



ALBERT E. MCCREERY

Albert Edmund McCreery was the second youngest of a family of four children born to Samuel and Loretta McCreery, residents of the cheese-making town of Ingersoll, Ontario. Like his siblings, Margaret, Eva, and Kenneth, he was raised by his mother to be a devout Baptist, presumably with the approval of his Irish-born father, an Anglican. Some time after Albert's arrival on 4 January 1918, the family moved to the nearby countryside when the father decided to go into farming. The mother and children, however, continued to worship at Ingersoll's First Baptist Church, the virtual focal point of their lives. A country boy, Albert attended the local version of the little red schoolhouse and regularly showed up at the vigorously conducted Sunday School at First Baptist. Later on, besides being gifted enough to sing in the church choir, he showed a maturity and a leadership among his peers that made him an obvious choice for the presidency of the Baptist Young People's Union. But admittedly it was not all church-going and church activities, important as these were to him and his family. The young and outgoing Albert had also indulged the summer and winter pastimes common to the youth of his generation, plenty of baseball and swimming in the summer and skating and hockey in the winter. As his sister Margaret recalled, he enjoyed a "normal boy's life" in that pleasantly rural western Ontario community.

After completing his primary education Albert proceeded to Ingersoll High School. He stayed only a year, however, before going out to work for the Hydro office in Kitchener where he "made out bills", doubtless providing some extra income for the family. But he kept his foot in the educational door by going to night school and completing his Middle School requirements in Math and History. In 1935, however, having saved up his money, he decided to resume full-time schooling, at least in Biblical studies. Reminiscent of fellow student, Stanley Gaudin [HR], whom he doubtless knew there, he left the work place to attend Toronto Bible College (TBC). He studied there for three years and graduated in 1938 with a creditable standing overall. His grades in English and Biblical History and Geography were barely average, however, perhaps a reflection of his thin high school education. Even so, having been out in the working world for several years he may have brought a refreshing perspective to his college experience. As part of his requirements at the school he served at various Ontario missions of the Baptist Home Mission Board (HMB), ranging as far afield as Niagara Falls, Haileybury, and Burford. From all accounts he performed his duties well.

It followed that one of Albert's college instructors, a McMaster graduate, could heartily recommend him to his alma mater as a worthy representative of the "fine new contingent of our students .." This was a far cry from the day when the TBC, concerned about the supposed liberalism of the University's theological curriculum, routinely discouraged its graduates from going there. In any case, he may have already steered himself in McMaster's direction with the prompting of a cousin, Rev. J. Wesley Bee, a theological graduate of the place. Albert could have attended McMaster in 1938 but decided instead to serve the HMB at their Eagle River Mission in northwestern Ontario and then enroll at Toronto's Harbord Collegiate to take the rest of his Middle School work. In the end, however, he did not write the examinations.

As a result, when Albert finally arrived at McMaster in September, 1939 - the fateful time World War II



broke out -- he was admitted to the English Theology course but on a probationary basis. After completing the year's work satisfactorily his request was granted to switch to the Arts program so that he might take the General (preliminary) Year and a portion of the work for Year I. In part this was to make up for the shortfall in his high school requirements. Again, he satisfied his instructors but clearly the regimen absorbed the bulk of his time because he appears to have enjoyed little extracurricular activity aside from some debating and taking part in the activities of the McMaster Christian Union and the Chess Club. His sister Margaret recalled how she helped him out with his Greek.

After the grave Allied defeats in Europe in the summer of 1940 and Ottawa's subsequent mobilization of the country's manpower and resources, Albert, like most male students, was required to serve in McMaster's Canadian Officers' Training Corps (COTC). Clearly divinity students like himself, unless they were "one hundred percent conscientious objectors" (COs), were not exempted from the regulations. Albert, who claimed no CO status, would probably have endorsed Chancellor Howard Whidden's blunt message that students in theology must "take their medicine like everybody else and learn to rub shoulders with students of all types". From all appearances the agreeable Albert had never had any difficulty "rubbing shoulders" with anyone and he turned out to be a committed cadet. His duties were carried out during the academic year, when drill and military lectures were the order of the day, and the periods of summer camp training at Niagara-on-the-Lake.

