

# 24th Canadian Field Ambulance

## Royal Canadian Army Medical Corps

### Harold Russell

The 24th Field Ambulance, Royal Canadian Army Medical Corps, was the only complete Kitchener-Waterloo, Ontario unit mobilized and sent overseas in the Second World War.<sup>1</sup> Today few know its story in spite of an active veterans' association. The purpose of this article is to pay tribute to the service and sacrifice of these extraordinary ordinary men who risked all when Canada was in peril.

The unit began as the 28th Field Ambulance of the Non-Permanent Active Militia (NPAM) formed in Kitchener in 1930 under the command of Lieutenant-Colonel A.J. McGanity who had been a medical officer in the Great War. In 1935 it was reorganized as the 24th Field Ambulance under Lieutenant-Colonel H.P. Hamilton with headquarters in the old post office building which was renovated to serve as an armoury. When Colonel Hamilton volunteered for active service in 1939 Lieutenant-Colonel R.G. Ratz took over command. This Militia unit provided the cadre of trained personnel for the Canadian Active Serve Force (CASF) unit.

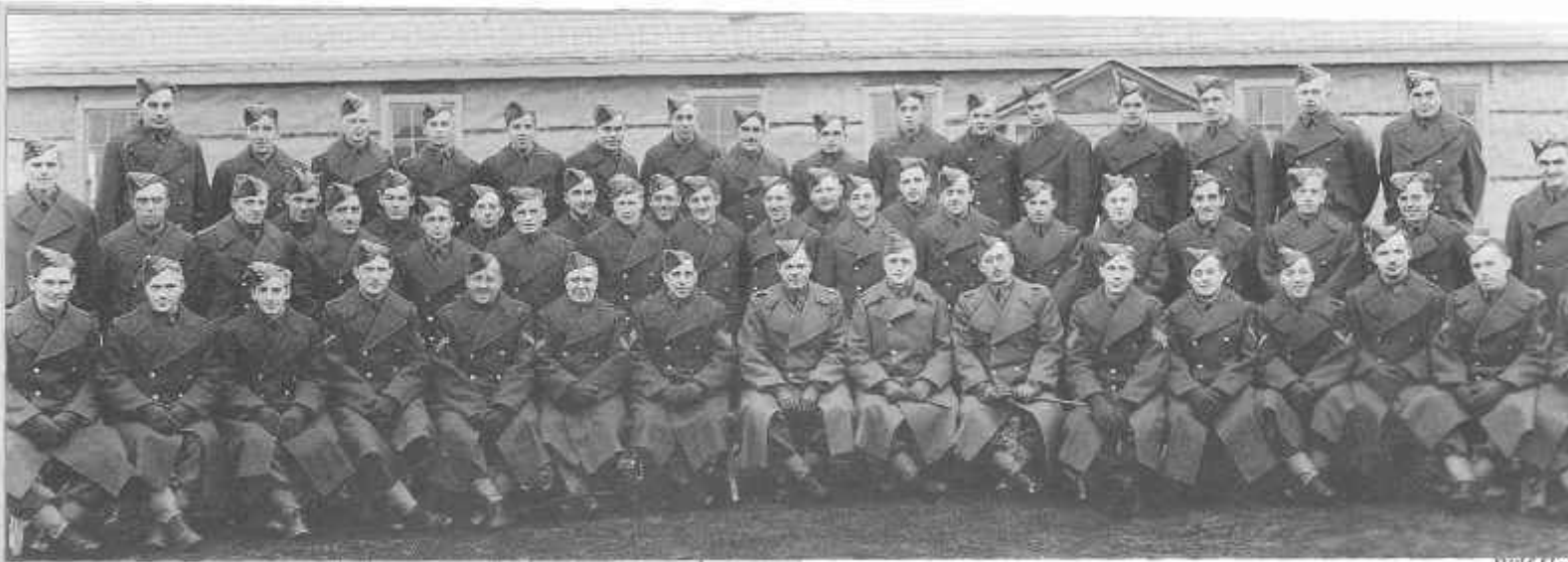
The Kitchener *Daily Record* headlined on 17 July 1940 "Close to 40 recruits expected to be signed by unit in first day." The mobilization order the day before had come from Ottawa to raise a field ambulance for overseas service. Across the Atlantic the Battle of Britain had just begun. Recruiting was completed rapidly in 10 days at the old post office building on King Street.<sup>2</sup> Wilf Howey encouraged six chums from Mill Street to join up. Bob Bergey recalls they had played sports together for years. Brothers Pearce and Harold Ruetz had tried other services but they were filled up. Earlier Ken Schneider had tried to join the 11th Field Ambulance led by the respected Doctor Hamilton but was too young. Bill Payette of Preston always wanted to be a doctor but had no money or education at

the end of the Depression. He recalls volunteers so poor the quartermaster had to give them requisitions for shoes. Bob Wahl, who had tried to join the Highland Light Infantry, but was told he was too short for the infantry, remustered in the medical corps. The commanding officer was a local doctor, Lieutenant-Colonel R.G. Ratz. Area doctors Captains C.C. Belyea, R.W. Zinkann, H.A. Williams and H.A. Lackner from Kitchener and Lieutenant T.B. Feick of New Hamburg also answered the call.

