

McGill Medicine on the Frontlines: A Student's Perspective of the 3rd Canadian General Hospital

Luca Melnychuk

MDCM Candidate Class of 2019

Supervisor: Dr. Richard Fraser

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Introduction

The history of the 3rd Canadian General Hospital that McGill established has been well documented due to its excellent and brilliant care during WWI. The Hospital helped McGill's Medical School gain prestige and an upstanding reputation throughout the world. However, the contribution of the McGill medical students to the Hospital before and during the war has not been well documented. This essay is dedicated to telling the story of the students that left their studies and halted their careers to serve their country and university in one of the most perilous conflicts the world has known.

WWI General Hospitals

The inevitable result of any armed conflict is the death or injury of soldiers who are positioned at the front lines. In order to save the lives of those who are gravely injured during combat, armies have developed hospital systems to allow soldiers to receive proper treatment in a timely fashion that puts them out of the way of conflict and harm's way. These hospital systems have changed with advances in combat and technology.

During WWI, the advent of trench warfare brought about changes in the types of injuries and treatment that needed to be performed on soldiers. Wounded allied soldiers were identified on the battlefield by the regimental surgeon, who delivered first aid on the field. The wounded were then transported by regimental stretcher bearers to "safe" positions near the lines, called Aid Posts. From these posts, stretcher bearers from field ambulances transported the wounded to dressing stations and Clearing Hospitals where more specific attention could be given to the wounded. The purpose of the Clearing Hospital was to distribute the wounded. From the Clearing Hospitals the wounded were

transported by motor ambulance to ambulance trains. Soldiers who had minor injuries and who were expected back at the front were sent to Stationary Hospitals that had around 200 beds. Further away from the lines were the General Hospitals, with between 500-2000 beds, for soldiers who had more serious injuries. Following treatment at the General Hospitals the wounded were once again sent by rail to Hospital ships that crossed the British channel, the final destination being Base Hospitals located in England.

The General Hospitals were as fully equipped as most civilian hospitals. Most contained pathology and clinical laboratories and an X-ray department. At the beginning of the war, most General Hospitals were staffed with 21 medical officers including Surgeons, Physicians and Specialists such as Orthopedists, Neurologists, Radiologists, Sanitary officers, Ophthalmologists, Anaesthesiologists and Dentists.

3rd General Hospital – McGill

The 3rd Canadian General Hospital - McGill was the crown jewel of the Canadian Army Medical Corps. It was the first hospital raised in the British Empire that was entirely from one university and set a precedent for other university medical schools, such as Laval, Queens and Toronto, to follow. The physicians and surgeons of the hospital were selected from the Montreal General Hospital (MGH) and Royal Victoria Hospital (RVH). Nurses from the same hospitals and many medical students from McGill also volunteered to join the hospital. The Hospital was originally located at Dannes-Camiers and was a tent hospital with a capacity of over 1500 beds. The beginning of winter in 1915 proved difficult for the Hospital as rain, heavy wind and snow caused many problems for the tents. In December 1915, it received orders to move to Bourgogne at the site of a former Jesuit College. This

location allowed the hospital to expand to 2000 beds, which was about 4 times the size of the MGH at the time. The Hospital was demobilized following the end of WWI in 1919.

The 3rd General Hospital received praise from both the British and Canadian militaries for its work. The surgical unit had a post-operative mortality rate that was similar to civilian hospitals at the current time(1). The legacy of the Hospital extends beyond its effort to treat the wounded as well. For example, physicians in its pathology department studied the causes of death of soldiers due to impact on the brain which led to the introduction of metal helmets for Canadian soldiers on the front lines, probably saving hundreds of lives over the course of the war(2).

The 3rd General Hospital would not have been possible without the dedication and work of several prominent members of McGill's Faculty of Medicine. The biggest advocate for the establishment of the 3rd General Hospital was the Dean of Medicine at McGill, Dr. Herbert Stanley Birkett. He had previously served in the non-permanent Army Medical Services of Canada and commanded the hospital until 1917(1). Dr. John Munroe, who had previously served as Medical Officer to the 2nd (Montreal) Brigade, Heavy artillery, was appointed as the Officer in Charge of Surgery. Dr. John McRae, who had previously served in South Africa as a Medical Officer to the 1st Brigade, Canadian Field Artillery, 1st Canadian Division, was appointed Officer in Charge of Medicine. Dr. McRae would become well known after the war for the poem "In Flanders Field", which was written during his service in the 3rd Canadian General Hospital.

