Spring 2017

'A Most Splendid Soldier': The Life of My Great-Grandfather Major General George Bruce

Orson Fry
Bard College

'A Most Splendid Soldier':

The Life of My Great-Grandfather Major General George Bruce

A Senior Project Submitted to

The Divisions of Social Studies and Literature

of

Bard College

By

Orson Fry

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

May 2017

Contents

Acknowledgements

I would not have been able to complete this project without the help of a great many people. Firstly, a big thank you to my advisers Marina van Zuylen and Richard Aldous for their tireless patience and generosity of mind. Marina you've been a constant mentor throughout my Bard years and no more so than in the last year. I'll always remember your illuminating teaching and your office as a literary refuge. The college is a more graceful place for having you around. Richard, you have tolerated my ignorance of history with remarkable patience in allowing me to embark on this project, and you have been throughout a faithful source of good advice. I've enjoyed greatly our office hours and our talks on everything from Mountbatten, to Bob Dylan, to Leicester City (and you made all the difference when I came down on the wrong side of bureaucracy!).

This is a family history and so many relatives have helped me along the way. I'm hugely indebted to my cousin Jay McCallum (or my 'half first cousin once removed') for his research on Bruce. When I finally got to the Imperial War Museum in London and the Lincolnshire Regimental Archives, it was with dismay (though mostly relief) that I discovered that Jay had pretty much already exhausted the archives on Bruce. If he had only cited his work, this project would have amounted to one long footnote to him and his amazing work in being the first family member to recover Bruce's story.

To all my 'Bruce' family in Washington State and Canada. To Sage, my Sherlock Holmes of the Northwest, who, with a heart of gold, welcomed me into the family and opened doors wherever she could to help me get to know Bruce. And who has always been at the end of

an email to answer any question I had about the family. It was Sage who took me to meet all my relatives in and around Vancouver, including Erin and her lovely family.

I want to thank Hamish and Mara for letting me into their lives for two magical days in March of last year, and for having tolerated me with great kindness through all my pestering interviews and incursions into their privacy.

To all my family in England; to my father, who's put up with his eldest children living on another continent for the last decade. To dear Jennifer and Anthony, who sent me the Masters book when I so badly needed it, and who have been such loyal guardians to my sister and I over the years. To Uncle James for having given me John's vital account of meeting Bruce, which breathed some much-needed life into this project. To my old friend Harry who gave me some great advice at the start of this project, and to whose mind I feel I can always turn. To Felipe for 'making it easy'. To the helpful staff of the IWM, and the Lincolnshire Archives. To some great professors here at Bard I've had the pleasure of studying under, to Stephen Graham, Karen Sullivan, Ben La Farge, Eric Trudel, and Odile Chilton. To Peter Gadsby for all his help in the Registrar. To Professor Brian Holden-Reid at King's College London. To my guitar teacher Mike DiMicco for having kept the music in my life. To my step-father Daryl for all his support through the last eighteen years, and for sharing his love of history with me.

And finally my mother, to whom I owe everything; who first sparked my interest in Bruce and 'stories' in general, and in whose hands this story would have been much better written. I've only been able to tell it because, after four years of searching in vain, she traced Uncle Hamish to an address in Vancouver and showed up at his door. Amazed at her persistence, he joked, 'you're just like Bruce, popping out from behind the curtain.'

To Hamish,

Heather, and John

Introduction

When he was twenty-six years old, my grandfather John Aspinall discovered that his real father was a soldier who had fought and been decorated in both world wars. Thrilled, he began to track his father down and catch up on the lost years. Being a great raconteur, stories at once began trickling down the family line about this illustrious figure 'Bruce', each one more wonderful than the last. But a lot remained missing: who was this young man who had picked up four wounds on the Western Front and won medals for his leadership and gallantry? Who later commanded 28,000 men in Burma the Second World War? Who seemed to excel in everything he did; who was brave to a fault, and yet at the same time, equipped with an all-too-familiar outrageous sense of humor?

Part military history, part family history, this project navigates the murky waters where fact meets fiction, to get as close to the truth as possible about one man's life. Where the story goes dark, as often is does when dealing with few resources, I have drawn on the lives of Bruce's contemporaries, particularly soldiers and poets. This is less an attempt to write the entire life story of one man, than an attempt to get to know him across time; to look behind the public mask and reveal the personality within. If I have failed, it is not for any want of character on the part of my subject, but for my own want of skills as his researcher. I always knew that I wanted to tell the story of my great-grandfather, to explore the life of this 'missing link' in a family scattered over two continents; here was my chance to finally verify that story.

If John's account of paternal discovery, with which this story begins, resembles a 'Lost World piece of literature; it's important to remember that's what it is. In meeting Bruce, we are stepping into a different world; a world of Empire, hushed truths, and blood dark history.

Beginnings

CHAPTER I

His Name Was Bruce

It is 1952 and my grandfather John is hurtling into London on the train to meet his father for lunch. John has just left, or rather been "sent down" from Oxford, where he had racked up gambling debts "in the classic fashion" to the tune of two thousand pounds.[1] Despite never having received much affection from his father, John has "high hopes" that after giving him a 'fierce lecture'[2] he will agree to settle with at least some of his creditors. In typical fashion, John plans to reimburse him later from whatever winnings or earnings might come his way.[3]

Robert Aspinall, a captain in the Indian Medical Service, had made a small fortune from a clinic he had established in Bangalore. He had worked in India all his life, yet with the collapse of the empire, he had returned to see out his days in England.[4] As John recollects in his account of the meeting, Robert had always acted "honorably" towards him, first by putting him through

[1] John Aspinall, unpublished memoir, p. 4.
[2] Ibid.
[3] Ibid., p. 3.
[4] Ibid.

private-school, and then at Oxford, by providing him with an allowance of 40 pounds a term. On top of John's ex-servicemen grant of 70 pounds a term, this—according to John—was "just enough for most undergraduates to survive on."[5] The problem being that John *wasn't* most undergraduates, and Robert's patience was wearing thin. Even so, as John recalls, "I little guessed what awaited me… as I climbed the stairs of the East India Club."[6]

Halfway through a reasonably awkward lunch, John summons the courage to put the fatal question to his father. As John remembers:

> He paused, looked at me coldly and said,
>
> 'John, it is time you knew… you are not my son - don't ever expect anything more from me now or in the future… except this'
>
> and producing his wallet he handed me a large white fiver. Somewhat stunned to silence by this revelation I thanked him for the fiver and asked if he had any idea who my father was. He leveled his eyes at me and said without any bitterness,
>
> 'Ask your mother.'[7]

All the way home in the taxi and on the train, John's mind races with fresh possibilities - who is my father? he wonders. Perhaps he is alive and immensely rich? he teases himself. He knows that his mother was "when young, debonair, seductive, amusing and full of joie de vivre."[8] An array of striking possibilities stretches out before him. She had even danced with the Prince of Wales a couple of times! After all, "Many famous and powerful men had strode across the Indian scene in the dying days of Empire."[9] John immediately, at least in his telling, turns a situation which for many might be a great tragedy, into an enticing endeavor. And I think it is

---

[5] Ibid., p. 4.
[6] Ibid.
[7] Ibid.
[8] Ibid.
[9] Ibid., p. 5.

less a result of his tendency to hide his true feelings, than it is a symptom of his uncanny ability to transform potential misfortune into boundless opportunity.

Arriving at Framfield Grange, Sussex, the ancestral home of his mother's second husband Sir George Osborne, John rushes upstairs and finds his mother Mary, known to all as 'Lady O', at her dressing table.[10] The following scene is so much a part of my family lore, echoed by so many relatives and in such impressive variation, that finding John's written account of it was something akin to stumbling across the Holy Grail:

> 'Mama is my father still alive?'
>
> 'What are you talking about, you silly boy - you've just had lunch with him … haven't you?'
>
> 'He told me I was not his son, gave me a fiver and suggested I should ask you who my father is or was.'
>
> 'The brute that he should be so cruel as to lie like that. I always told you and Chips [John's half-brother] what he was like. John, he is a miserable creature but I don't think that he could stoop so low as to deny his own son.'

John knows his mother is "playing a part." When he asks her what his father was like, and reasons, "Let's thank the gods you met him or I wouldn't be here," his mother begins sobbing, deeply. He puts his hands on her shoulders and kisses the back of her neck. She turns and studies his face.[11]

> 'John, he was just like you … he had your eyes, your hair, your height, only your nose is mine.'
>
> 'What do you mean, my nose?'
>
> 'Your nose is like mine, retroussé - his was straight.'
>
> 'Is he still alive?'

---

[10] Ibid., p. 5.
[11] Ibid.

'I believe so but I haven't seen him for years. You must look him up in the army lists. His name is Bruce. When I knew him he was Captain McIllree Bruce of the Royal Lincolns.'

'Where did you meet him?'

'At a regimental ball in Nainital.'

'Mama, how long did you know him?'

'For a week.'

'Where was I conceived?'

'On a lake side under a tamarind tree. It was very romantic. You mustn't blame me darling. He swept me off my feet.'

She starts to sob again, but as John recalls, "the contagion of my excitement soon put an end to that." Lady O laments,

'I wrote to him many times but he never answered.'

'What did you write to him for, Mama?'

'Money, of course for you darling, what else? Robbie knew from the moment he saw you that you were not his.'[12]

John, stumped by the news, also has a vague feeling of the world coming round to him. He appears like Perceval, or indeed any other major hero of Arthurian Romance, who only discovers the secret of his birth later in life. Upon discovering his father was a knight of noble birth, Perceval wants nothing more than to become a knight and honor his noble bloodline. And Lady O almost sounds like Perceval's mother who finds she isn't able to forever hold her tongue: "Ah! Woe is me, what Misfortune! Fair sweet son, I hoped to keep you so far from knighthood

[12] Ibid., p. 6.

that you would never hear tell of knights, nor ever see one! You were destined for knighthood fair son…"[13]

John had never felt a great affinity with Robert, not helped by their total lack of resemblance. Half-English and half-Maltese, Robert had changed his name from Stivilla to Aspinall when a student at Guy's Hospital in London. He must have known from the first moment he set eyes on John, and saw "a pink-faced babe with blue eyes and wisps of golden hair," that he was another man's son.[14] As John mused, "Robbie Aspinall knew at once what was to take me twenty-six years to discover - and then only by chance."[15]

Far from dismay, John is glowing at suddenly finding himself to be a love child, the son of a mysterious, dashing, and *straight-nosed* army captain. Embracing his mother, he tells her he will go to London to study the army lists and track his father down.[16] At Somerset House the next morning, he finds his father's file, and begins to trace his career from "Subaltern McIllree Bruce all the way through to Major General Bruce G.O.C. Nigeria at the end of the second world war and then his last command in Malaya." What's more, he finds an address.[17] George Bruce is still alive.