On 1 August 1940, 182 all ranks of the 24th went by train to Listowel under the command of Captain, later Major C.C. Belyea who became the second-in-command. They were quartered in a dirty old furniture factory glorified by the title Bennett Barracks. Battle dress uniforms and equipment were issued.<sup>3</sup> Wilf Howey recalls that he and Ken Schneider discovered that the officers were living better in a grand old home in town, so they found a job in the Officers' Mess. On 13 September the *Daily Record* printed a photo of the unit boarding a train and reported the town bid them farewell with a parade. Businesses closed down to see the boys off.

A second 24th Field Ambulance (Reserve) based at the Old Post Office Armoury was formed for home service and to recruit for the CASF unit. Lieutenant-Colonel McGanity returned as CO.<sup>4</sup> By January 1941 it reported a strength of 150<sup>5</sup> and RSM William Bowland was quoted in the *Record* that 22 members had joined for active service.<sup>6</sup>

The 24th CASF arrived in Camp Valcartier near Quebec City, where for a time it was the only English-speaking unit. John Gee of Listowel, who had been a Militia artillery sergeant, joined the unit here. Bob Wahl recalls route marches and medical lectures on topics such as anatomy,



**Top:** "B" Company, 24th Field Ambulance, CASF, Valcartier, Quebec, November 1940.  
**Above:** Officers of 24th Field Ambulance at Valcartier, November 1940 - back row (l-r): Lieutenant Insole, Captain H.A. Williams, Captain Miesner, Captain Gilleue, Captain McKibbon and Captain T.B. Feick; front row: Captain H.A. Lackner, Major C.C. Belyea, Lieutenant-Colonel Ratz, Captain R. W. Zinkann and Captain Taylor.

pressure points and how to recognize types of injuries. They befriended the tough Forestry Corps soldiers who helped police their canteen from rowdies as it sold beer for 5 cents a glass. On 4 July 1941 they returned to Ontario where RCAMC training continued with the 13th and 7th Field Ambulances living under canvas at Camp Borden. Borden's notorious dirty sand made it "hot, dry and very uncomfortable."<sup>7</sup> With the 7th Field Ambulance, the 24th joined the 5th Canadian Armoured Division wearing the maroon patch. A detachment of 41 Army Service Corps (RCASC) drivers, many who came from western Canada, joined the unit. The two field

ambulances of the 5th Division entrained to Debert Camp, Nova Scotia which was the embarkation point for overseas. Under the command of Lieutenant-Colonel Ratz they left the port of Halifax on 13 November 1941 on a convoy bound for Liverpool, England. Although U-boats were active, the crossing was uneventful.

### The 24th Prepares for Combat

The unit was stationed in barracks at Camp Aldershot and in the field at Malthouse Farm, where they settled in for two years of barrack cleaning, training courses and manoeuvres. It also operated a hospital, caring for 25-30 patients daily. Officers came and went, being posted on courses, as unit medical officers or to hospitals. In March 1942, Lieutenant-Colonel W.L. Coke replaced the highly-respected Ratz who was sick and returned to Canada. "Cokey Joe" was a Permanent Force officer and initiated a toughening up program. According to Payette, Colonel Coke on an inspection could look a man in the eye with one eye and look up and down his uniform with the other. He remarked, it was "the funniest thing I ever saw!"

Regimental Sergeant-Major John Gee supervised the training of the other ranks and provided the continuity in the unit as the Waterloo County medical officers were posted out. Gee proudly recalled "They were a great bunch [of men]; our unit would out do the others in map reading and other training." Pearce Ruetz was promoted to sergeant and sent on assault, mountain climbing and unarmed combat courses which he instructed back at the unit. Bill Payette was sent on a gas and smoke course. The memory of poison gas in the Great War made anti-gas defence a high priority. Bob Wahl was

on a mine detection and deactivation course with the engineers.