In the end, however, he chose not to take advantage of the military exemptions and deferments ordinarily granted undergraduates who maintained a satisfactory grade level. In other words, he was prepared to forego what the weekly *Silhouette* had called the "unique . privilege accorded to Canadian university students of being allowed to study uninterrupted throughout the year and at the same time accomplish part of the military training required under defence legislation .." Perhaps a deciding factor was the enlistment of his younger brother Kenneth for active service. In any case, in early September, 1942, in the midst of his studies, the "quiet, friendly theologian" known at the University as "Al", made the decision to enlist in the army. Up to that point he was still serving the HMB as well, having spent the summer at their Lorne Park mission.

At the time Albert enlisted the Hamilton area was still reeling from the grievous losses suffered by the Royal Hamilton Light Infantry (RHLI) in the recent abortive raid on Dieppe. Elsewhere in that wartime world, to be sure, the news was mercifully better. The Americans had recovered from Pearl Harbor to defeat the Japanese decisively at Midway, the Russians were desperately aiming to turn the tables on the Germans at Stalingrad, and the British 8th Army was holding off Axis forces in Egypt and preparing an offensive of its own. These were heartening signs but as Albert and his classmates were constantly told much bitter fighting still remained before the tide would turn decisively in the Allies' favour and ultimate victory be assured.

In any event, Albert joined up at #2 District Depot in Toronto and was shortly assigned as Trooper McCreery to the Canadian Armoured Corps (CAC). In late September 1942 he was dispatched for basic training to the Canadian Armoured Fighting Vehicles School recently established at Camp Borden, the installation dating from the Great War. The former COTC cadet must have shown considerable promise



because within a matter of weeks he was transferred to Borden's Officer Cadet School. There he successfully completed the course of training and on 13 February 1943 was judged qualified for a commission and accordingly promoted 2nd Lieutenant in the CAC. (A month later, after additional instruction, he was qualified to drive what was called a Class III Wheeled Vehicle). He continued to progress and was rewarded on 13 May with promotion to 1st Lieutenant. He had thus become a potential tank or mechanized unit commander.

A few days after clearing that hurdle Albert was re-posted to one of the CAC's Trained Soldier Regiments and then given an embarkation leave to say goodbye to family and friends. Early in June, 1943 he was formally transferred to the Canadian Army Overseas and shipped with his unit to the United Kingdom. On 18 June he arrived at his destination - after the usual and thankfully uneventful eight or nine-day voyage - and reported for duty. For the next several months he was engaged in learning the fine points of operating and driving a variety of vehicles, primarily the Canadian-designed Ram tank and the Sherman, the front line tank used by the Allies. He satisfactorily passed all the tests imposed. While stationed at Aldershot, he was befriended by local residents, notably the Walker family, who were impressed by his character and personality. Indeed, as later evidence showed - during his memorial service in England - he "won a large place in the hearts of the Aldershot people". It was at the Walker home that he was happily reunited with his brother-in-law and fellow serviceman, Samuel Hamilton, and together they enjoyed the family's Christmas hospitality.

Clearly Albert and Samuel were seen as a cut above the supposedly "roughneck" Canadians who sometimes made life difficult for the local population. On the other hand, as a veteran who was there observed, "Aldershot had lived off soldiers for a century and did so with cynical relish which the soldiers repaid with anger and an occasional riot."