---

[13] Chrétien de Troyes, 'Arthurian Romances; The Story of The Grail' (Penguin, London, 1991) - p. 386
[14] Taken from John's unpublished memoir, p. 3.
[15] Ibid.
[16] Ibid., p. 6.
[17] Ibid., p. 7.

CHAPTER II

Birthrights

George McIllree Stanton Bruce was born on September 19, 1896, in North Regina, Northwest Territories.[18] Regina is now the capital city of Saskatchewan, which along with Alberta in 1905, was carved out of the vast northern territories and given provincial powers by the Canadian Government.[19] George's father William Donald Bruce was a Major in the North-West Mounted Police, later the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, a force set up in 1873 by the Canadian Parliament to police Canada's newly acquired western territories.[20] Between 1896 and 1899, the Mounties, as they were called, would gain prominence policing the Klondike Gold Rush, when an estimated 100,000 prospectors headed for the Yukon in search of the yellow metal.[21]

According to John's account,[22] the Bruce family emigrated to Canada in 1818 from Wick in Caithness, Scotland. They originally settled in Guelph, Ontario, before moving en bloc it seems to Vancouver in British Columbia. John's general impression of his family is that "In Caithness they were farmers of Nordic stock and in Canada they were mostly soldiers." Regarding the men in his father's family, he was right. John's great-grandfather Captain George

---

[18] Taken from a copy of Bruce's birth certificate, which his son Hamish applied for when in the process of getting his own passport. This copy is filed in the Bruce folder given to me by my mother.
[19] http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/alberta-and-confederation/
[20] Andrew R. Graybill, *Policing the Great Plains: Rangers, Mounties, and the North American Frontier, 1875-1910* (University of Nebraska Press, 2007), p. 12.
[21] Pierre Berton, *Klondike: The Last Great Gold Rush, 1896-1899,* (Doubleday Canada, 2001), p. 396.
[22] John probably heard this date from his father. According to - www.findagrave.com - the Bruces emigrated to Canada in 1836.

Bruce had received an engraved pistol from the 'Ladies of Guelph' for his services during the Fenian Raids of 1866. This pistol supposedly went missing in a burglary of John's house in London in 1975. Until I came across an 1866 newspaper article in the Guelph Archives that linked this pistol to one 'Ensign Bruce', my family lore had me believe that this pistol was *actually* a "set of pistols," awarded to John's great-grandfather for "helping to repel the Fenian Raiders of 1837." One quick google search toppled this mistake; there were no 'Fenian raiders of 1837.' What does remain in my family's possession, however, is the Canada General Service Medal, issued by the Canadian Government in 1899 to troops engaged during the Fenian Raids. This piece of silver, which hangs in the medal cabinet in John's old study, is all we have to testify to the life and services of Captain George Bruce, the grandfather and namesake of George McIllree Stanton Bruce.

William Donald Bruce was a Mountie for 10 years, before returning to Guelph where he worked as city agent of a Winnipeg Manufacturer's firm. He then set off for the Yukon, a land he had once policed, to open an agency for the firm in Dawson City. A newspaper clipping detailing the departure reads, "Mrs. Bruce will stop in Victoria till after affairs are settled at Dawson."[23] This was Marion Orme Shaw, George Bruce's mother. A trip to the Yukon guaranteed great hardship, and it was common for wives to delay joining their husbands until affairs were settled in the North-West. It was about 1,500 miles to the Yukon from Victoria. As one successful Klondiker advised her fellow females after braving the journey: "Delicate women have no right attempting the trip. It means utter collapse."[24] Regardless Marion would join her husband in the Yukon, spurred on by the contagious excitement in the air. The newspaper clipping concludes:

---

[23] 'W.D. Bruce Will Go To The Yukon' in the Guelph Mercury Newspaper, date unknown.
[24] Annie Hall Strong in the Skagway News, December 1st, 1897 - https://www.nps.gov/people/annie-hall-strong.htm

"In conversation with a Mercury reporter this morning Mr. Bruce spoke very highly of the

Bruce's parents Donald and Marion.

Northwest. He thinks people who are hanging around here with little to do should pull up stakes and strike out west."[25] In the same spirit that lured his ancestors from the northernmost tip of Scotland to Canada in 1818, Donald set off for the "Golden City of the North."[26]

One story of Donald's departure which survived through family lore is the story of when he threw his infant son George into the arms of his mother, who was waiting on the dock, as his Yukon-bound ship pulled out of the harbor. My grandfather John, for whom eccentricity was a birthright, of course loved to tell this story. As someone who reveled in upsetting people's sense of propriety, it ticked all his boxes. He would do practically anything to shock or amuse, like the time he once swam across a dung-filled tiger pool for a meagre bet. Or the time he ate a whole pot of Colman's mustard because one of his children dared him *he couldn't*. He was a tyrant of

[25] 'W.D. Bruce Will Go To The Yukon' in the Guelph Mercury Newspaper, date unknown
[26] Ibid.

amusement; on family seaside holidays, he would jump *off* the boat every time he saw a shark, until the desperate screams of the children called him back aboard. If ever a 'sense of daring' is discovered to be a genetic trait, the Bruce patrilineality would be an interesting case study. While in John this trait revealed itself in legendary dares, and a fearless approach to wild animals; in his father, it showed itself on the battlefield, in reckless feats of bravery, and amounted to a glittering medal cabinet.

I have no account of Donald Bruce's time in the Yukon, and neither it seems did John. He makes no mention of it in his account, indeed he wasn't even sure of his grandfather's name: "My grandfather ???….. Bruce left the Mounties as a Major and speculated heavily in Vancouver real estate - amassed a fortune and lost it all in the property crash of '24. He lies in an unmarked grave."[27] In his usual sweeping style of dramatic narrative, John breezes through his grandfather's life before moving on to discuss his father. That may be all that he knew of his grandfather. But one imagines that, before he moved on, he couldn't have missed a recurring trait in his male lineage, one that certainly didn't stop at him—an inclination to lose great fortunes. John made and lost all his money, several times, in the casinos he set up in London in the 60s and 70s. His brother Hamish later recalled the delight John took after discovering his grandfather Donald had established the first gaming house in Dawson City: "John enjoyed that a lot, he knew it was in his blood."[28] Thankfully John knew more about his father Bruce.

In the same account, John narrates the story of his father's arrival to London[29] :

[27] Taken from John's unpublished memoir, p. 2.
[28] Hamish Bruce, interview with author, March 22, 2016.
[29] Taken from John's unpublished memoir, pp. 2-3.

George, circa 11 years old.

"McI, as he was called, was sent alone to London to his aunt ???? who owned an hotel in Bayswater. 50 sovereigns were tied round his neck by his mother in a leather pouch and these paid for his education at Haileybury"[30]

Because of John's narrative style, exemplified here, what he writes often appears like fiction. This passage could be straight out of *Goodnight Mr Tom,* or any other children's story set in 20th century Britain. 'Young George' is almost a Paddington Bear figure, sent on his own to London with 50 sovereigns tied round his neck in a leather pouch. What John is doing is writing down his father's story as he remembers hearing it. Sue Hunt, his old secretary, told me that after Bruce died, John used to visit Mona, Bruce's second wife, to reminisce about his father. What fascinates me is the story that arises out of John's memory. By the grace of his language, shaped as it was by his childhood reading, John's account becomes a piece of literature.

John's literary tastes had since childhood been rooted in dramatic tales of adventure. When he was thirteen years old, he happened to take down a book from the shelves of his school

[30] Ibid., p. 2. Prior to Haieybury, Bruce attended Ascham St. Vincent's Preparatory School in Eastbourne, Sussex. This all-boys school, for the ages 4-14, was intended as a feeder school for the nation's top public schools. - Need more info on Ascham to include this here.

library that would have a profound influence upon his life. *Nada the Lily* by H. Rider Haggard, tells the story of Umslopogaas, the illegitimate son of the great Zulu king Shaka, who with his mother was banished from the kraal when a mere child and brought up by another tribe. The boy swears vengeance for his shame and his mother's humiliation, and grows into a fine young man, loved by all the beasts of the forest, who relies on his warrior strength and his 'gift of the gab' to emerge triumphantly when all the cards are stacked against him.[31] Not only did the story open John's eyes to a far more romantic and impressive world, as his biographer Brian Masters has written, "he experienced for the first time that strange heart-beat of recognition."[32] An even stranger heart-beat, given that, at thirteen years old, John had no idea how much Umslopogaas's story of separation from his real father resembled his own.

John, aged twelve.

From that day on, John read everything he could, first by H. Rider Haggard, and second on the history of the Zulu people—an interest that never waned. In 1990 John would be initiated into the Zulu 'nation' as a 'White Zulu,' and had the title of '*Induna*' (headman) bestowed on him by King Goodwill Zwelithini.[33] Like the Zulus, who were known to be great raconteurs and whose history was entirely oral, John developed his own gift for bringing the past to life through conversation. He enthralled his classmates at school with Zulu lore and accounts of battles, and

[31] Brian Masters, *The Passion of John Aspinall* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1988), p. 30.
[32] Ibid., p. 29.
[33] From *Sunday Times*, 2 June 1991, quoted in Malcolm Draper and Gerhard Maré's article 'Going in: The Garden of England's Gaming Zookeeper and Zululand,' in the 'Journal of Southern African Studies Vol. 29, No. 2 (Jun., 2003)', p. 554.

even went so far as to claim his mother was a Zulu princess.[34] Peers who remembered nothing else about him could recall his Zulu obsession.[35] From the age of thirteen, Zulu customs and the character of King Shaka, who founded the Zulu nation in the 19th century, would rule John's imagination and shape his personality. While every thinking person is inspired by what they read, as Masters writes, "the consistency of Aspinall's fascination with the subject is rare… He was a different person for having discovered *Nada the Lily*."[36] Masters points to one particularly pertinent passage of Haggard to illustrate this. It tells of Umslopogaas being approached by ravenous wolves intent on tearing him apart, but who suddenly halt, fawn and lick him instead: "Umslopogaas, looking into their red eyes, felt his heart become as the heart of a wolf, and he, too, lifted up his head and howled, and the she-wolves howled in answer."[37] Twenty five years after he first read it, this passage became reality in John's life, when he introduced seven young wolves to Howletts, his home and wild-animal park in Kent. Though he used to enter their enclosure two or three times a week, he never had a bad experience with his wolves. In 1976 he wrote, "I look upon them as my wolf pack as indeed I am part of it… When I howl they follow suit, and if I fail to howl they will give tongue ten minutes after I have left."[38] In a quiet corner of England, John was living out his childhood dreams.