Map reading was emphasized as it was critical for casualty evacuation. They learned how to remove the injured from tanks or transport patients on stretchers down cliffs. Mock casualty exercises with realistic wounds taught them battlefield first aid. Tests of elementary training (TOETS) evaluated the men's military skills from small arms (they had to borrow Thompson and Bren light machine guns), field hygiene to first aid. Sports programmes of volleyball, baseball, hockey and boxing kept the men fit. Ten mile route marches with full equipment were remembered as tests of their endurance. The transport section received eight "slightly top heavy" English Austin ambulances.<sup>8</sup> Later six lightjeep ambulances with four wheel drive were added. Motorized exercises were limited by gasoline rationing in the early days. A unit exercise code named "Kitchener" preceded army exercises "Spartan" and "Grizzly" in 1943. Farther afield the men practised assault landings in Scotland. Ceremonial drill had to be sharpened for inspections by Minister of National

*The visit of the King and Queen to 24th Field Ambulance, September 1942.*

**Right:** *The Queen, wearing a silver Maple Leaf hat badge, talks to a young private. Between them stands Lieutenant-Colonel Coke.*

**Below left:** *The King examines a mock casualty.*

**Below right:** *Personnel of 24th Field Ambulance demonstrate how to remove casualties from armoured vehicles while the King (standing at right) observes. Col. Coke stands to the right of the King and Bob Wahl is standing in the truck.*

Defence Ralston and senior Canadian Army commanders including Generals MacNaughton and Sansom. Demonstrations of casualty evacuation were also on the programme, closely watched by Army Director of Medical Services staff. A highlight was the September 1942 visit of King George VI and Queen Elizabeth "who spent more time with us than with any other unit in the brigade."<sup>9</sup> A remarkable series of photographs document the inspection. The unit demonstrated casualty evacuation equipment and techniques while sports activities and field exercises go on in the background. Numerous general and staff officers made up the inspection party. Queen Elizabeth, who was Colonel-in-Chief of the RCAMC, sported a silver maple leaf pin in her bonnet.



The routine of preparing for war was broken by dances in the school hall attended by the ATS and WAAFS. Two movie shows were scheduled weekly. The men participated in a recorded radio broadcast which was transmitted to the folks back home in Canada. Lorries were made available to transport them on weekend passes to nearby Winchester. At YMCA leave centres in London there were volunteers like Else (Ma) Corrie who was a "mother overseas" for homesick servicemen. The "Y" arranged dances, provided dates and theatre tickets.<sup>10</sup> The padres conducted voluntary church parades. Christmas was celebrated with turkey dinners, entertainment and gifts for nearby Groombridge village children. The officers organized garden parties which cemented relations with the locals.

The Ruetz brothers were encouraged to look up the Schnarr girls and their mother from Kitchener, who had moved to Liverpool before the war. Mae and Vera, who were expected to join the British services, joined the CWAC in London. For Harold, meeting Mae was "love at first sight" and they went back to Liverpool every leave. They were married in October 1943 with Colonel Coke giving away the bride in the pre-embarkation period. Pearce and Vera dated and they also married back home in Kitchener after the war.

As the time to depart England drew closer, the unit's role became clearer. A field ambulance was to evacuate casualties and the ill from the combat zone to a safer area for proper medical care. Its task was to provide medical support for the 11th Brigade's infantry battalions which



*The marriage of Mae Schnarr to Harold Ruetz, October 1943, Eastbourne, England. (l-r): Wilf Howey, Pearce Ruetz, Mae Ruetz, Harold Ruetz, Vera Schnarr, Wally Cressman, Ken Rollo and Bob Bergey.*

included Stratford's Perth Regiment, the Cape Breton Highlanders and the Irish Regiment of Canada from Toronto. Each infantry battalion had a medical officer (RCAMC) who supervised unit health and trained unit medical personnel. In the field they maintained a Regimental Aid Post (RAP) to which the unit stretcher bearers would evacuate battle casualties.

A field ambulance was organized into a headquarters and two companies, divided into three sections (18 men) each. The forward company's sections were responsible for casualty evacuation by jeep ambulance from the battalion RAP to a casualty clearing post (CCP). A medical officer would provide initial treatment at the CCP. Heavy ambulances were used from the CCP to the advanced dressing station (ADS). The second company provided a tactical reserve and personnel to assist at the ADS.

Corporal Howey recalled the stress of combat:

The first time in action is the worst because you see things that turn your stomach.. fingers, toes, arms, head blown off.. you see that right off the bat and that's what turns you right away.. Oh my God, what am I doing here...once you get over that initial shock.. it's very difficult.. once you go through it.. it's like this is your job.. you know you have to do it. Being an NCO makes it that much worse.

By convention armies were not to fire on enemy medical services. Red crosses were on the ambulance top and sides, but Wilf Howey recalls that they stopped flying the red cross flag because they became a target for German artillery fire.