McGill Medical Students

Preparation

At the end of October 1914, Dr. Birkett announced to the students in the Faculty of Medicine that a General Hospital was being formed to go to the Western Front in France(3). He emphasised that the nation was at war and that the medical men of the country must bare a heavy responsibility. He announced that the hospital would be staffed by faculty and nurses from the MGH and RVH as well as student volunteers from the 3rd, 4th and 5th years of medical school. Dr. Birkett made it clear that volunteering had some conditions. For example, it would not make it easier for students to obtain their medical degree. In an interview with the McGill Daily, he mentioned that students would need to enlist in the Canadian Army Medical Corps and in a subsequent lecture he insisted that only those with “the strongest physique and possessing the greatest endurance could be accepted”(4, 5).

Several days after this announcement the medical students met amongst themselves to discuss the proposal. There was a large interest, but only if the conditions were suitable(6). The students did not want to leave until the current session was finished in the spring. The 5th year students wanted to finish their degree before departing and the 4th year students felt that they would be in a better position to help the wounded after completing their 4th year courses. As well, the students wanted to form a training camp until the end of the session.

The Faculty of Medicine accepted most of these conditions. The 5th year students had their exams moved up and were granted their degrees before departing for service. The faculty also coordinated with the Canadian and Provincial Medical boards to allow

graduating students to gain their medical licenses(4). All medical students who volunteered would be allowed to stop their regular work at 4 PM everyday and join the McGill regiment, in order to receive military training and start to acclimatize themselves to the military “culture”. The Faculty’s call for students to join the McGill regiment was well received as 156 medical students were listed as part of the regiment by November 14, 1914. Medical students participated in drills independently until mid-December, 1914 when they joined the rest of the McGill regiment.

Before the Medical students left for the 1914 Christmas break, Dr. Birkett gave a lecture on the General Hospital in which he emphasised the qualifications that would be needed to join and elaborated on what students would be doing at the Hospital. He stated the 5th year students would continue their current hospital work, such as assisting surgeons and acting as dressers and case reporters. The students were warned about the stark conditions of war and the perils they would likely face in service. Expectations were



Figure 1 - Medical Students of the 3rd Canadian General Hospital – McGill, in front of the Strathcona Medical Building – 1915 - (1)

high ; Dr. George Adami, Professor of Pathology in the Faculty, proclaimed: “We are going to be the greatest, grandest, finest and best military hospital in France”(7).

Students began applying in January, 1915 and by the end of the month 128 had enrolled. In all, half of the 5th year, one quarter of the 4th year, one third of the 3rd year and one third of the 2nd year classes applied(8). It was also revealed by Dr. Birkett that students would not be confined to one department but would actively participate in medicine, surgery and the clinical laboratories(9). At the beginning of February, 1915, it was announced that the medical students who volunteered for the hospital would start conducting stretcher drills within a week and leave the McGill regiment. Specific training for the General Hospital was also to begin very soon. In fact, so many students applied for the hospital that a testing period was instituted. There was a strong emphasis placed on following orders and discipline; according to Birkett the one condition for acceptance to the hospital was “unquestioning obedience ”(10). Students who were accepted enlisted as privates.

During the winter semester, students had several lectures concerning wartime medicine and surgery. There was even an update of the medical conditions in France in a letter from William Osler that was read to the 5th year medical class. In it, he discussed the type of wounds encountered from bullets and shrapnel. He also emphasized the significance of sepsis and infections that were occurring in the hospitals, particularly tetanus since most of the battlefields were in cultivated land in which *Tetanus bacillus*, the causative agent of tetanus, thrived. Near the end of the winter session, Dr. Elder gave a lecture on taking care of the wounded in war. He mentioned how hospitals needed to be ready to accommodate hundreds of patients on just several hours notice (11).

Students who enrolled were clearly devoted to the task. Many gave up their positions on Varsity athletic teams in order to participate in the drills for the General Hospital. The annual Med banquet was renamed the “War Dinner” and those who attended felt a “fervor of imperialism with splendid Canadian support.”(12). There was a great deal of enthusiasm displayed by the Medical students when it was announced that the size of the hospital was expanding and more volunteers would be needed(13).

