

12 (Vancouver) Field Ambulance



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Militi Succurrimus

**Honorary Colonel John Blatherwick, CM, OBC, CD, MD, FRCP(C), LLD(Hon)
2006 to 2012**

Cover by Douglas Blatherwick

INTRODUCTION

In thinking about what I could leave the unit after my six years as the Honorary Colonel, I realized that one of my goals had been to produce a history of the unit. I sat down one Friday and started working on it and by Sunday I had it 75% written thanks to material that Adrian French had sent me – I say written as I had basically copied material from others but I did still had to sort it out! I have switched tenses often in the history - that wasn't my intention but I did. I wrote a lot of it in the present tense and so my perspective on the history pervades the book. However, you will get a sense of the past and present in the book and I hope that you enjoy it. Ben Roth gave me the HCol (emeritus) title!

John Blatherwick
Honorary Colonel (emeritus)
12 (Vancouver) Field Ambulance

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This book is dedicated

to my wife
to our children

Carol Elaine Blatherwick (the real doctor in the family)
Lieutenant(N) James Edward Blatherwick, RCN
David Allan Blatherwick and his wife Jennifer
Douglas Stephen Blatherwick and his wife Lamor
Paula Judy Hanson

to our grandchildren:

Alec, Elizabeth Hope, Katherine, Nicole, Krista, Stephanie, and Travis

And the Men and Woman of 12 (Vancouver) Field Ambulance Past and Present

With thanks to:

- Adrian French – curator extraordinaire of the museum and for digging out great material for the book.
- Jeff Pope – for getting the photos from Afghanistan for the book and the walls of the 12 Field Ambulance
- Jenni Doty for getting me photos and information
- Scott Stewart for helping with the RSM information
- Dave Lowe, Rod Needham and Ben Roth for their assistance
- Henry Kwok for providing material
- Bruce Holvick for sharing his photos with me, many of which are included in the book
- Tylere Couture, David Andersen, Justin Johnson, Chris Buckley, Wayne Wohlgenuth, Colin Terry Afghan photos ¹



These are excerpts from Tylere Couture's time in Afghanistan starting in February 2008 (Task Force 1-08)

From CFB Edmonton, we were bussed down to the International Airport, and loaded into an Airbus CC-150 Polaris. After a couple quick fuel stops in Goose Bay, Labrador, and Köln, Germany, we arrived in Camp Mirage, a Canadian support base in the Middle East. From there I was lucky enough to enjoy the flight into Kandahar Airfield (KAF) on one of our new C-17 Globemasters, as opposed to a versatile but vomit-inducing CC-130 Hercules. Other than all the guys in arid army uniforms, this was the first sign we weren't on just any normal long flight halfway around the world.

¹ We were visiting a village south of Kandahar City and I stopped to chat with these kids. I asked them what they were learning in school, and they told me they were learning to read and write. So, I asked them to write something in my notebook. In the picture, I am reading the Pashto they wrote back to them. My role was Kandahar City CIMIC (Civil Military Cooperation) Team Leader. I received the Task Force Commander's Commendation for my work. (**Captain Tylere Couture**)
Tylere moved to Vancouver Island to take a teaching position and is now attached to 11 (Victoria) Field Ambulance

Particularly, when the announcement over the intercom came, “please fasten your seatbelts as we prepare for a combat landing”...huh? As it turns out, in an aircraft as large as the C-17, a combat landing isn’t too much different than a normal civilian landing, except for a steeper dive and a few shallow bobs and weaves. And they turned the lights out, which made it a little more exciting too.

We were immediately hit by our first big shock in Kandahar. Now about 2am local time, and 24 hours into our trip, it was freezing. By about 5am we had finished clearing into the base, and were shown to our bunks in the transient quarters. Rather than give in to sleep, most of us decided to fight the jet lag and stayed up until our next briefing at 1300. Our first stop, of course, was the famed KAF Tim Horton’s trailer where we got a shot of moral boost, then I met up with a friend from Victoria, Warrant Officer Bob Macdonald, who gave us a quick tour the massive place. KAF is a multi-national base of over 12,000 soldiers about 15km southwest of Kandahar City. It is also home to the soldiers of 11 other nations.