From the CCP casualties were evacuated by box or heavy ambulances to the advanced dressing station located at the unit headquarters. The ADS was on the "down" route near the brigade headquarters. A field hospital of 40 to 50 beds might be established under canvas which could be expanded into a series of wards. Harold Ruetz recalls wiring 700 feet of electrical cable to provide lamps of 10,000 watts above an operating table. The unit frequently set up in a commandeered building, ideally a local hospital or school, or a small factory or large home. The war-related injuries doctors might expect to treat included wounds caused by gunshot, shell and landmines and routine accidents. They had to treat soft tissue injury, abdominal and head

wounds, broken bones and burns. A serious consequence of these physical trauma was a general circulatory collapse or "surgical shock" which, untreated, could be lethal.<sup>11</sup> Bob Wahl found the medical procedures fascinating and the doctors informal. He often assisted the surgeons by operating the foot pedal pumps which drained fluids off abdominal cavities which were haemorrhaging.

Behind the field ambulances were other RCAMC units. At the advanced dressing stations, Medical officers practised triage to organize the incoming wounded. Priority I were bleeding cases in severe shock. They required plasma and went directly to field dressing stations. Priority II cases were severe wounds requiring immediate surgery and were transported to a field surgical unit which operated as an advanced surgical centre. A field transfusion team might also be attached. All other cases or Priority III were routed to the casualty clearing stations.<sup>12</sup> Surgery might take place anywhere in the chain of evacuation depending upon the number of casualties being processed. I Canadian Corps operated a motor ambulance convoy to casualty clearing stations, field surgical units, field dressing stations and 200-bed Canadian general hospitals in the rear. Long term casualties would eventually be removed from the combat zone in trains, aircraft or hospital ships.

## The Italian Campaign

The 24th Field Ambulance under Lieutenant-Colonel Coke sailed from Liverpool on 27 October 1943. Wilf Howey was not sure where they were going (they were told Ireland) until they saw Gibraltar and realized that they were off to Italy. Their convoy came under enemy torpedo bomber attack and the ship carrying No. 14 Canadian General Hospital sank with the loss of their equipment. Staff including 36 nurses were rescued. The 1st Canadian Division was already in Italy and together they eventually formed I Canadian Corps fighting as part of the British Eighth Army.

The unit landed at the port of Naples on 8 November. The men were inspected and welcomed by the commander of 5th Canadian Armoured Division, Major-General Guy Simonds. Much of their new equipment was left

in England. Unfortunately they had to take over worn out British ambulance equipment from the outgoing British 7th Armoured Division which had fought in Africa as the famous "Desert Rats." Deficiencies in medical stores took time to replace.<sup>13</sup> Exercises helped them prepare for Italian theatre conditions. Hordes of starving Italians had to be kept out of the unit lines. The unit operated a hospital and a division recovery centre of 80 beds during this learning phase. In the middle of January the 11th Brigade, which had impressed Simonds, were given their first attack assignment in the Ortona salient.

Then came the baptism of fire. Wilf Howey recalls:

Our first action was near Ortona [in January 1944] where the Perth Regiment took an awful beating. Our medical section was with the Perths. Jerries were on both sides as we went down a valley...you'd think we were on a route march...caught in a cross fire...the Perth Regiment took quite a shellacking...it was our first engagement...we were busy hauling out casualties.

In February in a defensive position near Orsogna Sergeant Bill Payette's section had to evacuate 37 casualties including 19 dead from the Perths. Their cooks had set up a meal parade at the entrance to a cave. A random German mortar bomb landed in their midst. They hardly had enough vehicles for all the wounded.<sup>14</sup> In one town a German Teller mine was set off creating a crater full of civilian casualties. Lieutenant-Colonel Coke confirmed Payette's respect when in his booming voice he ordered, "Back lads, back lads! This is a job for me!" and he went alone into the potentially dangerous hole.

In February 1944 Lieutenant-Colonel J.S. McCannel became CO, replacing Coke, who had been injured. During April the Canadian Corps was shifted west of the Apennines to participate in the advance which was to liberate Rome. For some time the Allies had been stalled by the Gustav Line, anchored at Cassino. The 24th Field Ambulance followed the 11th Brigade into the mountains northeast of Cassino. Stretcher bearers evacuated casualties from the 11th CIB, as well as British and New Zealand troops. The mountainous terrain led to extensive use of bearer parties forward of the CCP. David Gordon remembered "Casualties had to be evacuated at