All the volunteer selections were made by the end of February, 1915. Students began the process of entering military service by undergoing physical exams and receiving the anti-typhoid vaccine. They were sworn into active service on March 8, 1915 and took their exams in early April. The active members of the General Hospital began regularly parading in March and several instructors arrived from Ottawa to help with the organization of the hospital(14). On March 30, the medical students of the General Hospital moved into barracks located at 5 Mansfield street, which was known as St George’s Immigration Home(15). On May 6, they paraded to the steamship *Metagama* that would take them to England. Of significance to the General Hospital’s voyage across the Atlantic was the sinking of the passenger liner, RMS *Lusitana*, on May 7.

At War

The men of the 3rd Canadian General Hospital reached the Moore Barracks, Shorncliffe, England on May 16, 1915 and remained stationed there for several weeks until they received orders to move to France. On June 14, they departed for France on the steamer, the *Huanchaco*. Once arriving on the shores of Boulogne, the men marched to Dannes-Camiers, the location of the tent hospital. The majority of the month of June was

spent in preparation. It was not until August 7 that the 3rd General Hospital began receiving patients.

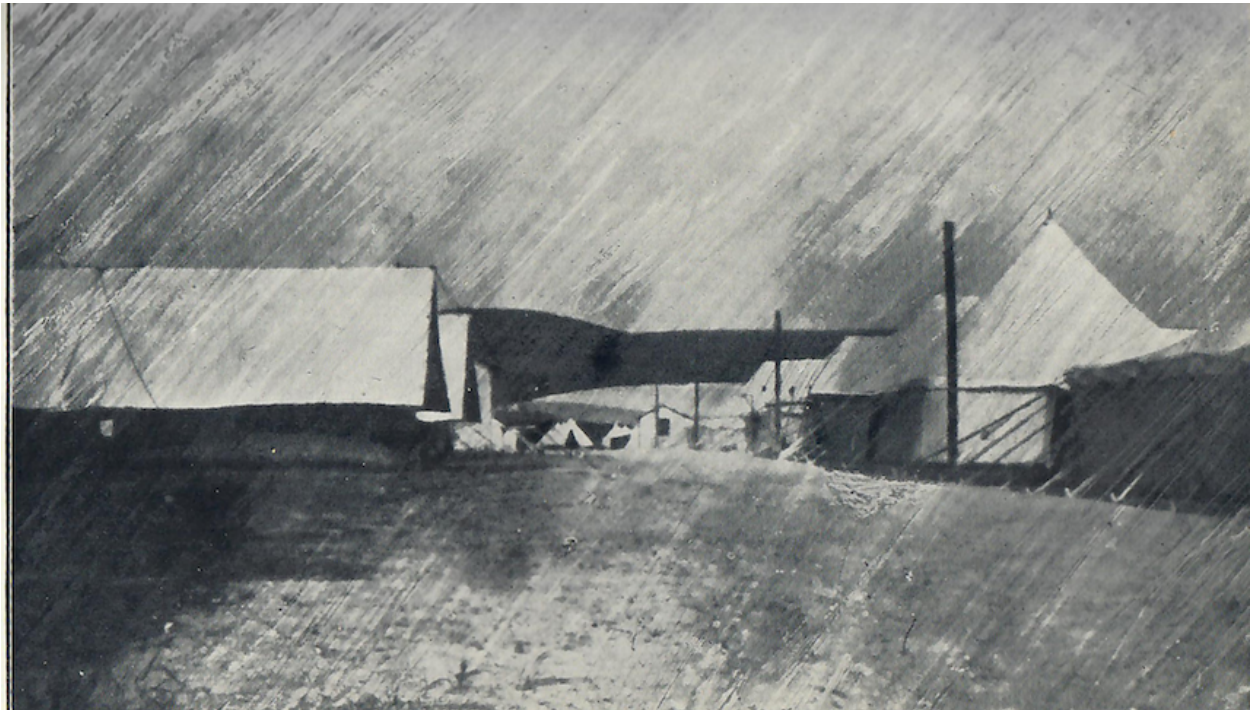


Figure 2 – The tent hospital at Dannes-Camiers – 1915 - (1)

At the tent hospital, the medical students participated in a wide variety of the medical operations. Some aided in surgery with Dr. Elder as surgical orderlies(1). Most of the surgeries that were performed were for the removal of bullets and shrapnel(16). The surgical department was also aided immensely by the radiology and pathological departments, both of which were staffed with medical students. The radiology department became impeccable at finding bullets and pieces of shrapnel to within millimeters so the surgical efforts to remove them could be the least invasive. The chief of the department, Dr. A. H. Pirie became such an innovator in this field that he was inducted to the Röntgen society of London, one of the most prestigious honours for a radiologist at the time. As well, the pathology department played a key role in diagnosing infections in patients who had to

undergo surgery. There were also several dentistry students from McGill who joined the hospital and performed tooth fillings and extractions on soldiers(1). The procedures the medical students were exposed to would not be routinely performed in civilian hospitals in Montreal such as the MGH and RVH.