While Albert's tank training was nearing completion welcome circumstances intervened to change the course of his military service. Throughout his brief but busy army life he had invariably gained the confidence, respect, and liking of the men around him and had often offered sound counsel and advice to those in need who requested it. Once again his obvious decency and marked maturity had come into play. In effect, he had become at times a chaplain in all but name even while he was progressing steadily through the conventional military ranks and postings. Happily for him, there was a perceived need at this time for more official chaplains in the Armoured Corps and he seemed to be an obvious pick - a question of being in the right place at the right time. Certainly his superior officer believed so and strongly recommended him for the position while at home his former McMaster professors wrote on his behalf to the Baptist Chaplaincy Committee, the authorizing body.

These efforts produced the desired results. Though Albert still lacked technical credentials, on 30 March 1944 a special ordination was laid on for him, the necessary prerequisite for his chaplaincy appointment. It was arranged through the courtesy of British Baptists at Aldershot Tabernacle, in the heart of that military training town. To add frosting to Albert's cake, other padres and supportive soldiers from his own unit eagerly showed up for the ceremony. He was also pleased that H/Major Stuart Ivison, a McMaster graduate and Baptist minister now serving as Staff Chaplain, Assistant to the Principal

Chaplain, was on hand to officiate. Also present was Rev. H.H. Bingham, Executive Secretary of the Baptist Convention of Ontario and Quebec, who happened to be on a timely visit to the United Kingdom. H/Major R.F. Sneyd, another senior chaplain and a fellow Baptist from Toronto, also took part in the ceremony that paved the way for the next stage in Albert's military career.

Following his ordination, he was duly appointed H/Captain or Chaplain 4th Class on 17 May 1944. He served in a number of reinforcement units in the United Kingdom before being dispatched to France in September, some three months after D-Day and two years after his enlistment. In April, 1945, after serving with headquarters units, he fittingly became the padre of the 22nd Canadian Armoured Regiment, which formed part of 21st Army Group in northwest Europe. The regiment, formerly the 1st battalion of the Montreal-based Canadian Grenadier Guards, proudly wore the black beret identifying it as an armoured outfit. By the time Albert, a trained tank man himself, joined the regiment in Germany, it could, like so many others, grimly look back on the series of bloody battles in which it had participated, ranging from Normandy to the Rhine and the battle for the Hochwald.

While Albert presumably had his own personal way of discharging his chaplain's duties, he probably shared the essentials of what others experienced. As one chaplain described it:

"From the chaplains' view it's always the human story. They are the ones who can tell of the sweat and blood poured into [places like] Buron . Carpiquet . and Caen, for they with their units know just what it cost to take and hold [them]. To the chaplains these names conjure up vivid memories - as brave men fought and died and the noblest traits of men came forth .. "

"Bloody" Buron, Carpiquet, and Caen had been killing fields in the Battle of Normandy, which had raged all through the summer of 1944. A shaken front line chaplain who had served in those killing fields betrayed sentiments that may have been shared by many a colleague in the field. ". It is no use pretending", he wrote a friend,

"I am heartily sick of it all .. There is not much Glory, only sordid destruction. I look upon [this war] . as a very dirty job, which definitely must not recur. So many are the narrow escapes . that it has seemed a miracle has happened to save me . it is finally getting on my nerves. I am no longer the man [I was].".

"However", he gamely assured his correspondent, "I will get over it."

For the front line chaplain especially, it was the challenge of boosting morale at the most demoralizing times and giving spiritual comfort in a chaotic world that all but denied the spirit. It was also a matter of holding religious services whenever possible during infrequent lulls in the fighting, and, above all, of

making one's hopefully reassuring presence known and felt during the violence that brought death, grief, and destruction. In many cases it also meant tending the wounded and, if possible, bringing them to an aid station, and sometimes under fire. One chaplain used a jeep with stretcher racks for the purpose. "I spent all day going up and back", he reminisced about one occasion. ". everyone helped each other. Come on out and help me get this fellow in, I'd call. And a couple of riflemen would get up out of their cover and give me a hand .." Another chaplain recalled how he had tried to help a stricken tank crew "but once you get doing this kind of thing, there's no end to it . so my small rescue party found ourselves with more casualties than we could keep up with". Albert's last days may well have been spent engaged in such activities with the men of the 22 nd Armoured.