*Medical personnel treat casualties in the field, Italy, 1944.*

In the Hitler Line battle Sergeant Pearce Ruetz's section was forward supporting the Irish Regiment. One platoon had heavy casualties in a valley between the opposing forces. Thirteen casualties were evacuated in daylight, under fire, but Ruetz stayed with three others requesting help from the rear. Receiving none, after dark he carried one of the soldiers on his back two miles to the Irish lines which had withdrawn to the hill top. "Did you ever try to return to your lines in the dark of night without getting killed?" Without the password, he risked being shot as an enemy patrol. The others were recovered in the morning's advance. For this action he was awarded the Military Medal.

night.. it was really difficult to take them a couple of miles over those mountain trails."<sup>15</sup> The division's jeep ambulances proved to be very valuable and were later used in the Korean war. The tracked Bren gun carriers were also modified to carry stretchers. The unit learned to provide in-ambulance blood transfusions.<sup>16</sup> Another innovation included putting the Field Ambulances on a Signals wireless network.<sup>17</sup>

The war diary reported a "moderately heavy flow of casualties through the sections" during this period. Gordon said this was "the busiest of his war experiences. [He] went without sleep for forty-eight hours." Lieutenant H.T. Griffiths reported "most cases being *on* the road to an ADS in 90 minutes to two hours of being wounded." The FSUs and CCSs were close behind and the ambulance convoys active. Another diary reported "Everyone amazed and a little shocked at the energetic and bold forward movements of the corps' medical units."<sup>20</sup> There was a commendation from the Director of Medical Services "Never before had casualties reached hospital so quickly and in such good condition."<sup>21</sup>

These innovations, and many others, were put to good use when the division supported the attack in mid-May on the Gustav and Hitler Lines in the Liri Valley. As the 5th Division passed through the 1st, advanced dressing stations leapfrogged forward from map reference to map reference. During this period of movement the unit worked in close cooperation with the 5th and 7th Field Ambulances as the valley was narrow and the lines of advance and casualty withdrawal were congested. For a time near Pontecorvo the 24th ADS took over full responsibility for evacuating the divisional front.<sup>18</sup> The May/June AI Section diaries showed that their CCP moved in close proximity to the Perth Regiment RAP. Section commander Captain T. A. Gander was attending to heavy tank trooper casualties from the New Brunswick Hussars. Most of the 122 casualties reported were from shelling, mortaring and mines.<sup>19</sup> Lieutenant E.C. Liscumb's B5 section located at a crossroad reported serious burn and shrapnel casualties from a vehicle convoy which was shelled. An artillery quad full of ammunition blew up and there were three deaths that night.

Respite from combat included periods in reserve. In June and July the Corps was in the Volturno River valley and later north near Foligno. "Canada Place" was a leave centre for the soldiers at Campobasso. The service corps personnel maintained and painted vehicles. Voluntary church parades were conducted by the chaplains. The paymaster's parade was always welcome. "A heavy mail and an auxiliary services show sent the unit to bed happy."<sup>22</sup> Proximity to the Adriatic Sea meant swim parades. Baseball matches relieved tension and reminded the boys of home. The unit volleyball team, nicknamed the "Mill Street Gang," won the Corps' championship and the story with a photograph of the sun-bronzed athletes was reported in the Daily Record. Evening movies in the lines were welcome. Nearby there was a mobile bath section which also gave

relief from the day's heat. Once when posted near a convent, Sergeant Payette was giving full-kitted defaulters double time punishment drill in the hot sun. Much to the amusement of the soldiers the nuns hissed "Bad sergeant!"

After a rest period when it operated a 70-bed hospital for minor sick and wounded, the 24th rejoined the division on the Adriatic coast near Ancona. There the men were reunited with the 1st Canadian Division and the Polish Corps. On August 30 the 5th Armoured Division broke through the Gothic Line across the Foglia River and the Corps fanned out beyond the objective. The Canadians had 235 killed and 591 wounded in three days.<sup>23</sup> The 24th handled 246 patients in 30 hours. At one time during this period medical officers and vehicles from other field ambulances were called in as they were the only divisional medical installation open. A large number of casualties were wounded German prisoners. On one September day more than 250 Canadian admissions for surgery were received at No.5 CCS, the majority evacuated through 24th Field Ambulance's ADS.<sup>24</sup> Two unit members were wounded and a driver, Private Wice, later died. Rapid moves and deployments marked this period and kept the service corps troops on their toes. The diarist noted "evidence of severe fighting made the trip a much more interesting one than usual." The Luftwaffe mounted air raids at night as the Allies had air superiority. By the end of September the autumn rains had bogged down the offensive in "the richest mud known to the Italian theatre."<sup>25</sup> In October the unit was in reserve operating a 40-bed hospital. Later it supported the 11th Brigade in a defensive position along the Savio River which was crossed successfully in that month's battles.