While John's childhood reading shaped his personality, it also characterized his writing and the way in which he would remember his life. The full-blown Haggard style of "grand exhortatory sentences and pages of local color" seeped into John's own account of paternal discovery. If ever there was a case of life mimicking art, this was it. For in remembering his

---

[34] Masters, p. 30.
[35] Ibid., p. 30.
[36] Ibid., p. 32.
[37] Ibid., p. 29.
[38] John Aspinall, *The Best of Friends* (London: Macmillan, 1976), p. 107.

father, John couldn't help remembering the story of Umslopogaas, which had fixed his imagination since childhood. As John tells it, George thus arrived at boarding school in the fashion of a young Umslopogaas.

CHAPTER III

Schooling

Haileybury is a boarding school in Hertfordshire for students aged 11-18. Its alumni include Clement Attlee, the postwar Prime Minister, and Hugh Lunghi, the first British soldier to enter Hitler's bunker.[39] Today it is considered a 'minor public school', an unofficial slur for the group of public schools which sit a tier below the Etons, Harrows and Winchesters of this world. But in 1896, the year Attlee attended, it was sometimes said that Haileybury was "more Etonian than Eton itself, though a bit cheaper."[40] It also had a very strong tradition with Empire. Seventeen of its pupils have won the Victoria Cross, the highest award for gallantry in battle.[41]

Granted a royal charter in 1864, Haileybury had a long standing connection with the East India Company. As the historian John Bew writes in his biography of Attlee published last year, "one of its [Haileybury] professed aims was to train its students to run the British Empire in India."[42] This started with molding their characters from a young age. According to the Clarendon Commission of 1864, a Royal Commission which gave a detailed picture of life in some of Britain's top public schools, the English public school education was "an instrument for the training of character." Its findings were as such:

---

[39] John Bew, *Citizen Clem; A Biography of Attlee* (London: riverrun, 2016), p. 341.
[40] John Bew quoting *The Chicago Daily Tribune*, 18 Nov 1945, in his book *Citizen Clem; A Biography of Attlee* (London: riverrun, 2016), p. 35.
[41] *Haileybury's Military Heritage*, accessed 3/1/17, https://www.haileybury.com/explore/haileybury/heritage-archives/haileyburys-military-heritage
[42] Bew, *Citizen Clem,* p. 34.

> The English people were indebted to these schools for the qualities on which they pique themselves most—for their capacity to govern others and control themselves, their aptitude for combining freedom with order, their public spirit, their vigour and manliness of character, their strong but not slavish respect for public opinion, their love of healthy sports and exercise.

In short, an English public school education at the turn of the century trained you for a job in the public sector, in the service of His Majesty's government, and very often, his Empire. Even Clement Attlee, the Briton who would do more than any other to dismantle the British Empire, recalled being thrilled as a schoolboy by the sight of large portions of the classroom map colored in pink, denoting Victoria's dominions.[43] The Labour prime-minister once recalled the excitement that he and hundreds of thousands of spectators experienced in attending Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee Parade in 1897. For a young Vera Brittain, who also attended the Parade, it served as her earliest childhood recollection.[44] The same was true for Robert Graves who in *Goodbye To All That,* would later bid a glad farewell to everything the Empire stood for. But at the turn of the century, for a family like the Attlee's, "Victoria's Empire was not only a source of pride but a world of potential opportunity and adventure."[45] This feeling was not lost on the Bruces.

After Haileybury George attended Woolwich Military College and then transferred to the Royal Military College Sandhurst. All of a sudden things started moving very quickly. On March 17, 1915, he was appointed to a Commission in the Lincolnshire Regiment as a 2nd Lieutenant.

---

[43] Ibid., p. 36
[44] Vera Brittain, 'Testament of Youth' (Virago, 1978, London) - p. 4
[45] Ibid., p. 28

On the 22nd, he was posted to the the 3rd Battalion. Barely 3 months later, 2nd Lieutenant Bruce proceeded to British Expeditionary Forces France.[46]

In the only surviving letter which George wrote to his parents from Haileybury, he included a poem. Called 'The Tide,' it shows the trend of thought he had even at that young age.

The Sea, The Sea, forever coming in and going out.
From day to day you charge and turn about.
Like some beaten army when it turns to bay
You gradually through bit by bit give way
Till desperate a sudden rush you make
And with your gallant cry your ground retake.

By G. McI. S. Bruce
Ever your loving and thoughtful son.

What's clear from this poem is that George, who must have been no older than 18, had war on his mind. He also must have fancied himself as something of a poet—not unusual in a generation that would produce more renowned poets than any other. Yet his lines bespeak a certain innocence; an innocence characteristic of the pre-war years. In his book *Empires of the Dead*, David Crane refers to this changing time as when "an era of expansive confidence and optimism gave way to that endlessly contradictory, paranoid, self-asserted and self-questioning Edwardian age."[47] In his comparison of the movement of the waves to the movement of an army, George describes war with a sense of airy detachment. A detachment that would be shattered on the

[46] From Bruce's service records, obtained by request from the Army Personnel Centre, Historical Disclosures, 65 Brown Street, Glasgow, G28EX
[47] David Crane, *Empires of the Dead: How One Man's Vision Led to the Creation of WWI's War Graves* (London: William Collins, 2013), p.14.

Western Front in 1914. For this would be the testing ground for a new industrial form of warfare, whereby vast armies in fixed positions would systematically bomb each other with high explosive artillery.[48] What good would 'a sudden rush' or a 'gallant cry' serve a 'beaten army,' when it is faced by an enemy it can't see? When "Death could come suddenly and without warning from out of the sky"?[49] From a young age it seems George had wanted to be a soldier. Now that he was one, the ultimate test awaited him on the battlefields of France and Belgium.

Advances

[48] Ben Shephard, *A War of Nerves* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2000), p. 2.
[49] Ibid., with his own footnote to: Michael Howard, *War in European History* (Oxford, 1970), p. 120.

CHAPTER IV

The Western Front

On July 5, 1915, 2nd Lt. Bruce was posted to the 1st Battalion Lincolnshire Regiment, joining the troops at Busseboom in Belgium.[50] To begin with, they spent an uneventful time in the trenches and behind the lines near Ypres, Sanctuary Wood, with the usual record in the diary reading "Conditions on our front normal" or "All Quiet."[51] On October 27, 1915, Bruce and 20 of his NCO's (non-commissioned officers) and men proceeded to Steenvorde, just over the border in France, to form part of a Brigade Company which attends a ceremonial parade held before the king, George V.[52] On November 13 1915, in an effort to strengthen the newly arrived formations with seasoned troops from the original division of the BEF, the 1st Battalion began its transfer to 62nd Brigade in the 21st Division. The battalion, led by pipers of the 2nd Royal Scots Fusiliers, marched along the road to Steenvoorde which was lined with cheering officers and men of other regiments. That same day the battalion took over its first sub sector at Houplines,

[50] Lincolnshire Regimental War Diaries, 1st Battalion, Regi 1/1/1, 5 Jul 1915
[51] Ibid., Jun 1915 to Jul 1915
[52] Ibid., 22 Oct 1915

about 12 miles south of Ypres. The trenches were deep in water, and no man's land a dismal site to contemplate.[53]

Throughout the winter and spring, Bruce and his battalion were constantly on the move. In May 1916 they finally settled down into trenches just east of Albert. As the month drew to a close, they snuck into billets at Méaulte, just a four mile walk from the German held town of Fricourt. They were on the doorstep of an Anglo-French offensive that had been a long time in the making.

The situation of the Allies by the end of May 1916 was becoming desperate. In March and April the Russians had suffered 70,000 casualties on the Eastern Front, when they were defeated by the Germans at the Battle of Lake Naroch. On 29th April, in the largest-ever surrender in the history of the British Army, 13,000 British and Indian soldiers surrendered to the Turks after the Siege of Kut in the Mesopotamian Theatre. By mid-May, the Germans had renewed their attack on Verdun with alarming success, and had established themselves in a solid position just northwest of the city. According to the Lincolnshire Regiment's official history, "the combined French and British offensive which had already been decided on, in principle, could not be postponed beyond the end of June."[54]

The plan for this offensive, which was to take place on both sides of the upper reaches of the Somme River, had a three-fold objective. It was 1) meant to relieve the pressure of the Germans against the French at Verdun; 2) assist the Allies in other theaters of war by halting any further transfer of German troops from the Western Front; and 3) wear down the strength of

---

[53] Ibid., 13 Nov 1915

[54] From 'The History of the Lincolnshire Regiment; 1914-1918, - L.355.31 SIM, Compiled from War Diaries, Despatches, Officer's Notes and Other Sources, Edited by Maj. Gen. C.R. Simpson, C.B., Colonel of Regiment,' housed at Lincolnshire Regimental Archives, p. 159.

opposing troops.[55] In the days leading up to the bombardment, every officer and man on the Somme was involved in maintaining the defenses; by digging communication and assembly trenches and dugouts, collecting stocks of ammunition, and helping build the many miles of railways and trench tramways when back in the 'so-called rest areas.' This was on top of their ceaseless training for the upcoming attack.[56]

On June 24, the six day bombardment began. No less than 1513 British and French guns concentrated their fire on German trenches and wire defenses.[57] General Sir Henry Rawlinson, Commander of the Fourth Army, is supposed to have told his senior officers before the barrage lifted, "Nothing could exist at the conclusion of the bombardment in the area covered by it." His confidence was understandably high, for no bombardment had ever equalled it up to that time on the Western Front.[58] Allied soldiers, deprived of any chance of sleep by the noise, watched with "awe, not unmingled with satisfaction"[59] as thousands of shells roared over the heads in the direction of the enemy lines. Raids were made up and down the line, and patrols sent out to reconnoitre the condition of the enemy's defenses. All returned with the same result—"the wire was well cut and the German trenches in an appalling condition."[60] But a horrible miscalculation had been made.

With the enemy positioned on a high undulating tract of ground, which rose in some places to more than 500 feet above sea level, they were able to dig very deep bomb-proof shelters and dugouts. The majority of the German lines were immune to even the heaviest

---

[55] Ibid.
[56] Ibid.
[57] Lincolnshire Regimental War Diaries, 1st Battalion, Regi 1/1/1, 24 June 1916
[58] C.R. Simpson, "The History of the Lincolnshire Regiment," pp. 163-164.
[59] Ibid., pp. 160-161.
[60] Ibid., p. 161.

shell-fire. Members of the Lincolnshire Regiment later recalled coming across the "wonderful shelters, often thirty feet below ground level" and the "veritable fortresses" of the enemy's system of trenches, villages, and woods.[61] They had two main systems of defenses along their front, each consisting of several lines of trenches. Behind the front line strong redoubts had been built, from which the Germans could sweep their own trenches with machine-gun fire should they be taken.[62] And before each front line, iron stakes hammered into the ground propped up barbed-wire entanglements "almost as thick as a man's finger."[63] All this went unmentioned in the patrol reports.[64]

Long before zero hour, 7:30 a.m. on July 1, the worst day in the history of the British Army, there was great movement of troops along the Allied line. One officer recalled that while movement was restricted to a minimum during daylight on the June 30, "as soon as darkness fell every section of the line became busy as a beehive."[65] He attested to a state of great excitement in all the ranks, and an anticipation that going across No Man's Land would be easy and that the enemy's first system, and possibly the second system, would fall easily into Allied hands. But to add to the unforeseen burden of the Lincolnshire infantryman (who were to follow the Middlesex, the Somersets, the York and the Lancasters across No Man's Land) the second system of German trenches sited between the Somme and the Ancre was on higher ground, and could only be observed from the air.[66]

---

[61] Ibid., p. 159.
[62] Ibid., p. 160.
[63] Ibid.
[64] Simpson, pp. 163-164.
[65] Ibid., p. 163.
[66] Ibid.

