoped to get into Windsor one of these fine days." On 20 May he wrote "that wind simply sweeps across this piece of devil's ground and bangs against the huts. Felt slightly down-hearted last evening, so three of us hit the town. Sat around drinking beer on a terrace on the banks of the Thames - a beautiful spot, with rowboats & swans perfecting the scene." He spoke of days busy with administrative jobs and added: "Hey Hon, for your info today was given full powers of a Lt.Col. Not bad, eh?" He ended with the reminder: "Remember what I've told you - don't worry over things."

The next days and weeks were full of work and, as he said in a letter of 29 May, he was "getting bushed. Guess I'll have to go out and get drunk. Tis about the only way to get over the feeling of nerves & claustrophobia" He spoke of his troop's letters and their thoughts "expressed only in letters home, which we have to censor. The high morale & the stark realization that at last their three years of waiting are to be rewarded - with what? They know what's ahead, the pals that will be lost & the friendships severed - for what? To do what they feel is right - to share in destroying the enemy and then, no doubt, be forgotten in the gay celebration of victory. All they ask is a helping hand to get their farms operating again, to live happily with their families, to buy their boats & fishing equipment, or to finish their education. To 95% of our guys, this is their third spring in England - waiting, fretting, hoping & planning for the day. I do pray that God will stay beside them all through it. As Eisenhower said: 'Comes the day when all that mortals can do is done, and our fate is in the hands of God.'"

D-Day, 6 June 1944, aroused complex feelings in Hal. "Just a note to relieve my feelings. Knew damn well I'd feel like this when D-Day came - damn near breaks my heart. My unit, my platoon, my friends in there at the beginning & I've got to wait...It was the most amazing sight. The air support, the big & little ships, a glorious

& inspiring sight. Spent a sleepless night, praying for my guys & that they are all there when I go in." He kept his own men "busy from 8 a.m. Gave 'em P.T., lectures, etc" and continued: "When grown men cry 'cause they're not with their unit today carrying out their jobs, well that's an indication of the fighting spirit of the 3rd Cdn. Div. The men who hit the beaches with a smile on their faces were carrying out their jobs as taught them on the Lochs of Scotland and on the various 10 day & 2 week exercises & landings & assaults, & night assaults & penetrations. Damn, damn. Months of tough schemes, of driving, of repetition for the task that started this morning. This is a job right up Cdns alley. To hit hard & hit again & again. We can do it. Our guys are marvellous -honestly. It's a beautiful sight to see thousands of assault craft steaming off. Takes ones breath away & makes one pray for guidance & success. We all feel the same way. Our Air Force is marvellous, hundreds & hundreds passing for past 24 hrs."

Hal had intended to keep a diary of his time in action, he stated in a letter of 8 June. But he changed his mind, informing Marjorie that instead, "My diary is going to be written to you. What I see & do & all the happenings & feelings will be sent you, the one I can talk to, that understands me." Three days later he recorded: "Have spent the last 1/2 hr counting aircraft. Just a thundering roar for an hr now. Only a few minutes flight & they'll be giving our guys the so necessary air support." He had seen a motion picture newscast: "It was pretty grim. The news of the invasion, & everything was similar to our last exercises and I could just vision the unit. Sorta got me down."

He wrote again on 13 June: "Saw a couple of my boys today - back in Hosp. A lot more I won't see again. A bit hard to take. Would like to give you the names of guys we knew who dropped off on the Beaches, but strict censorship forbids... [S]ome of my best friends are gone." On a later hospital visit, Hal saw a long-time friend, Merle (Scunch) Keith, who "was the victim of an S-mine between two houses. Got a hit in chest & leg. He was fortunate, though, got off very lucky. Got his story of the whole thing." Merle had "made his way back to the beach & while waiting in the lee of the wall was watching rest of the guys coming off. One of my men was trying to get a light Motor

Cycle started. He had on a German helmet, & all the while a sniper was trying to get him. The casualties all had a good laugh at him. That's what I like about our guys. Lying there with severe wounds & still able to laugh at others... Then Toot Moar had taken a strongpoint and the Jerries coming up out of it. One big blond Germ., halfway up, looked up at Toot & laughed in his face. Toot says "You dirty bastard" and let his ham fist go. Hec Leblanc seems to be impervious to bullets & goes around singing in French." On 16 June, he wrote: "Got a casualty list today. Not too bad considering the job they did, a lot of the ca[ualties] are minor ones from mines & booby traps. The Beach was a walkover, but the Wall & beyond pretty tough. Snipers and mortars were accurate, but all in all not deadly."