RSM John Gee got to see the overall picture as he supervised the unit, visiting the sections on his Norton motorcycle. He would determine the need for supplies, deliver mail and copies of the army paper *The Maple Leaf*. Once on a high plateau, overlooking a plain he got a panoramic view of the division breaking through the enemy lines. "There were explosions, haystacks and

buildings burning just like a war movie. They were just going through and taking everything with them. Low and behold on the road a jeep ambulance with stretchers came under mortar fire. Bang, bang, bang the shells fell just behind. The driver stopped and dove into the ditch. The shells went over top. He got back in and drove out of range of the mortars." Gee had the same experience being chased up the roads by mortar shells. The enemy decided to take a bridge out that was on his route. He hit the ditch and "there was an inferno for half an hour." On his motorcycle he had to keep the vehicle convoys tight in their frequent moves.

Casualty evacuation under shell fire was a recurring, frightening nightmare. Gordon believed the soft, deep mud saved him when a shell landed a few yards away when he was loading casualties into a heavy ambulance.<sup>26</sup> "A shell landing at night always seemed a lot closer and I don't mind admitting that my guts would tighten up and my legs get rubbery."<sup>27</sup> Captain TA. Gander reported his section had learned the value of "keeping under cover" and "well dug positions." On one casualty call Harold Ruetz's section came under fire and he hid under a tank as shrapnel rattled above. After a few of these episodes they got "slit trench religion."

Early in the campaign Pearce Ruetz's section was sent forward to support a unit RAP. He recalls "There was heavy shelling. The unit medical officer and his stretcher bearers wouldn't budge. Four of us had to go over and bring those casualties back. We were disgusted. They were their buddies. It wasn't our job. They were to bring us the casualties. We were so exhausted; so frightened! We were being hammered! Whenever we heard something coming we ducked. We were lucky if they fell behind us.

*The 1944 Corps Volleyball Champs:*  
Front row (l-r): Pearce Ruetz, Harold Ruetz, Wilf Howey and Bob Bergey; Back row: Ken Rollo, Lou Katona, Wally Cressman, Ralph Leighton, Captain Fraser, Smokey Shaddock, and Stan Widmeyer.





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*Stretcher-bearers evacuate a casualty, Italy, 1943*

When it was over back at our headquarters our colonel gave us a bottle of strong navy rum. Each took a good swig - 'Let's go back!' we cried." The false courage amazed him years later.

Pearce recalls that they were not always successful. One private "had a bad fracture and an arm wound. We treated him; gave him blood. He had a cigarette and he started talking to us. We thought 'The next ambulance we'll ship him out.' We put him in the ambulance but he was dead of shock. It was tough going through their personal belongings and writing it up. We had to do the burying, with those little army spades."

In November the unit was static near Urbino, again operating a hospital for minor sickness. Second-in-command Major W.G.M. Wilson became acting CO. as Colonel McCannel was serving at division headquarters. Urbino was cleaner than most towns and the people friendly, especially the "bella signorinas." They enjoyed the first dances of the campaign. The war diarist wrote, perhaps with an eye to future historians, "there were a great many chaperones whom we privately believe came mainly for the eats. Morale was good..no crime wave swept the unit and the number of charges were extremely small." The only lament, "mail has been extremely poor."<sup>28</sup> Pilfering by civilians was a problem as Part 1 Orders decreed the posting of guards especially at the vehicle park. For some the opportunity for a short leave to visit beautiful Florence or more distant Rome was the chance of a lifetime. Notice was received of Sergeant Pearce Ruetz's award of the Military Medal for gallant and distinguished service.

I Canadian Corps was part of one last pre-winter thrust. December found 5th Canadian Armoured Division on the offensive with the 24th in support near Ravenna. River crossings were the infantry's main problem as they hurdled the Lamone, Montone and advanced to the Senio River. The medics faced the challenge of evacuating casualties through areas of flooding and blown bridges. Unit personnel operated assault boats to ferry casualties. The ADS had to make several moves with the 7th working in close cooperation with the 24th. Casualty evacuation was frequently under fire, even casualty clearing stations suffered "intense enemy shelling."<sup>29</sup> There was "a noticeable increase in the incidence of neuropsychiatric cases attributable to battlefield exhaustion brought on by lack of decent sleep."<sup>30</sup> The prolonged campaign was taking a terrible toll and longer rest periods were required.