By mid-afternoon, we were finally ready to head out to our much smaller Camp Nathan Smith (CNS), where the 250 soldiers and civilians of the Provincial Reconstruction Team are stationed. Expecting the butterflies to hit on my first trip outside the wire, I was amazed that nothing of the sort happened, in fact I almost felt like I was back in Wainwright on our training exercise. Despite it being a soldier’s secondary duty to complain, it now became obvious how effective our pre-deployment training was. As we entered the city - a sprawl of mud huts with vendors lining the roadside - a small group of about five children waved to us calling for their friends who were soon pouring out of nearby huts to join in. Another small group of children down the road were jumping up and down giving the thumbs up, except for one little punk who tossed an experimental stone our way. The locals pulled over and watched us go by, no doubt a common scene for many for decades. After about half an hour we reached the gates of CNS in the northwest sector of the city. I finally got some sleep.

Twice now I have visited the University of Kandahar. In the chancellor’s vision, it is a thriving centre of research and higher education, where world class professors come to study the unique culture and history of southern Afghanistan. In reality, this former Taliban training ground is a large, nearly empty plot of land, with a string of eleven dormitories and an enormous blue mosque along a single road. These dormitories have been fitted to serve as an administrative building, lecture halls, and a faculty of education, medicine, engineering, and agriculture. A few hundred meters further down the road, two empty female dormitories sit. In many parts of the university’s land, Kuchis (Afghan nomads) have raised their tents and people displaced from fighting in rural districts have erected crude mud homes.

The first time we arrived, the few students outside looked on in curiosity. After dismounting from our vehicles, a small group including myself approached the students, the crowd of which was quickly growing. I asked in Pashto if any of them spoke English, and several responded “yes”. I spoke a few greetings in Pashto, as I now always do, but this crowd wasn’t as easy to impress. They asked me where I learned the language, and when I explained that I studied it from a book in Canada, I could tell they were sceptical. They started testing me, assuming I had only memorized a dozen phrases, so I asked one of the students what subject he was studying at the University, but I did not understand his reply. I asked them what it was in English, and they said “Bekar”. I asked him to describe what thing a “Bekar” studied and they laughed at me as they explained he was the guy who made bread in the morning...the baker.

The first time I met Dr Totakhail, the Chancellor of Kandahar University, I was originally expecting to discuss only a list of projects he had requested help with from the KPRT, instead, I found myself in a philosophical discussion about education’s role in the future of Afghanistan. The Chancellor passionately portrayed his vision for the University, and explained how it was the key to southern Afghanistan progressing from the backward era in which it currently resides. He said that a generational change is required, but “if we do not educate our sons and daughters, we will be left with only another generation of the same.” He articulated his hope for professor/student exchanges with Canadian universities, and the creation of a research facility where scholars would come from around the world to discuss Afghanistan’s unique history. He apologized to me when he excitedly began to discuss other projects he was coordinating with other funding agencies such as the World Bank, and he was visibly proud when he told me that this year, several of his students were accepted into masters programs in neighbouring countries.

12 (Vancouver) FIELD AMBULANCE

Who we are

12 (Vancouver) Field Ambulance is a Canadian Forces Medical Reserve unit in Vancouver which serves 39 Brigade but is not part of the Brigade. It belongs to the Canadian Forces Health Services Group (which is part of the Chief Military Personnel department). The unit is based at the Jericho Garrison at 4050 West 4th Avenue in Vancouver.

Our members are soldiers first – medical personnel second. Most of the members have a civilian job and are part of that group that Sir Winston Churchill is purported to have said, “The Reserve soldier is twice a citizen, serving their country in their civilian role and serving their country in their military role”. For the past six years (February 2006 to February 2012), the author has been proud to be the Honorary Colonel of this outstanding group of dedicated men and women.