As per the 21st Division's Operations Order, Bruce and the 1st Battalion Lincs were back in reserve on July 1. They were not so far, however, as to be out of earshot of a terrific roar that sounded out at 7:28 a.m., when a British mine, secretly planted under a German field fortification by the Royal Engineers, went off and formed an immense crater 100 yards in diameter.[67] The Lochnagar Mine took its name from 'Lochnagar Street', the trench from which it was dug. Anecdotal reports suggest that the mine was heard in London. This explosion, which

Lochnagar Crater near La Boiselle, France, where almost the entire 10th Lincolnshire Battalion was wiped out on 1st July, 1916. Photo taken by self, July 2016.

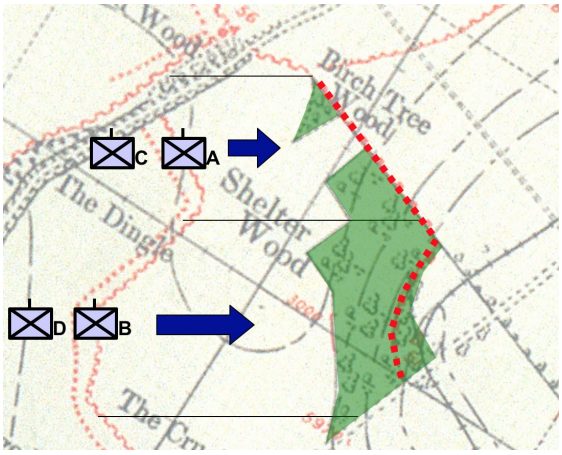
happened just south of the village of La Boiselle, served as the signal for the 10th Lincolnshire Battalion to begin their attack on their sectors either side of La Boiselle. Here and there a few officers and men of the 10th Lincolnshire made it across No Man's Land and attached themselves to other units, but most of the battalion was wiped out before it had even got beyond the British front line.[68]

To support the offensive, Bruce's 1st Battalion was ordered to carry small arms ammunition, Mills grenades and Stokes mortar bombs for the attacking brigades.[69] Carrying parties proceeded across open ground to the first line captured from the enemy and thence to the

[67] Ibid., p. 167.
[68] Ibid.
[69] Lincolnshire Regimental War Diaries, 1st Battalion, Regi 1/1/1, 24 June 1916

arms dump. By 1:30 pm on 1st July, they were back in the old German front line, known as "Sausage Trench", beginning the work of consolidation (rebuilding walls, bunkers etc.). This proved an arduous task following the heavy Allied bombardment of the German lines, and was rendered even harder as their position was swept by heavy machine gun and artillery fire from the second German line. The Battalion Adjutant was wounded, so Bruce now assumed his command. At 6pm he was ordered to reinforce the 64th Brigade, and the battalion broke off into A,B,C, and D companies before proceeding to establish new headquarters on the 'Sunken Road' at 'The Dingle.'

On July 2, sections of the battalion's front were heavily shelled by 15cm Howitzers coming from the enemy trench running along the northern edge of Birch Tree Wood and Shelter Wood.[70] At 7pm the battalion received a message from 62nd Brigade HQ, saying that an attack



on the woods has been postponed till the next day. During the quiet night that followed, men were sent out to recover wounded from the battlefield, and patrols were sent out which reported 'all quiet within the enemy lines.'[71] At 2:30 am on the morning of July 3, orders were received in

[70] Ibid., 2 Jul 1916
[71] Ibid., 2 Jul 1916

the form of a brief message: 'Artillery Bombardment commences 8:40 AM STOP Attack 9:00 AM stop From Scan.' This indicated that the battalion would attack Birch Tree and Shelter Woods.

At exactly 9:00 am, as the bombardment ceased, the leading platoons leapt over the parapets of the trenches and moved towards the enemy. The left flank, fronted by A Company, came under immediate fire and so C Company, under the command of Bruce, was rushed to reinforce. By about 4:30 p.m., Birch Tree and Shelter Woods were in the hands of the Lincolnshire, the German forces having surrendered en masse.[72] Relieved by the 12 Northumberland Fusiliers that night, the battalion withdrew to the the Sunken Road and formed a local reserve. Among the 1st Battalion's 243 casualties was Lieutenant Bruce.

At some point between exiting the trench and advancing on the wood, Bruce, at the helm of his battalion, was shot in the face. The sickle-shaped scar he would carry on his right cheek for the rest of his life would remind him of this moment when he came within inches of losing his sight, or possibly, his life. On July 6, 1916, he returned to the UK wounded.

On August 10, 1916, Donald Bruce wrote to Marion Bruce about their son. Written on 'Militia and Defence' letter-writing paper, it must have been written just before Donald, a major in the Canadian Expeditionary Force, embarked for the Western Front.

[72] Ibid., 3 Jul, 1916

Bruce at 23; his sickle-shaped cheek wound clearly visible.

Dear Marion,

I am too busy for words. This is a fine strapping fellow and a most splendid soldier. Has his world down fine and is a beautifully spoken chap. Manly and most finished young fellow I have seen. I enjoyed being with him so much. He has more brains than I ever gave him credit for. Dorrie and him will tell you the rest. *Don*

I have no record of Donald visiting Bruce at the hospital. It seems that when he wrote this letter, he had no idea of Bruce being wounded, and therefore had not seen him for over a month. It reads as a classic note of reassurance from one parent to the other. Marion, like countless other mothers of sons engaged at the front, would have been anxiously awaiting any news of George. In her monumental 'Testament of Youth,' Vera Brittain, whose brother had been badly wounded at the Somme, described this feeling of anxious suspense, which was a daily struggle for non-combatants:

> During the periods of waiting, especially when the newspapers reported the imminence of a 'great push', ordinary household sounds became a torment. The striking of a clock, marking off each hour of dread, broke into the immobility of tension with the shattering effect of a thunderclap. Every ring at the bell suggested a telegram, the only method of conveying urgent news before the days of radio

> and television; every telephone call implied a long-distance message giving bad news.[73]

In this way the war entered into every household, suspending time and even redefining the effect of 'household sounds.' It upset everyday rhythms and could break into the psyche of a house on its own terms. The threat of its messenger, the telegram, loomed at every doorstep.

Donald Bruce was serving in the Canadian 4th Division, as part of the 12th Canadian Machine Gun Company, which landed in France in mid August 1916. Owing to his past career as a Mountie, he was made a cavalry officer in a machine gun company, which would see action in the Somme battles of that year. Though it is strange coincidence that father and son were fighting at the same front, they were both born at exactly the time to make this possible. In regards to their respective years of birth, 1864 and 1896, they were genuine sons of empire. As Donald arrived in France after Bruce had been wounded, it is unlikely that father and son met at the front.

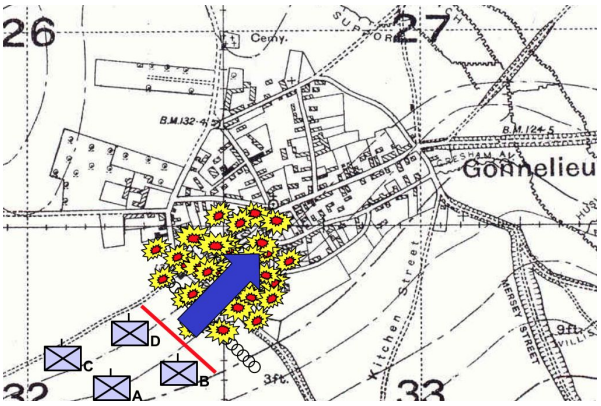
On October 6, Bruce returned to the front after two months convalescence. He was posted to the 2nd Battalion and made an Acting Captain, commanding D Company.[74] The 2nd Battalion spent a quiet winter and early start to the new year in Picardie, 'mopping up' and serving as carrying parties for ammunition. When on the March 27, the Canadian Cavalry took the town of Équancourt, A,B, and D Companies were brought up to relieve them.[75] After a fierce enemy bombardment the Lincolnshires successfully repulsed an infantry attack. But taking heavy losses,

---

[73] Vera Brittain, *Testament of Youth*, (New York: Penguin, 1989), p. 142.
[74] From Bruce's service records, obtained by request from the Army Personnel Centre, Historical Disclosures, 65 Brown Street, Glasgow, G28EX
[75] Lincolnshire Regimental War Diaries, 2nd Battalion, Regi 1/1/3, 26 Mar 1917

they also had to be relieved.[76] After two days in reserve, they rejoined the 8th Division's drive to Gonnelieu.

On April 21, 1917, after advancing through the village of Gouzeaucourt, the battalion began its assault on the village of Gonnelieu. At 2:30 am, in preparation for the attack, Bruce's friend 2nd Lieutenant 'Ponto' Middleton of C Company was ordered to lay out the tape to assemble on.[77] At 4:20 a.m. the battalion's four companies, organized into two rows of two, began their assault of the village as a supporting barrage commenced overhead. Bruce and D Company took the left flank and were supported in the rear by 'Ponto' Middleton and C Company. By 5 a.m. the battalion had cut through the wire and taken their first objectives. D Company met with heavy opposition in its subsequent push northwards through the village, when isolated groups of German troops who had been holding out in houses during the barrage appeared from the dugouts fighting. They were "killed or captured with great dash."[78] At 5:15 a.m., having captured the northern portion of the town, Bruce fired four 'Very' lights into the sky, indicating he had gained his objective.[79]



Bruce's leadership on this day earned him the Military Cross, which was reported in a supplement to the London Gazette on June, 18 1917:

> *Lt (Acting Capt) GMS Bruce is awarded the Military Cross for conspicuous gallantry and devotion to duty when his company was*

[76] Ibid.
[77] Ibid.
[78] Lincolnshire Regimental War Diaries, 2nd Battalion, Regi 1/1/3, 21 Apr 1917
[79] Ibid.