For some unit members Christmas 1944 was their fourth overseas. There were "decorations galore...the place is taking on a festive attitude...visitors have dropped in to wish their friends Season's Greetings."<sup>31</sup> The medics found ways to help the destitute Italians and they reciprocated with a fine five hour Christmas dinner for Bill Payette's section. He befriended the local priests including a Resurrection father who came from Preston, Ontario. The priest had been forced to work in a German hospital, but dared not reveal he was a Canadian. He longed to tell the Canadian POWs who saw him as a "black bastard" that he had drunk beer in Waterloo County pubs a few years before. Winter in northern Italy was miserably cold with rain, snow, and lots of mud. The unit rotated between active and reserve roles. Word of the death in action of former unit officer Captain Spafford, serving as the medical officer of the Irish Regiment of Canada, was sadly recorded. This required a temporary replacement from the unit medical staff.

In January 1945, the house in which Captain Fowler's section was treating a casualty was



struck by a shell. Corporal Gordon was buried and had to be dug out of the rubble. Other members of the section were saved because Colonel McCannel had ordered them out of the upper floors where the shell exploded. Their section was out of action and Sergeant Ruetz's section had to take over the line of evacuation.<sup>32</sup>

The arrival of new Canadian lorries and jeeps came with rumours of a major move. On 17 February 1945 a vehicle convoy began the drive across the Italian peninsula, past Florence and three days later arrived at the port of Leghorn. Vehicles and then personnel were loaded on an American Liberty Ship. Wilf Howey recalls the ship was provisioned with luxuries almost forgotten in combat. The war diarist commented the unit, "looked their last on Italy with nary a tear being shed" as they left Leghorn in a small convoy. After a calm crossing they arrived at the French port of Marseilles on the following day, 28 February.

## Northwest Europe

The move of Lieutenant-Colonel McCannel's 24th Field Ambulance was the consequence of a desire to enhance national pride by joining the I Canadian Corps with the II Corps already fighting in North-West Europe. This would unite all Canadian troops in the Canadian Army under the command of General Crerar. A vast column with the 24th near the vanguard stretched its way north through France and Belgium. Bill Payette, who spoke only English, was sent ahead to deal with the Flemish Belgians as his name sounded French. The 24th arrived at Langemark on 7 March where it immediately set up a 50-bed hospital. The unit added personnel and reverted to the standard from the light field ambulance establishment. Howey sought out a reunion with his brother in the 4th Armoured Division whom he had not seen for two years.

The 24th supported the 5th Armoured Division's advance into Holland near Nijmegen. In April it arrived near the "ghost town" of Arnhem, object of the failed 1944 operation. It swung through a corner of Germany and back to Holland. Their task was to advance to the shore of the IJsselmeer and cut off German forces in the area.

At Otterlo on 16 April the unit set up an ADS in an abandoned garage which soon was receiving casualties. That night a German force, trying to withdraw, blundered into the crossroads where 5th Division's headquarters, the 24th's ADS and an artillery regiment were located. Canadian gunners were firing over open sights. A Colonel and his batman shooting from beneath his caravan killed five attackers. The ADS was in the thick of battle under small arms and mortar fire. All medical officers were busy attending to the many wounded. RSM John Gee organized the Service Corps personnel into a defensive position and distributed ammunition on foot and in a jeep. "I was just doing my job," he said, but was awarded the Military Medal for his "coolness, courage and devotion to duty."<sup>33</sup> In the morning the enemy were driven off by flame-throwing carriers of the Irish Regiment. A third of the 146 casualties treated were German prisoners. Those requiring surgery were evacuated to a field dressing station/advanced surgical centre located at Arnhem.<sup>34</sup> The 24th diarist summed up "At 0830 hrs [when] the battle had ceased 400 German dead lay in the fields, ditches and roads and 250 had been taken prisoner from a force estimated to be 1000 strong."<sup>35</sup>

In the final phase of advance the division was sent to clear northeast Holland. There were frequent unit moves requiring reconnaissance parties and set up and dismantling of the ADS. Usually it seemed, this was carried out in the rain.<sup>36</sup> The 1st of May found the unit in Ten Boer, where although the weather was bad, the men were able to set up in a school away from the ever-present mud. At Sappemeer they set up a 50-bed hospital in another school anticipating the end of hostilities. On the 5th the Germans surrendered in that sector and VE day came officially on the 8th. The diarist noted that beautiful weather followed the passing of the "war clouds." Celebrations were subdued, "lacking the hilarious pitch that most people had expected." The 24th went to a peacetime routine with few admissions to the ADS. Recreational sports and dances were organized which included the Dutch. The civilian population, which had been near to starvation, welcomed their liberators. There was a memorial mass church parade and march past of the maroon patch division for their respected commander Major-General B.M. Hoffmeister.

In July repatriation drafts were heading back to Canada. Many had been overseas for four years and personnel changes were constant. Pearce Ruetz left for England to receive his Military Medal from the King at Buckingham Palace, but returned and remained to the end. His married brother Harold, with more long service points, got on an early draft home. The 24th volleyball team won the Canadian Forces Overseas' and the Allied Forces' championships. Bob Bergy's draft was deferred so he could play. At Leuwarden, Holland on 17 October 1945 the 24th Canadian Field Ambulance was disbanded and the remaining personnel departed for home.