The Mission of the Canadian Forces Health Services Group is “Understanding and Caring - For those who serve anytime anywhere”. The Vision is “We are a professional military health service trusted for our expertise. We understand and respect the unique needs of those who serve anytime, anywhere. The excellence of our care makes us proud to serve”. The mission of the CFHS is “To provide full spectrum, high quality health services to Canada’s fighting forces wherever they serve.”

To understand the history of 12 Field Ambulance, we must look at the history of the 24th Medical Company and the history of the Canadian Medical Services as a Corps - the Royal Canadian Army Medical Corps. The History of the Corps, is the history of the Company, is the history of the Field Ambulance.

The History of the Canadian Forces Health Services / Royal Canadian Army Medical Corps

At the beginning of the Canadian Military History, the Medical Services consisted of the Regimental-Surgeon, who was a Personal Servant of the Commanding Officer, usually without any military training. He carried the rank of Surgeon-Major, and the equipment, supplies, etc. of his trade were his problem and usually inadequate. With the withdrawal of the British Regiments, many Surgeon-Majors stayed in Canada, and there together with some medical men from the United States, who came to Canada with the “Loyalists” after 1783, provided the only Medical Services in Canada both Army and Civilian.

FENIAN RAIDS 1866 - 1870

The Fenian Raids of 1866 and the Red River Expedition of 1870 demonstrated the need of the Militia to have more efficient medical services than the part-time civilian Surgeon-Majors employed by the battalions could provide. The Surgeon-Major frequently serviced both sides of a conflict and were unassisted by other ranks, other than the occasional voluntary help from civilians, such as medical students.

NORTHWEST REBELLION 1885

The first all Canadian military force was raised in 1885 to put down the rebellion in what is now the province of Saskatchewan. Here the real problem of casualty evacuation became recognized by Ottawa. The Commanding Officer of the contingent wrote, “The sick are a regular anchor”. The campaign bogged down until an inventive medical officer rigged stretchers of canvas, and hides to transport the sick. The medical officers reported on such problems as winter clothing, boots, rations, and water bottles.

Colonel Darby Bergin (a Member of Parliament) was appointed Surgeon-General and instructed to organize a medical service. He served until



1896 as the Surgeon-General. Ottawa approved the establishment of two field hospitals in civilian establishments and the military medical services of Canada began. Within seven days of taking over, the first field hospital was on its way to Winnipeg from Ottawa. Other Ranks needed to assist the physicians were recruited by calling on volunteers from medical students. Nurses were used based on the experience of the Crimea and were placed in hospitals in Moose Jaw and Saskatoon. Casualties were evacuated from the field hospitals 50 miles by wagon and 1100 miles by barge.



However, from the end of the actions in Saskatchewan, the medical serves again deteriorated to the status of part-time Regimental Surgeons. In 1896 **Sir Frederick Borden**, a former medical officer, became Minister of Militia and Defence (CFB Borden was named after him). **Surgeon-Major J.H.L. Neilson** was appointed Director-General of the Medical Staff in 1898. His office was a railed off corridor end in Ottawa which was at the same time, his office, stores, and reserve stores depot. In 1889, the Canadian Army Militia Medical Service was created. This resulted in the appointment of a part-time Principal Medical Officer in each Military District. He was

responsible for the medical training in the District, and the medical facilities at the summer camps.

ARMY MEDICAL SERVICES 1889

The regimental medical component planned in 1889 was a stretcher-bearer section, under the Regimental Surgeon with a Corporal Medical orderly attached. In addition, authority was given for 1 Bearer Company to each Brigade and 3 Field Hospitals to a Division with proportional allotments to the cavalry and independent brigades. The Bearer Company consisted of 3 medical officers, 61 other ranks and 10 wagons. They were entitled to train for 9 days at Headquarters and 3 days at Camp. The Field Hospital consisted of 100 beds with 4 medical officers and 40 men plus a quartermaster. Training was provided for 12 days at camp plus providing the medical services at camp. Base Hospitals were formed in civilian hospitals.