The previous day he had again given his men "strenuous P.T. and a 15 mile march," then had gone to the local hotel for a few beers. "Met a couple I'd met before. She, during a short absence on his part, said he was on duty tonight if I was interested. Politely said I wasn't. These people are nuts." Then, the "G.D. pilotless planes [German V-1s, also called "Buzz Bombs" or "Doodelbugs"] are a nuisance. Alerts & All Clears follow one another in rapid succession. Gives one a funny feeling to see one passing overhead, wondering just when the light will go out. They're only a nuisance but sometimes effective." He resumed on 20 June: "Speaking of the Flash Gordons, first couple of nights they were unnerving. Now it's just a matter of 'Well if the light goes out while it's overhead - hit a slit Trench.' Twas funny last night. About 10.30 one went over the Mess, very, very low - can't mistake the sound of them. We all went out to gawk & each one in turn was saying 'Don't drop there - it's over my Vehicles.' Fortunately it went on past."

The Mess had an invitation to a College of London dance. Ten of them decided to attend and on 25 June he gave an account of it. "One of the pleasantest evenings I've spent in England. Beautiful buildings, average age of the girls was 22 or 23 and most had on evening gowns. Such decent people - not the type one meets in Pubs, etc., and we rarely have the opportunity of meeting that type of person. The girls were charming company & we all had a good time. Really felt refreshed after the Dance. It finished

at 10 & after walking around the campus we left at 10.40. Mac & I have an invitation to tea & tennis." The next day his mood had darkened again. "Haven't had a murmur from you for over 5 weeks. No cigs, no parcels, no nothin... Have a million & one questions. If anything did happen to you I'd never know about it 'cause all my mail is in Normandy awaiting my arrival, & Dammit I had better arrive there soon or I'll go crazy or A.W.L."

At last, on 27 June, word came for him and his unit to move. "Hey, guess what? The light has changed to Green! Very busy in consequence...Markings to put on all Vehicles, O Groups to attend, maps to mark, men to brief, blankets & palliases to be turned in, all Vehicles loaded & kit loaded, rations arranged." After a straight 52 hours duty Hal's contingent at last reached a preliminary destination, from which they had a 4 am. start to get to their embarkation point. "Shall never forget those last two days - an average of 30 pilotless planes per day in and around camp. Sorta glad to get away from those things." They boarded ship at the London docks, and after a quiet crossing, Hal and his 100 strong contingent made their way across the Normandy beachhead to join the North Shore Regiment, which was then in the midst of a fierce struggle to capture the airport at Carpiquet, just outside the city of Caen. Hal's career as a combat officer was about to begin.

Notes

1. The castle and ancestral seat of the Duke of Argyll, and chief of the Campbells, is located at Inverary, which is north of Glasgow on the west coast of Scotland. Rev. R.M. Hickey, *The Scarlet Dawn* (Campbellton: Tribune Publishers Ltd., 1949), pp.169-170.
2. C.P. Stacey and Barbara M. Wilson, *The Half-Million: The Canadians in Britain, 1939-1946* (Toronto, 1987), p.107.
3. Dissatisfaction with ENSA and other English shows had led to the development of "Canadian entertainment overseas...such as the outstanding 'The Army Show,'" where such first class Canadian entertainers as Wayne and Shuster got their start. See W. Ray Stevens, *The Canadian Entertainers of World War II* (Oakville, ON 1993).
4. The term Zombie was generally used by active service personnel to refer to soldiers conscripted under the National Resources Mobilization Act, whose service was limited to Canada. Here MacDonald seems to use it simply as term of derision for soldiers he did not like.