> *strongly counterattacked, he went from post to post under heavy fire encouraging his men. It was greatly owing to his fine leading and example that the enemy attack was beaten off. 21 April 1917, Gonnelieu.*
> **Editor's note - Gazetted to Military Cross 18 June 1917, not decorated until 12 Dec 1917.*[80]

This account of Bruce winning his M.C. was also reported by a Vancouver newspaper article titled "Real War Veteran, Though Just Qualified To Vote", which described Bruce's "conspicuous bravery and skill in handling his company under trying conditions."[81]One can only imagine with what pride the twenty-one year old Bruce received this news. One wonders if he allowed his mind to drift in the same way that a young (pre war-weary) Siegfried Sassoon did, upon hearing that he was due for decoration: "When I was allowed out of the hospital for the first time my vanity did not forget how nice its tunic would look with one of those (still uncommon) little silver rosettes on the M.C. ribbon."[82] Later Sassoon would, in a dramatic display of anti-war sentiment, toss the ribbon of his M.C. into the Mersey River. Bruce, despite the physical and mental damage inflicted on him by the war, would do no such thing. A half-century later, as he lay on his deathbed, his 'case of medals and awards' was one of few possessions he was able to leave behind for his son. Clearly these medals, which at various times in his life had been ceremoniously hung about his neck, had always remained close to his heart.

Bruce had won the MC yet three months later the regimental call again sounded. On July 30, 1917, the 2nd Lincolnshires moved into trenches in preparation for the attack on Pilkem Ridge. This would be the opening move in the Flanders Offensive, to commence the next day.[83]

---

[80] *London Gazette*, 18 June, 1917
[81] From a Vancouver newspaper clipping found in my family's Bruce file; newspaper name unknown.
[82] Siegfried Sassoon, *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer* (London: Faber and Faber, 1965), p. 176.
[83] Lincolnshire Regimental War Diaries, 2nd Battalion, Regi 1/1/3, 30 Jul 1917

The Third Battle of Ypres

The Third Battle of Ypres, also known as the Battle of Passchendaele, occurred on 31st July 1917 in the countryside south and east of the Belgian town of Ypres. The Germans were holding a strong line of defense where the Menin road crosses the crest of the Passchendaele-Wytschaete Ridge. The job of Bruce's 2nd Battalion was to support a three divisional advance north to capture Westhoek Ridge.

Just before 7 AM the 2nd Battalion, consisting of 20 officers and 600 other ranks, was formed up and began advancing slowly in 'Military Formation' led by Bruce. It arrived at the deploying position at 9am. All the companies reported casualties from M.G. fire in Chateau Wood and from shell fire between there and Westhoek. The carrying platoon was exhausted from 'the effect of gas shells and the heavy ground.' Sometime during this attack Bruce was caught by machine gun fire, receiving a wound to his chest. A newspaper clipping later detailed what happened. Bruce had just been hit in the chest: "While being carried back to the rear the party was struck by a shell. He was wounded in the leg and shoulder and lay out for twelve hours before being picked up by a detachment of the Canadian railway corps."[84] As far as I know Bruce made no account of being shot, but if we turn to George Orwell, we can get an idea of what this might have felt like:

> Roughly speaking it was the sensation of being at the center of an explosion. There seemed to be a loud bang and a blinding flash of light all round me, and I felt a tremendous shock—no pain, only a violent shock, such as you get from an electric terminal; with it a sense of utter weakness, a feeling of being stricken and shrivelled up to nothing… The next moment my knees crumpled up and I was falling, my head hitting the

[84] From a Vancouver newspaper clipping found in my family's Bruce file; newspaper name unknown.

> ground with a violent bang which, to my relief, did not hurt. I had a numb, dazed feeling, a consciousness of being very badly hurt, but no pain in the ordinary sense.[85]

If Bruce experienced this painless 'numb, dazed feeling' upon being shot, it won't have lasted as a shell then struck the carrying party on its way back to the trenches. Shrapnel tore through the skin of his leg and shoulder. If he was thinking anything at this moment, surely it must have been 'this is it'. He was only twenty and he had already been wounded four times. As he lay out in the mud for what must have felt like the longest 12 hours of his life, orders were received from the G.O.C. 125th Brigade that the advance would be carried out as planned. Command was given over to Lt. K. Young. But on reaching the crest of the ridge, the battalion suffered heavy casualties from machine gun fire; its barrage had fallen beyond the German guns. Stalling on the crest of the hill, it had to repulse multiple enemy counter-attacks before finally taking command of the ridge that afternoon.[86]

A rare photo indeed; two British officers larking about among the ruins of the Western Front. Bruce, on the left, wears the traditional German headgear, the 'pickelhaube,' while being 'bayonetted' by fellow officer and friend Lt. Young. Ypres, 1917.

As night fell the battalion went about the work of consolidation and at 10 pm, the Lewis gun posts on the the crest of the ridge were converted into bombing and listening posts. When the battalion was relieved the next morning, it had suffered 263 casualties in the day's fighting, with 41 killed in all ranks.[87] Bruce's wounds were extremely serious, and after

[85] George Orwell, *Homage to Catalonia* (Orlando: Harcourt Inc., 1980), p. 185.
[86]Lincolnshire Regimental War Diaries, 2nd Battalion, Regi 1/1/3, 31 Jul 1917
[87] Lincolnshire Regimental War Diaries, 2nd Battalion, Regi 1/1/3, 21 Apr 1917

three months in a base hospital somewhere behind the lines, he was removed to England. The shell wound to the shoulder was so severe that the doctors wanted to amputate the limb, but it was considered too close to the torso.[88]

On August 5, Donald Bruce typed up a letter to his wife Marion, informing her of how their son was getting along at the front. Donald was again unaware that as he writes, Mc, as he called him, is in hospital nursing a severe gunshot wound and two shell wounds. In his letter, Donald recalls receiving a letter from Mc "just before he went into the attack on the 30th." He expects to hear in a day or two "if he pulled through." Donald's pride in his son is palpable, and in describing Bruce's accomplishments, he almost seems to rule out the possibility of something going wrong, as we can see from whole letter below.

[88] My cousin Jay quoting Mona, Bruce's second wife

12th Machine Gun Coy C.E.F.

August 5th 1917

Dear Marion:-

I promised Mc in a letter to-day that I would write you. He is with the flower of Britain and France engaged in the greatest battle of the war. He wrote me just before he went into the attack on the 30th. I know where he is or near where he is but must not write it. I also know that they gained their objective whether they held it or not I cannot say. I do know too that it was severe fighting he had ahead from the tone of his letter. If he pulled through I will hear again in a day or two. I can only wait and hope for the best. That he will fight with best judgement and lead his men fearlessly I also know, for he is a wonderfully clever and good soldier respected by both his officers and men as the best in the Regiment. His Colonel loves him and has publicly congratulated him and his Company as the best in the regiment. Seniors in the army have come out to the regiment, some of them Captains long before Mc yet he retained the Company which shows clearly how much he is thought of. Army men think it a most wondefful thing that a boy of 20 should have a Company, 5 Officers and 250 men under him, yet he has a nd commands them and fights them better than many much older Captains, at least so his Colonel says and so do other Officers in the regiment whom I have met. He is such a cheery soul and as Middleton of the regiment days, the life of the whole show. I have talked with Major Slater of Vancouver at whose sniping school Mc. lectured and he told me he was a coming man in the Army. I have seen others and all are of one opinion. Dont think he cannot be serious for no one could be more soldierly or have more serious views of the life and work of

of a soldier. He is as proud of his Regiment and its traditions as it is possible to be- He never boasts about anything and gives the Hun full credit of all his fighting qualities. Of course like all regulars he will let one know that he is in the regular army. One cannot blame him for that for in spite of all that can be done they still stand out as the best. This is largely owing to the fact that they have the best blood in England to lead them and that they have their own instructors who are smarter than blazes besides of course it is the Regiment and its traditions they preach to the men that keeps them keyed up. Just before I left England there was an examination for entrance to Sandhurst and a very fine young chap from Wellington College was writing on it, He and his mother were stopping at the hotel and I learned from a Major one of the returns, 30 years at Sandhurst, also at the hotel, that there were 100 vacancies and that 1100 young men were writing on the examinations so you can understand the choice of young officers for the Regular Army is great. All of course must go through Sandhurst for the Cavalry and Infantry. Dorothy is well and will be well looked after should I get knocked over. We are having a cushy time at this front just for the moment although the artillery thunders day and night and of course some one is always getting pipped.

Don.

I can only assume that Donald is writing to Bruce's mother on behalf of their son because the latter is too busy preparing for the 'greatest battle of the war' (The Battle of Passchendaele), and because if Bruce were to write, there is very little he could write for fear of compromising his position. As if to counter the anxiou suspense he must have been feeling, he can at least take comfort in the fact that if survival on the front is dependent on 'good judgement' and 'courage'—which of course it usually wasn't—then his boy will be alright. For a mother waiting restlessly on the other side of the Atlantic, unwise to the unpredictability and the random nature of war on the Western Front, such words would have been a balm to lingering worries. If Bruce is the 'best soldier in the regiment,' there should be little to worry about concerning his survival.

Donald marvels at how Mc, only 20 years old, is in command of a whole company of men. And while he has a reputation as a 'cheery soul', he makes sure to inform Marion that their son has 'serious views on life' and is a 'coming man in the Army.' Donald is displaying a mixture of familial and social pride in his son. His words begin to suggest that the Army was a prestigious institution, in which Bruce was fortunate to be enrolled. He seems to want to get the message across that while their son is 'with the flower of Britain and France' engaged in this noble struggle, he is also carving out a valiant career path for himself. Perhaps he was taking his first step in a career which could land him a posting in the colonial service, where he could enjoy the extent of Britain's dominions, and travel the world as a servant of the Raj. This pride helps explain the optimistic tone that rings through this letter.

On October 25 1917, after a short stay in England, Bruce returned to Canada on convalescence leave.[89] It is the first time he had been home or seen his mother for five years, and

[89] From Bruce's service records, obtained by request from the Army Personnel Centre, Historical Disclosures, 65 Brown Street, Glasgow, G28EX.

she would have noticed a great difference in his appearance. The last time she saw him he was a fresh-faced 17 year old boy, awkwardly clad in an army uniform too big for his slender frame,

Bruce the young adjutant at 17; 1913

Capt. Bruce (21) pictured on convalescence leave in Canada, 1917

The 'Real War Veteran,' pictured with *Mater;* Canada, 1918

too rigid for the smooth contours of his innocent expression. Now he has returned a Captain due for a Military Cross, with his right arm in a sling. With sharpened features, he looks and is a different person.