While the students were actively participating in the efforts of the 3rd General Hospital they continued their academic endeavours. As soon as the hospital began functioning, they started a Medical Students Society that was sanctioned by Dr. Birkett. The meetings of the MSS were regularly frequented by Birkett, as well as Drs. Elder and McRae(16). Dr. Elder resumed his teaching duties by holding clinics 3 times a week for the 4th and 5th year students. These clinics were attended by students who were off-duty and were described as “an opportunity to keep from rusting” their medical knowledge(16). Dr. Elder kept his “humorous way of pressing home knowledge” during his clinics(16). What must have come as a treat for the students were the lectures and consultations given by Sir William Osler when he visited the hospital in September of 1915(1). There was also a library located at both Dannes-Camiers and Boulogne that contained medical literature so the medical students could keep up with their studies(17).

When the medical students were not on active duty or involved with academics they kept themselves busy with various activities. Soccer was a big part of their downtime. The Hospital fielded a team that competed against various other hospitals and military units in the region. The students and nurses were even able to hold some social functions. As the Hospital was packing up for it’s move to Boulogne and after all the patients were evacuated, a masquerade ball was held in an empty tent(18). The Y.M.C.A also provided a

tent for the medical students and soldiers that hosted concerts and had an area for the students to write letters back home.



Figure 3 – A surgery being performed at the 3rd General Hospital - McGill – 1916 - (1)

Several medical students that had been on the staff of the McGill Daily decided to organize a newspaper for the Hospital that would be known as the McGilliken. In total only 14 issues were printed from October, 1915 to February, 1916 with production ending due to a military censor. Most issues began with the latest news from the war collected from various sources. Contributions to the paper came from medical students and other officers at the hospital. The paper contained articles on social events, athletics, observations from the medical students and news from McGill. A recurring feature to the McGilliken was a section entitled “On Dit,,” where all the Hospital gossip seemed to be distributed in anonymous quotes. It also seemed like the paper was used as a forum to discuss problems

within the Hospital. The 10th issue of the McGilliken discussed the ire of the Hospital as it was moving from Dannes-Camiers to Boulogne.

It is hard to exactly determine the morale of the medical students during the war, but some of their thoughts can be gleaned from diaries they kept. One student wrote: “Had there been no war, the first line-up rugby practice of the season would have taken place at McGill this afternoon. Instead of football, I did a few dressings and cleaned and straightened up the ward”(1). Another student who was working as a surgical orderly wrote: “All night I washed dirty, bloody, lousy boys ... I finished just at dawn, and, looking out of the window, saw passing on a stretcher a still figure, covered with the Union Jack – another name added to the long roll of those who die for Canada”(1). It must have been very difficult for those that served in the Hospital to face the monstrosities of war on a daily basis.

After the War

The 5th year medical students began returning to McGill to complete their studies in December of 1915 and the rest of the medical students slowly returned to McGill in the following years. Fortunately, none of the students who departed with the 3rd General Hospital were killed in action. However, Dr. McRae and Dr. Elder both succumbed to illnesses that they encountered while in service. Several medical students received awards for their service including the Military Cross and Bar, the Military Cross and the Croix de Guerre of the French army.

The lessons and the teachings of the 3rd General Hospital lived beyond WWI. When global conflict erupted again in 1939, McGill men once again answered the call for service. Several medical students who had shipped off with the 3rd General Hospital returned in a

medical capacity. Dr. Phillipe Bernard Belanger became the Chief of Surgical Service at the No. 17 Canadian General Hospital and Dr. George Albert Lyons would command the No. 14 Canadian Field Ambulance(19, 20). I would imagine that these men and others who served with the 3rd General Hospital applied what they learned as students to their military service during WWII.

Conclusion

The 3rd General Hospital showcased the ability and prowess possessed by McGill's Medical School with contributions from every level. Before the hospital opened in Europe, the medical students provided the necessary support for the hospital to be organized while still pursuing their medical studies at McGill. The Hospital became known as one of the most formidable on the Western Front, in which students played an important role helping to establish and maintain. The role and daily life of these students were quite unique as they had both military duties and still maintained their scholarly activities as medical students.

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