On the afternoon of 4 May 1945, while on an "errand of mercy" trying to bring severely wounded German soldiers to safety, he and another Canadian officer were killed - to quote an official account - "in circumstances which remain obscure". For some his fate was not obscure at all. One account asserts that he was "shot by a German sniper when he went . to the rescue of a young German soldier trapped in a blazing tank". In any event, Albert was one of the last Canadians to suffer this fate, a mere forty-eight hours away from the cease-fire that led to the end of hostilities in Europe. At his moving memorial service held in Aldershot, where he had been ordained only the year before, the mayor of the town and five Baptist "padres" were among those who attended and spoke to the occasion. Following the sermon, in a final tribute, the assembled chaplains sang "The McMaster Hymn". Albert was among nine Canadian chaplains who were killed in action or died as the result of wounds and accidents in World War II. Their names are inscribed in the chapel of the Royal Army Chaplain's Department at Bagshot Park, England, a Commonwealth memorial.

After the war McMaster University received an anonymous financial gift in Albert's name. It set up a bursary enabling theological students, as the Alumni News put it, "to get the training which [he] was not permitted to receive".

Albert Edmund McCreery is buried in Holten Canadian War Cemetery, Overijssel, Netherlands.

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SOURCES: National Archives of Canada: Wartime Personnel Records / Service Record of Chaplain 4 th Class Albert E. McCreery; Commonwealth War Graves Commission: Commemorative Information, Chaplain 4 th Class Albert E. McCreery; letter from H/Major John Forth to Florence Dorsey (undated), in John Dorsey's collection of Lieutenant Robert Dorsey's wartime correspondence and memorabilia (see biography of *Robert Edmund Dorsey*); Canadian Baptist Archives / McMaster Divinity College: McMaster



University Student File 7814, Albert E. McCreery, Biographical file, Albert E. McCreery: Toronto Bible College transcript and correspondence, McMaster admissions application and registration documents, letter from A.J. Milligan to H.H. Bingham, 28 May 1945, letter from Richard E. Ruggle, Canadian Forces Chaplain School and Centre, 28 Mar.1995, photographs, and newspaper cuttings (including *Canadian Baptist* [A.E. McCreery obituary by H.H. Bingham] 15 June 1945), Baptist Chaplaincy Committee records; McMaster University Library / W. Ready Archives: Marmor 1940 , 51, 75, 1942 , 67, Silhouette, 1, 18 Oct. 1940, *McMaster Alumni News* , 18 Oct. 1945; Charles M. Johnston, *McMaster University, II: The Early Years in Hamilton, 1930-1957* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1981), 89-91; Walter T. Steven, In This Sign (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1948), 140, 162, 163, 176, 179; J. Allan Snowie, *Bloody Buron: The Battle of Buron, Normandy - 08 July 1944* (Erin ON: Boston Mills Press, 1984), 71; John Morgan Gray, *Fun Tomorrow: Learning to be a Publisher and Much Else* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1978), 265; Blake Heathcote, *Testaments of Honour: Personal Histories of Canada's War Veterans*(Toronto: Doubleday Canada, 2002), 317 [Laurie Wilmot's recollections]; John Marteinson & Michael R. McNorgan, *The Royal Canadian Armoured Corps: An Illustrated History* (Kitchener: (Royal Canadian Armoured Corps Association and Canadian War Museum, 2000), chap. 4, and 314, 317; C.P. Stacey, *Official History of the Canadian Army in the Second World War, III: The Victory Campaign: The Operations in North-West Europe, 1944-1945* (Ottawa: Queen's Printer, 1960), chap. xxii, 611.

Internet: "Canadian Grenadier Guards: History of the Regiment during the Second World War", 2 pp., www.cgg.ca/history/ww2.htm

For related biographies, see *Nairn Stewart Boyd , Albert Harry Mildon*]