Bruce's return to Canada is detailed in a Vancouver newspaper article titled 'Real War Veteran, Though Just Qualified to Vote.'[90] With the above picture (centre) attached, the article begins by describing the delight that many of Bruce's "old boyhood friends and acquaintances have had" in welcoming him back to the city. It goes on to describe how "Although barely 21 years old, Capt. Bruce has had a remarkable war experience… has been wounded three times, and has won the Military Cross for gallantry." On December 12, 1917, after two months sick

[90] From a Vancouver newspaper clipping found in my family's Bruce file, newspaper name unknown.

leave, Bruce returned to England to be personally presented with the Military Cross by King George. This signalled the end of his first world war career. He would spend the new year in Canada, and then return to the UK in July of 1918 to rejoin his regiment.[91]

It is likely that Bruce shared in the dream of many young men around this time to get out of England, and what better way to this than in the service of his country. The novelist Nicholas Mosley described this feeling in his biography of the First World War poet Julian Grenfell:

> What made young men like Julian long to leave England for India was some such desire for recklessness, for freedom from constraint… There was little else for a fashionable young man to do if he wanted to get away from artificiality and yet did not want to be almost totally alone. The army in India had become a sort of club providing formalities for would-be eccentrics.[92]

Based on his upbringing and his war experience to date, it seemed that Bruce was destined for a posting in the colonial service. The army life and the colonial framework was made for men like him, and was in many ways a continuance of the public school system with its strange customs and entitlements. The historian José Harris has recently argued that Edwardian Britain was a society with two faces; one that was masculine and reaching out to the colonies, and one that was feminine and inward looking. She writes "Imperial visions injected a powerful strain of hierarchy, militarism, 'frontier mentality', administrative rationality and masculine civic virtue into British political culture."[93] It is clear which face of society Bruce belonged to.

---

[91] Ibid.
[92] Nichola Mosley, *Julian Grenfell; His Life and the Times of His Death, 188-1915* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1986), p. 191.
[93] José Harris, *Private Lives, Public Spirit: Britain 1870-1914* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1994), p. 6.

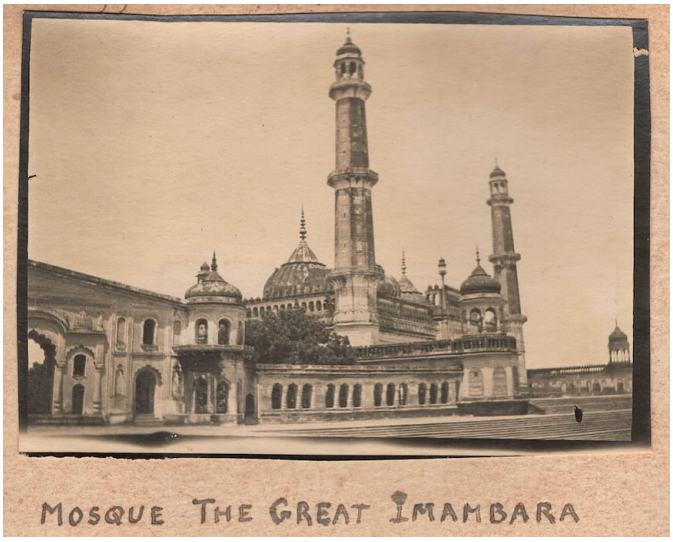
CHAPTER V

India and Sudan

Bruce sailed for India with the battalion on July 18 1919, aboard the Royal Navy cruiser the S.S. City of Calcutta. A photo taken on board shows Bruce looking comfortable and cheerful in his brown khaki suit, with a pith helmet (or sun helmet) on his head. One hand is in his pocket and the other clasps a cigarette as he gazes confidently into the lens. He looks the part of a young British officer, battle-hardened from the war, about to experience his first taste of the British Raj.

Disembarking at Bombay, Bruce made his way inland to Poona, which would be the battalion's home for the next six years. With very few letters to go on, I'm obliged to trace Bruce's movements through captioned photos which he compiled in numerous family albums. It seems he dotted around quite a lot, attending 'peace celebrations' and a 'basket-ball final' in Pachmarhi in '19, also finding time to fit in some golf. Bruce made it to Lucknow in northern India in August of that year, making a stop at Agra where he visited the Taj Mahal. At Lucknow he took photos of his fellow officers posing with the 'household brigade,' the barracks staff. He also visited the Bara Imambara Mosque and spent time wandering around the marketplace, or the 'Chauk'. More pictures taken on board the S.S. Calcutta show that he spent part of that summer on the Suez Canal, and in the port of Said. The Royal Navy battleships which appear in his Port Said pictures attest to the presence of British forces in Egypt in 1919, which had been sent to quell the disturbance in the wake of the arrest of revolutionary leader Saad Zaghlul. A picture

taken of the 2nd Battalion officers in front of their Ghorpuri Barracks in 1921 shows Bruce to be among the youngest of the bunch. Also in this picture are old friends 'Ponto' Middleton and H.M. Boxer, nicknamed 'Chunk', from the war.



On November 8 1922, Bruce was provided with a detachment of 100 men to be present at the unveiling of the Maratha War Memorial at the Shaniwar Wada fortification, Poona. This fort was the seat of the Peshwas (prime-ministers) of the Maratha Empire which passed into the hands of the British East India Company after the Third Anglo-Maratha War of 1817-18. The memorial was constructed to honor the soldiers from Maharashtra who had fought for the British Indian Army in the Great War. Thousands of memorials like this (plaques, sculptures, buildings) sprang up in villages and towns across the British Empire in the wake of the Great War. The historian David Crane points out that in 1914, the number of surviving British War graves scattered around the continent could be "counted in their handfuls."[94] He argues this could be explained in part by a "lack of connection" that existed between the country and its armies.

[94] Crane, *Empires of the Dead.* p. 12.

Britain's European wars up until 1914 were very often seen as 'minister's wars' or other such political conflicts, that "had more to do with an imported monarch's German interests" than with matters close to home. Consequently it took a long time for Britons to overcome "a deep-rooted suspicion of its armies."[95] Although this attitude began to change with the defeat of Napoleon at Waterloo, it would take the Great War to infuse Britain with a strong sense of national identity.[96] Close to a million British and Empire soldiers had sacrificed themselves in the Great War—a process had to be begun to ensure that their names would never be forgotten.[97] This resulted in the thousands of memorials that can be seen today all over the world, concrete testaments to the real price that Britain and her Empire paid in the the Great War. 74,000 Indian soldiers had lost their lives fighting for the British Empire. The Maratha War Memorial held particular significance as around 4,000 soldiers from the 6th Poona Division had died as captives of the Ottoman Army, following the disastrous Siege of Kut.[98]

It seems that in between such regimental duties, Bruce was enjoying the spoils of Empire. He joined his battalion's cricket team, playing wicket keeper (an odd thing considering his height). Team-sports were a constant throughout his life, wherever he was. Perhaps they sated a natural inclination towards leadership (Bruce was always sat in the captain's spot in the middle of team pictures.) Or perhaps on the wide, freshly-cut grass of a cricket pitch, he found the space, the air, and the control that was the exact opposite of his life in the trenches. Julian Grenfell, the young author of "Into Battle," who died in May 1915 after he was wounded by a shell-splinter to the head near Ypres, wrote of his love of sport as a "love of primitive things, strength and speed,

---

[95] Crane, p. 4.
[96] Ibid., p. 6.
[97] Ibid., p. 9.
[98] F.W. Perry, *Order of Battle of Divisions Part 5B. Indian Army Divisions,* (Newport: Ray Westlake Military Books, 1993), p. 78.

dash and courage, stealth and cunning."[99] Though he had hunting in mind when he wrote this, these feelings could be generally be applied to most field sports. But for Bruce, at least now, it seems the playing field was a place where order and peace reigned. Parties on the other hand, of which there were many in India, proved quite a different distraction.

It was at a regimental ball in Nainital, sometime in 1925, that Bruce met Mary Grace Horn, known to all by the nickname 'Polly.' She was the eldest of three daughters of Clement Horn, a construction engineer who specialized as a bridge-builder, and had been born in Seoni, just outside Nagpur, India.[100] It was said that when the three Horne sisters arrived in Nainital, the residents would call it a 'brighter Naini'.[101] Polly was an accomplished dancer, and it was at one of these dances seven years earlier where she first spied Dr. Robert Aspinall. They were married within a fortnight—partly on account of his reputation as a superb dancer.[102] But Polly soon discovered little else that made her husband appealing. In an effort to leave the family home and, ironically in hindsight, realize her independence, she had rushed into a stifling marriage with a man with whom she had little in common.[103]

Robert Aspinall was "by no means the most illustrious catch," as John's biographer Brian Masters puts it.[104] Unlike Polly, whose family had been in India since 1813[105], he had no background in India, but had been born in England, later attaching himself to the Indian Medical Service in search of adventure. Upon their return from 6 month's compassionate leave in

---

[99] Nicholas Mosley, *Julian Grenfell; His Life and the Times of His Death* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1976), p. 105.
[100] Brian Masters, 'The Passion of John Aspinall,' p. 13
[101] My mother heard this from an old local she had met when visiting Nainital as a young girl.
[102] Ibid., p. 14
[103] Masters, p. 15.
[104] Ibid.
[105] Taken from John's unpublished memoir, p. 9.

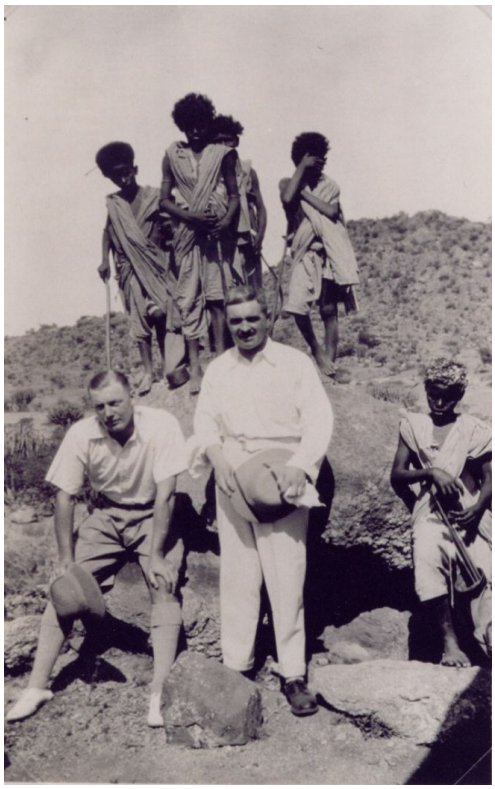
England (following their marriage), Robert was made Civil Surgeon of Delhi, where he and Polly lived for seven years.[106] Their first son Robert, nicknamed 'Chips' was born in 1924. But no new-found status could prevent Polly's sinking feeling that her hasty marriage had been a mistake. As Brian Masters writes: "Mary's more ambitious nature found no comforting echo in Robby's more cautious approach to life, and her dissatisfaction found release in flirtation and complaint."[107] She must have been feeling particularly lonely and unhappy the night she let herself be seduced by that 'penniless professional soldier' beneath the tamarind tree. He also 'danced beautifully'.[108]

In 1926 the Aspinall's second son, John, was born. Though the boys spent all their childhood together, it was clear early on that Chips took after his father, "firm, reliable, but uninspiring, whereas John had far more of his mother's eccentric spirit, ever likely to test the response to unconventional behavior, curious and inquisitive, and not remotely shy."[109] John was his mother's son, and there grew between them a powerful bond, "uncommonly close and confidential."[110] The real secret of this bond would remain hidden for 26 years.