One Bearer Company was organized in Halifax in time to see the beginning of the Canadian commitment in South Africa. In all, the Medical Services formed #10 Canadian Field Hospital in South Africa and sent 7 Medical Officers with Regiments plus 16 nurses. All saw considerable action handling 1,000 casualties in an 83 day period. From this engagement the Medical Services developed such things as an improved hospital tent (the Hubert Tent), a Light Wagon, and efficient lighting using Acetylene.

Nursing Sister Georgina Fane Pope was awarded the Royal Red Cross (First Class) for her services in South Africa. Her medals are shown below.



Lieutenant-Colonel **George Stirling Ryerson** was made a Knight of Grace of the Order of St. John for his services.

Lieutenant (later Major-General) **William Henry Snyder Nickerson, VC, CB, CMG**, of the Royal Army Medical Corps, received the Victoria Cross ² in South Africa and was made a Companion of the Order of the Bath and Companion of the Order of St. Michael and St. George in WWI. He was born in Dorchester, New Brunswick.



Major-General The Honourable **Sir Marie-Joseph-Eugène Fiset**, KT, CMG, DSO, KStJ, ED, MD, born in Rimouski, Quebec, was a physician in the rank of Major with the Royal Canadian Regiment leaving Quebec on 30 October 1899 and arriving in Cape Town, South Africa in November 1899. He received the Distinguished Service Order for his services in South Africa as well as three times Mentioned-in-Despatches. He left the army after returning from South Africa to train as an Ear, Nose and Throat

² At Wakkerstroom, on the evening of the 20th April, 1900, during the advance of the Infantry to support the Mounted Troops, Lieutenant Nickerson went, in the most gallant manner, under a heavy rifle and shell fire, to attend a wounded man, dressed his wounds, and remained with him till he had him conveyed to a place of safety. Nickerson's replica medals are on display at the Halifax Citadel Military Museum and a painting of the event shown above...

Surgeon. However, he rejoined the Army Medical Services becoming the Adjutant and then the Director-General of Medical Services. On 22nd December 1906, he became the Deputy Minister of Militia and Defence a position he held throughout WWI. He retired on 31 March 1924 to become a Member of Parliament. In December 1939, he retired as a Member of Parliament and became the 18th Lieutenant-Governor of Quebec serving until October 1950.

The CANADIAN ARMY MEDICAL CORPS is BORN 02 JULY 1904

As a result of the experience in South African, General Order #98 of 2 July 1904 announced a re-organization of the Military Medical Services in Canada, which in future was to consist of:

1. The Army Medical Department under the Director-General of Medical Services (Colonel Fiset);
2. The Medical Staff – a Regimental Medical Officer for each District (8 medical officers);
3. The Army Medical Corps (Permanent and non Permanent) to include medical officers, nursing officers, other ranks and dental surgeons (36 non-commissioned orderlies and storesmen);
4. The Regiment Medical Services which gave the medical officers a combatant rank. The medical officers had authority over the stretcher-bearers and patients. In 1906, the medical staff came into the Army Medical Corps and in 1900; the Regimental Medical Officers also came into the Corps.

FIELD AMBULANCE 1906

In 1906 the Bearer Companies and Field Hospitals were re-formed into a combination of both and called Field Ambulances. The question of sanitation, which prior to this time was nobody's business, became the responsibility of the Commanding Officer of the Field Ambulance and was in effect administered by the medical officers. At the 1906 summer camp in Nova Scotia, a model hygiene set-up was demonstrated by the Regimental Medical Officer and put into effect throughout the camp. Within 3 days, sickness was reduced in the camp.