The costs and rewards were high. Private I.M. Wice and Private E.B. Harris, and four former members of the unit died as a result of combat and one was taken prisoner. Thirty-two were wounded. The unit received 1 OBE, 1 MBE, 2 MCs, 3 MMs, 1 U.S. Bronze Star and 8 were mentioned-in-dispatches. The real battle honour of the 24th Field Ambulance was the knowledge that thousands of wounded men were saved by prompt, compassionate, and professional care.

Brigadier H.M. Elder, the Deputy Director of Medical Services, commended the RCAMC units of the First Canadian Army when he bid farewell. "In this war only one in a hundred died of wounds compared to one in ten in the last. Disease was a comparatively negligible factor. This could only be accomplished by the magnificent spirit of self sacrifice, co-operation and team work shown by all ranks throughout the Corps."<sup>37</sup> The 24th had distinguished itself and its members dispersed with pride and some sadness. The final diarist reported a remark often heard in unit lines "We are not the best, but we are better than the rest."<sup>38</sup>

## Notes

Interviews were conducted with the following personnel:

Warrant Officer Class II Wilf Howey, 2 July 1997  
 Sergeant Bill Payette, 13 August 1997.  
 Sergeant Pearce Ruetz and Lance Corporal Harold Ruetz, 19 August 1997.  
 Warrant Officer Class I John Gee, 5 September 1997.  
 Private Bob Wahl, 13 April 1998.

1. Gait's Highland Light Infantry (HLI), comprised of two companies recruited in Gait and two companies from Kitchener-Waterloo, went overseas in July 1941.

- Kitchener's Scots Fusiliers of Canada was mobilized but was broken up before being sent overseas.
2. Kitchener-Waterloo *Record*, 22 May 1965.
  3. Kitchener *Daily Record*, 1 August 1940.
  4. *Ibid.*, 1 August 1940.
  5. *Ibid.*, January, 1941.
  6. *Ibid.*, 27 September 1941.
  7. War Diary, 24th Canadian Field Ambulance, RCAMC 28 July 1941.
  8. War Diary, 14 April 1942.
  9. *Ibid.*, 24 April 1942.
  10. She visited Canada. "Vets Flock to See Overseas Mother", *Record*, undated clipping.
  11. John Grayson, *March Through Military Medicine* (Toronto: Lugus Productions Ltd., 1990), pp.39-40.
  12. W.R. Feasby, *Official History of the Canadian Medical Services 1939-1945* (Ottawa: Queen's Printer, 1956), p.85.
  13. G.W.L. Nicholson, *Seventy Years of Service* (Ottawa: Borealis Press, 1977), p.175.
  14. Daniel Dancocks, *The D-Day Dodgers* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1991), p.217.
  15. *Ibid.*, p.234.
  16. War Diary, 30 June and 31 December 1944.
  17. Nicholson, pp. 180-181.
  18. Feasby, p. 183.
  19. War Diary, 30 June 1944.
  20. Nicholson, p. 182.
  21. 50th Anniversary [History], *24th Canadian Field Ambulance (Active) RCAMC*. 13-15 July, 1990.
  22. War Diary, 15 August 1944.
  23. Feasby, p. 194.
  24. Nicholson, p. 191.
  25. *Ibid.*, p. 192.
  26. David Gordon, *The Stretcher Bearers* (Stroud, ON: Pacesetter Press, 1995), p.63.
  27. *Ibid.*, p.54.
  28. *War Diary*, 30 November 1944.
  29. Feasby, p.206.
  30. Nicholson, p. 197.
  31. War Diary, 24 December 1944.
  32. Gordon, pp.87-88.
  33. War Diary, Undated commendation by Lt. Col. J.S. McCannel.
  34. Feasby, p.289.
  35. War Diary, 17 April 1945.
  36. *Ibid.*, 22 April 1945.
  37. *Ibid.*, 15 July 1945.
  38. *Ibid.*, 17 October 1945.

Major Harold Russell, CD began his military career as a private with the 24th Field Ambulance (Reserve) in 1953. After being commissioned as an officer in the Royal Canadian Corps of Signals while attending Waterloo College (WLU) Canadian Officer Training Corps, he served briefly with the successor unit, 12 Medical Company, RCAMC (Militia). This article, in its original form, first appeared in the *Waterloo Historical Society, Annual Volume*, 84 - 1997. Harold Russell is a past president of the Waterloo Historical Society and a retired history teacher.