Bruce spent the rest of the 1920s dotting around the Empire. In 1926 he was sent to New Zealand on Interchange (Exchange) Duty. In 1928 he sailed with the 2nd Battalion to Port Sudan. In 1929, Bruce commanded the Battalion in a Guard of Honour for Lord Lloyd, High Commissioner for Egypt, on his visit to Khartoum. That same year he was presented to the King at a royal Levee. What life must have been like for a British soldier in Khartoum in the interwar years can be inferred from accounts written at the time. It was a changing city, one that was

---

[106] Ibid., p. 15
[107] Ibid.
[108] 'Lady O' would often remember this to her children about Bruce
[109] Ibid., pp. 15-16
[110] Ibid., p. 16



Bruce (left) with Major Hopwood and local caddies at Kitty's Leap, during a round of 'Regimental Officer's Golf' near Khartoum in the Sudan, sometime in 1929.

"inexorably being drawn into the wider world" as John Frost writes in his book 'The British in the Sudan.'[111] Due to a vigorous campaign by the authorities and the cooperation of the city's residents, the incidence of malaria was on the decline. (Failure to report a mosquito or to eradicate standing water on your property could incur you a fine.[112]) The impressive Kitchener School of Medicine had sprung up in 1923. By the time Bruce arrived in Khartoum five years later, horse-drawn taxis had been replaced by motorized ones and imported automobiles, and "the bicycle had all but replaced the donkey as the means for transportation in the British community."[113] Between 1929 and 1936 in Khartoum, 258 street lights were installed and 4,500 trees planted, 12 public gardens opened and 3 grass football fields laid out.[114] For a British official with little else to do, it was a place where the days seemed to merge with one another, filled by activities such as horse-racing, yachting, tennis tournaments and parties at the Sudan Club and the Grand Hotel. [115] Minimal contact was usually observed in Anglo-Sudanese relations.[116] The rhythm of British life, split between office, club, and home, meant that the British and the Sudanese rarely met on

[111] John Frost, 'The British in the Sudan, 1898–1956: *The Sweetness and the Sorrow*.' p. 80.
[112] Ibid. p 80.
[113] Ibid.
[114] Taken from a 1929-36 report of Khartoum Province by Governor E.G. Sarsfield-Hall, in M. W. Daly's 'Imperial Sudan: The Anglo-Egyptian Condominium 1934-1956' p. 68.
[115] John Frost, p. 79
[116] Daly, p. 69.

equal terms.[117] The social segregation was further unhelped by a general British lack of ability and interest in learning Arabic.

With no letters from these years, I'm left to wonder if Bruce breezed through his time serving the crown, enjoying a warm life —the cricket matches, the time spent between friends houses at Delhi and Calcutta, the whiskeys and cigars at sundown; in short a life spent easily—or if he had doubts about British rule in India, about what he was doing there. Without the letters there is no way of telling, pictures only give glimpses. George Orwell, who worked as an imperial policeman in Burma in the 20's, later wrote about his own peculiar predicament of hatred for the empire he served and rage against the "evil spirited beasts"[118] who made his job a misery:

> With one part of my mind I thought of the British Raj as an unbreakable tyranny, as something clamped down, in *saecula saeculorum* ('forever and ever'), upon the will of prostrate peoples; with another part I thought that the greatest joy in the word would be to drive a bayonet into a Buddhist priest's guts. Feelings like these are the normal by-products of imperialism; ask any Anglo-Indian official, if you can catch him off duty.[119]

Unlike his fellow officials who largely maintained a professional front, who might simply have enjoyed their time, and who, anyway, were bowed down by what he called the "silence imposed on every Englishmen in the East,"[120] Orwell much later broke his silence on these conflicting feelings. He had also by this stage committed himself to the ideals of democratic socialism, so ideologically, was an enemy of everything the Empire stood for. After 5 years in Burma he abruptly returned to England, handed in his notice, and took up his pen. Conversely Bruce would

---

[117] Daly, p. 69.
[118] George Orwell, 'A Collection of Essays; *Shooting an Elephant, 1936*' (Harcourt, Orlando, 1981) - p. 149.
[119] Ibid.
[120] Ibid.

remain in the army for the rest of his life, indeed it became his home. For now it seemed he was happy just to 'get on with it'.

In April 1930, Bruce attended a large party in Gibraltar where the 1st and 2nd battalions were reunited. It being fancy dress, he decided to show up as a corpse covered in 'blood-soaked' bandages wheeled in on a stretcher—a 'bad taste' joke if ever there was one, though one his son would have greatly appreciated. He then returned to the UK, to the 2nd Battalion's Citadel Barracks in Dover, Kent, where he remained based there for two years. Bruce captained the regimental cricket team for a winning season, and had great success at the annual Dover Garrison Horse Show, where his horse won several prizes. (Horses would later play a large part in the fortunes of Bruce's yet-to-be-met son, John, who notoriously skipped his final exams at Oxford in 1950 as they happened, "by dreadful mischance, to coincide with Royal Ascot."[121] John, who throughout his three years at Oxford managed not to attend a single lecture, at least left the college with some winnings in his pocket, when his horse won the Gold Cup at 7-1.)

With the war well over, Bruce's fighting in peacetime now consisted solely of sporting combat. He captained a company of the 2nd Battalion in the 12th Infantry Brigade fencing championship of 1932, and won it outright. A caricature drawn of him at an Officer's Mess Dinner around this time, which places him on a rugby pitch surrounded by sporting stick figures,

[121] Masters, p. 52.

attests to this athletic side of his character. He was clearly a great sportsman and team player—one of only a few traits which didn't seem to pass on to his son John.

Despite being a strong young athlete who worked hard to get his Rugby XV cap, John was more of a maverick when it came to team sports. It was part of his penchant for disruptive behavior. As Brian Masters writes, "It was not that he set out deliberately to challenge authority, simply that he did not recognize its existence."[122] As a member of the School Cadets, during one particular occasion when they were supposed to be attacking a farmhouse, John's section was discovered dozing beneath a tree. This kind of iconoclasm earned John the respect of his peers but the wrath of one particularly conventional and prim boy called Nigel Power, his Head of House. John was to make history by becoming the first boy in living memory to be quad-flogged at Rugby School. This ancient, hieratic custom was the maximum punishment, and involved "dragging the boy out after bedtime into the centre of the quadrangle, in the chill air, as the Head of House repeatedly ran at full speed down the steps and across the quad to thump the miscreant on the backside in full view of other members of House."[123] Rather than reform John, this had the reverse effect and only bolstered his individualism.

A three year stint in the Royal Marines, of which his real father might have been proud, also did nothing to bend John's character. He joined the Intelligence Section of the 30th Battalion and served in England and on the Maas River in southern Holland. But for whatever reason, John had no desire to rise in the army and declined to be an officer, remaining a plain marine with pay of 1 pound a week. In retrospect, "for a man who bridled at the very thought of organized authority thwarting his will,"[124] the army was the last place he belonged. He was

---

[122] Masters, p. 25.
[123] Ibid., p. 26.
[124] Ibid., p. 34.

always marching at the back of the platoon, and once when he should have been on a grueling route march, he was found reading Sir Edwin Arnold's translation from the Persian poets. When questioned he said he "suffered from the poetic temperament."[125]

This difference between John and his father was also a generational contrast. Unlike his father or grandfather, John was never called upon to fight a war, so he never absorbed that discipline and subservience so integral to army life. It's not that he wasn't patriotic, it's simply that he knew he wasn't suited to follow his stepfather George Osborne into the army. He also had no interest in medicine, the profession of his 'father' Robby Aspinall. At school he was completely indifferent to the progress of the war which other boys followed daily,[126] and was more absorbed in creating his own mythologies than engaging in any discussion about matters of substance.[127] Perhaps John would have shown more interest in the war had he known that his real father was fighting in it, and that it would have a profound impact on both their lives.

[125] Ibid., p. 35.
[126] Ibid., p. 27.
[127] Ibid., p. 27.

Exaltations

CHAPTER VI

Malaya

> *It is not one man in ten thousand who, not being a Malay linguist and having had no previous contact with that race, could have taken recruits from the kampongs and created one of the smartest regiments in the colonial forces of the British Empire.*[128]

In September of 1932, the Government of the Federated Malay States announced the allocation of 75,000 Straits dollars (Malayan currency) for the recruitment of 25 soldiers. Various British and Indian battalions had up until that point provided security for the Malay states, and now it was finally decided the time had come to recruit a locally raised Malay Regiment. Captain George Bruce was one of those seconded for service (‘on loan’) to the Colonial Office to train the new force. He was selected to be company Commander and was immediately sent to the School of Oriental Studies in London to learn basic Malay for a month. In February of 1933, he embarked for Port Dickson, in the state of Negeri Sembilan, where an old rubber estate became

[128] Taken from an article titled ‘A Leader of Malays’ published in an unknown Malayan newspaper

his regimental home. Bruce was given six months to raise, train and command an experimental company of Malay soldiers, who, if the time came, would be able to defend themselves against foreign invasion.[129]

The Sultans of the Federated Malay States had long cherished the ambition to form a local regiment, but had constantly met with doubt as regards to whether the Malay temperament was suited to soldiering on the lines of a British battalion.[130] This explains why the initial Malay Regiment proposal, put forward in 1913, took fifteen years to be accepted. As the Malaysian historian Dol Ramli has argued, these doubts were understandable in light of the widespread trouble and unrest which had engulfed Malaya's warring feudal states since the 1870's.[131] But when the proposal to recruit a form a local regiment was finally accepted in 1933, it wasn't so much events in Malaya which had inspired the decision, but events that had been unfolding in Japan.

In the Opium Wars (1839-60), Britain had humiliated China's Empire and forced it to open up to world trade on its own terms.[132] Japan saw that it would soon suffer a similar fate unless it defended itself. It is no coincidence that Japan officialy became an empire in 1868. Towards the end of the 1800's Japan employed a policy of western militarization. Western technicians and teachers were hired to develop the use and manufacture of new European weapons; French and German instructors were brought in to bolster the Japanese Army; and British naval experts were sought out to build ships and train Japanese sailors. [133]As the historian

---

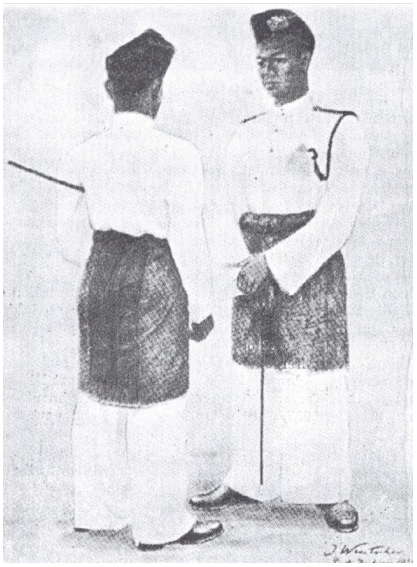
[129] Slides 112-113
[130] Taken from a Malayan newspaper clipping found in my family's Bruce file, newspaper name unknown.
[131] Dol Ramli, *History of the Malay Regiment 1933-1942,* in the *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society, Vol 38, No 1* (Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society, 1965), p. 199.
[132] Louis Allen, *Burma; The Longest War 1941-1945* (London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1984). p. 4.
[133] Ibid., p. 5.