WORLD WAR I – 1914 to 1919



In 1914, the Medical Corps consisted of 20 Permanent Forces medical officers, 5 nursing sisters and 102 other ranks. The non permanent active militia (NPAM) medical staff had on paper 6 cavalry field ambulances, 15 Field Ambulances and 2 Clearing Hospitals. By 1918, the Canadian Army Medical Services (CAMC) had 68 units serving 425,000 Canadian Troops in the Canadian Expeditionary Forces (CEF). The CAMC sent 4 Hospital Units to Gallipoli and 4 to Vladivostok. A young man name Lester Bowles Pearson, better known as **Private 'Mike' Pearson, the 14th Prime Minister of Canada**, served in Greece as a stretcher bearer.³



When the First Contingent of the Canadian Expeditionary Force (CEF) went overseas, the 1st Canadian General Hospital (raised from the CAMC reserves) deployed to France. On 21 October 1914, as most of the 1st Contingent was training in Britain, the 1 CGH was treating patients in France. By the time the 1st Canadian Division arrived in France arrived in the Ypres

³ In 1915, Pearson went to Salonika in northern Greece to serve as an orderly in a Canadian Field Hospital supporting the 10th Division, which was fighting the Bulgarians. In 1916, he trained in the Royal Flying Corps as a pilot. He was given the name 'Mike' while with the RFC as it was determined by his comrades that Lester was no name for a fighter pilot. His medals above include the Companion of the Order of Canada, the Order of Merit (OM) and the OBE (first type) plus his WWI medals and four commemorative medals.

area, the hospital had already treated nearly 3,000 patients. Members of 1 CGH received the 1914 Star; most of the other members of the 1st Canadian Division received the 1914-1915 Star as they didn't get to the continent until 1915.

World War I saw the CAMC treated 540,000 Hospital cases. The CAMC enrolled 21,453 members (3,147 nursing sisters) during WWI of which 1,325 casualties and 504 who died. On 15 April 1915 the CAMC treated 5500 gas casualties and treated 134,000 gas casualties between 3 September and 16 October 1916 at the "Somme". Two CAMC medical officers and two stretcher bearers received the Victoria Cross in WWI and 325 other awards were made to the Corps.

WWI CANADIAN ARMY MEDICAL CORPS VICTORIA CROSS AWARDS

Captain Francis Alexander Caron Scrimger, VC born in Montreal and serving with the CAMC attached to the 14th Battalion (Royal Montreal Regiment). He received the Victoria Cross for the following action:

"During the Second Battle of Ypres on 25 April 1915 at Saint-Julien, Belgium, Captain Scrimger was in charge of an advanced dressing station in a farmhouse near Wiltje on the St. Julien-Ypres Road. The advancing enemy were bombarding the area with an intense shelling. The German infantry were within sight. Scrimger directed the removal of the wounded under the heavy fire. Captain Scrimger and a badly wounded Captain Macdonald were the last men left at the station. Scrimger carried the wounded officer out of the farmhouse to the road. The bombardment of shell forced Scrimger to stop and place Macdonald on the road. Scrimger then protected him with his own body. During a lull in the gunfire Scrimger again carried Macdonald toward help. When he was unable to carry him any further, he remained with the wounded man until help could be obtained."



Captain Bellenden Seymour Hutcheson, VC was born in Mount Carmel, Illinois, USA, but renounced his American citizenship (and reclaimed it after the war) to serve in the CAMC in WWI. He also received the Military Cross. His citation for 02 September 1918 reads:

"For most conspicuous bravery and devotion to duty on September 2nd, when under most intense shell, machine-gun and rifle fire, he went through the Quéant-Drocourt Support Line with the battalion. Without hesitation and with utter disregard of personal safety he remained on the field until every wounded man had been attended to. He dressed the wounds of a seriously wounded officer under terrific machine-gun and shell fire, and, with the assistance of prisoners and of his own men, succeeded in evacuating him to safety, despite the fact that the bearer party suffered heavy casualties. Immediately afterwards he rushed forward, in full view of the enemy, under heavy machine-gun and rifle fire, to tend a wounded serjeant, and, having placed him in a shell-hole, dressed his wounds. Captain Hutcheson performed many similar gallant acts, and, by his coolness and devotion to duty, many lives were saved."

Photo at left



Private John Francis Young, VC was born in Kidderminster, England on 14 January 1893, and came to Canada as a young man. He died of tuberculosis in Ste-Agathe, Quebec on 7 November 1929. He enlisted in the 87th Infantry Battalion, Canadian Expeditionary Force, serving as a stretcher-bearer. Private Young was awarded the Victoria Cross for his conduct on 2 September 1918 during the fighting for the Drocourt-Quéant Line, near Dury in France. On that day, his company suffered heavy casualties from German shell- and machine gun fire. His citation reads:

"For most conspicuous bravery and devotion to duty in attack at Dury-Arras sector on the 2nd September, 1918, when acting as a stretcher-bearer attached to 'D' Company of the 87th Bn., Quebec Regiment. This company in the advance over the ridge suffered heavy casualties from shell and machine-gun fire. Private Young, in spite of the complete absence of cover, without the least hesitation went out, and in the open fire-swept ground dressed the wounded. Having exhausted his stock of dressings, on more than one occasion he returned, under intense fire, to his company headquarters for a further supply. This work he continued for over an hour, displaying throughout

the most absolute fearlessness. To his courageous conduct must be ascribed the saving of the lives of many of his comrades. Later, when the fire had somewhat slackened, he organised and led stretcher parties to bring in the wounded whom he had dressed. All through the operations of the 2nd, 3rd, and 4th September, Private Young continued to show the greatest valour and devotion to duty.” (London Gazette, no.31067, 14 December 1918)

Private Michael James O’Rourke, VC, MM was born on 19 March 1878 in Limerick, Ireland. He enlisted in the Canadian Expeditionary Force as a stretcher-bearer, and served with the 7th Infantry Battalion. O’Rourke received the Military Medal for his conduct in the Battle of the Somme in 1916.

O’Rourke earned the Victoria Cross for his courage and devotion to his comrades over a three-day period, from 15 to 17 August 1917, during the fighting for Hill 70, near Lens in France. O’Rourke died in Vancouver, British Columbia on 6 December 1957. His citation reads:



“For most conspicuous bravery and devotion to duty during prolonged operations. For three days and nights Pte. O’Rourke, who is a stretcher-bearer, worked unceasingly in bringing the wounded into safety, dressing them, and getting them food and water. During the whole of his period the area in which he worked was subjected to very severe shelling and swept by heavy machine gun and rifle fire. On several occasions he was knocked down and partially buried by enemy shells. Seeing a comrade who had been blinded stumbling around ahead of our trench, in full view of the enemy who were sniping him, Pte. O’Rourke jumped out of his trench and brought the man back, being himself heavily sniped at while doing so. Again he went forward about 50 yards in front of our barrage under very heavy and accurate fire from enemy machine guns and snipers, and brought in a comrade. On a subsequent occasion, when the line of advanced posts was retired to the line to be consolidated, he went forward under very heavy enemy fire of every description and brought back a wounded man who had been left behind. He showed throughout an absolute disregard for his own safety, going wherever there were wounded to succour, and his magnificent courage and devotion in continuing his rescue work, in spite of exhaustion and the incessant heavy enemy fire of every description, inspired all ranks and undoubtedly saved many lives.”

(London Gazette, no.30372, 8 November 1917)

Of interest, but not a member of the CAMC, **Captain (later Brigadier) John Alexander Sinton, VC, OBE** ⁴ of the Indian Medical Services, who was born in Victoria, B.C., also received the Victoria Cross. On 21 January 1916 at the Orah Ruins, Mesopotamia, Captain Sinton, then 31 years old, attended to the wounded under very heavy fire.



Sinton’s citation for the Victoria Cross reads:

“For most conspicuous bravery and devotion to duty. Although shot through both arms and through the side, he refused to go to hospital, and remained as long as daylight lasted, attending to his duties under very heavy fire. In three previous actions Captain Sinton displayed the utmost bravery.”

⁴ His OBE was awarded as per the London Gazette of 10 June 1921 to Captain & Brevet Major (T/Major) John Alexander Sinton, V.C., M.B., Indian Medical Services. A 1947 photo of him in his Brigadier uniform and of the London Gazette announcing his award of the VC is below.