Louis Allen reflects, the Sino-Japanese War of 1895—which deprived China or Korea as a vassal state—and the Japanese annexation of Korea in 1910, were in effects revolts against these countries allowing European intervention. Japan began to see itself as the only country in Asia capable of resisting western incursions.[134] When Emperor Hirohito succeeded to the throne in 1926, he ushered in a new era of intense nationalism. In 1931, Japan invaded and conquered Manchuria (Northeast China) and established a puppet government there. With its eyes now set on other parts of East Asia for their raw materials, it seemed there was little to stop Japan's territorial expansion. In the West, Japan's imperialist behavior began to be viewed with horror.[135]

Out of 1000 applicants, twenty-five men from different parts of Malaya were selected for the company. Bruce was supported by a staff of 4 officers, all who had previously worked in Malaya. He designed a crest for the regiment, which included two standing tigers supporting an Oriental crown, below which was a circle enclosing a Kris (asymmetrical dagger indigenous to Malaya) crossed with a Scabbard.[136] On the circle's rim was the motto 'Ta'at Setia' ('loyal and true'). Bruce also designed a 'walking-out-dress' for the troops, which consisted of a green velvet 'Songkok' (a south Asian cap associated with Islam), a white Baju (stiff-collared Malay shirt) and trousers, and a green and red silk Sarong woven in the northern state of Kelantan.[137] As Bruce later recalled, "The Sultans kindly gave permission for us to wear the short sarong and the kampong girls got an 'eye full' when they saw the new Malay soldiers on leave."[138]

---

[134] Ibid.
[135] Jon Latimer, *Burma; The Forgotten War* (London: John Murray, 2004), p. 29.
[136] From 'The History of the Royal Malay Regiment,' page 6, housed at the Imperial War Museum Archives, London
[137] Ibid.
[138] Radio Broadcast Talk by Major General G.Mc.I.S. Bruce OBE, MC. Recorded at Radio Malaya Studio, Kuala Lumpur at 1500 Hrs 6 Sep 57 and Broadcast at 2045 Hrs 10 Oct 57 - found in my family's Bruce file



While there was a good deal of opposition to overcome "from pessimists who had predicted that Malays would not submit to military discipline,"[139] there were also certain standards that had to be met in the formation of the regiment. This began with food. As Bruce reflected, "Good soldiers need plenty of good food… I think more recruits were obtained by the words 'Makan ada Baik' ('there is good food') than by 'Ta'at Setia'. This was integral to Bruce's plan to assemble the "smartest known solders in the Peninsular." When the parents of recruits visited the barracks, he took extra care to show them how their sons lived and were fed, for he had to overcome their reluctance to part with their sons "to an unknown place and an unknown fate." Further there was a good deal of what he called "skepticism to be overcome from the Europeans and to some extent from the army." To prove the success of his experiment, he had to get them on his side.[140]

[139] From *The History of the Royal Malay Regiment,* p. 10., housed at the Imperial War Museum Archives, London.
[140] Radio Broadcast Talk by Major General G.Mc.I.S. Bruce OBE, MC. Recorded at Radio Malaya Studio, Kuala Lumpur at 1500 Hrs 6 Sep 57 and Broadcast at 2045 Hrs 10 Oct 57 - found in my family's Bruce file

Four months after the birth of the regiment, a High Commissioner and two staff officers made an inspection of the barracks at Port Dickson. To put on a show, Bruce had his men perform a flawless drill which included fixing and unfixing bayonets on the march—a complicated exercise seldom performed by the British Army. Bruce also had invited some "civilian planter friends and weekend visitors" to be present at the drill, and as most of them had been soldiers in the first war, they knew "what was what." [141] He found it gratifying to hear them talk about "Our Regiment at Port Dickson."[142] So impressed by the display, the High Commissioner promptly organized expansion of up to 150 new recruits. For his impressive work in raising the Malay Regiment, Bruce was promoted to Major.

By 1936, the hard work of the regiment was rewarded when the first 4 Malays in history received their commissions as officers in the regiment, and were presented with swords of honor at a ceremony in Kuala Lumpur. A great number of newspapers covered this event and each one gave a nod to Bruce's accomplishment, which finally sunk claims by pessimists within the Army who had doubted the Malays' capacity for military discipline—despite there being "little in recorded history to justify their doubts."[143] A dozen of these newspaper cutouts would end up in my family's Bruce file, collected it seems by a devoted relative.[144] Or perhaps by Diana Hance, a young actress Bruce met when he was home on leave in June of that year. Diana was a "classical beauty,"[145] who had studied at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art (RADA) in London. She was

---

[141] Ibid.
[142] Bruce also had invited some "civilian planted friends and weekend visitors" to be present, and as most of them had been soldiers in the first war, they knew "what was what."
[143] For more information on the Malays as a warring people, turn to the Second Chapter titled 'Training For War' in 'The History of the Royal Malay Regiment,' page 10, housed at the Imperial War Museum Archives, London
[144] As is the nature of cut-outs, this hoarder sadly snipped off the name of every publication title, bar the *Singapore Free Press*.
[145] Taken from Heather Bruce's unfinished memoir, p. 1.

apparently "much sought after"[146] when she became enamored of Bruce who was 20 years her senior. As he was due back in Malaya in a couple of weeks, after a "whirlwind courtship",[147] they decided to get married on July 16 1936, at St Andrew's Church in Westminster, London.

Diana joined Bruce in Malaya sometime after their daughter Heather Diana Mary Bruce was born on May 2 1937. They lived in a big white house in the officer's quarters, near the Port Dickson barracks. Diana must have been very proud of the house for she took an almost panoramic view of it on her camera, and photographed every room. She carefully compiled this series in a captioned photo album of their life in Malaya. It seems she thoroughly embraced her life here; she showed a curiosity in local trees and fruits like sago trees and durian by photographing them in 'still life.' From these photos it can also be inferred that the Bruces received many visitors, and travelled a lot when Bruce was given leaves; they sailed to Berastagi in Indonesia, probably to stay with friends, and visited the temples of Tamil Nadu on India's southern coast. Diana was often at her husband's side, playing witness with her camera to the

[146] Ibid.
[147] Ibid.

parades and marches he attended, his duties 'inspecting the guard', and the functions at the Port Dickson Club. Not one to lay about at home, Diana got up close to photograph a tiger which had been killed by locals on the edge of the Port Dickson golf course.

The life was visually not that different from the time Bruce spent in Khartoum. In between soldierly duties, British officers serving in the Empire were provided with many of the comforts of home. Golf, cricket and tea-parties made the days pass easily. But when the regiment became part of the newly-formed first Malayan Infantry Brigade, Bruce's work was done. He was awarded the OBE for his troubles.

Newspapers covering Bruce's departure in August 1938 described a colorful farewell. The whole of the regiment was present as well as fifty European guests. Members of the regiment gave "a most realistic performance" of 'Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs'—the performance losing "none of its humor and charm though the use of the Malay language." After the show Bruce made his farewell speech, in which he praised the spirit of his men, and concluded, "My thoughts will always remain with the Regiment wherever else I go." He then directed some words in Malay to his men, telling them never to forget that the eyes of the world were upon them wherever they went, and that "each one of them must remember to preserve the good name of the Regiment which was in the care of every individual."

Bruce closed his speech by reminding his men that although they had earned a high reputation for smartness and efficiency, their most searching test had still to come under fire.[148] This test came only two years later with the outbreak of the European War, when the Regiment was immediately mobilized, and took over the West Sector of Beach Defences at Pasir Panjang.

[148] From 'The History of the Royal Malay Regiment,' p. 8, housed at the Imperial War Museum Archives, London

At the Battle of Pasir Panjang Ridge on 13th February 1942, a heavily outnumbered company of the Malay Regiment (B Company, 1st Battalion) was encircled by the Japanese 56th infantry Division. When their ammunition ran out, they fought on savagely using their bayonets, until nearly every last man had been killed. A few soldiers managed to escape and the rest became prisoners of war. Men of the Malay Regiment made another heroic last stand at the Battle of Bukit Chandu (Opium Hill) the next day. Here, Second Lieutenant Adnan Saidi (one of Bruce's old boys) and men of 7 Platoon, C Company, stood their ground for two days against an overwhelming number of Japanese. Saidi was later captured, tortured and bayoneted to death. He is today considered a national hero by both Singaporeans and Malaysians. Several officers, including two of Bruce's original twenty-five recruits who joined the Malay Regiment, were taken prisoner and executed by the Japanese when they refused to join the Japanese Imperial Army or remove their Malay Regimental uniforms.[149] Although Singapore fell to the Japanese soon after, Bruce's Malay soldiers had shown that they could fight with as much discipline and courage as any British battalion.

What Bruce had accomplished in under 6 years was the "raising and training of the youngest regiment in the regular military forces of the colonial empire."[150] Sir Shenton Thomas, Governor of the Straits Settlements (Britain's settlements in SE Asia), honored Bruce as such in a speech he gave in Kuala Lumpur to the Federal Council:

> I don't recall a better example of the 'right man' in the right place… Lt.-Col. Bruce has seen the Malay Regiment grow from a few recruits to battalion strength, and he has left it a unit of which we are all proud and in whose future performance we have full confidence…If I were asked to suggest the secret of his

[149] Radio Broadcast Talk by Major General G.Mc.I.S. Bruce OBE, MC. Recorded at Radio Malaya Studio, Kuala Lumpur at 1500 Hrs 6 Sep 57 and Broadcast at 2045 Hrs 10 Oct 57 - found in my family's Bruce file
[150] Malayan newspaper clipping found in my family's Bruce file, newspaper title unknown.

> success, I should say that it is the confidence in their officers which he has been able to inspire in successive batches of recruits. They have learnt gradually to have confidence in themselves… I join with them [The Malays] in wishing him every happiness and success, and I shall gladly forward a copy of today's speeches to the Secretary of State for the Colonies for transmission to the War Office."[151]

The Governor's decision to sing Bruce's praises to the War Office—"He might with advantage also be considered for further employment under the Colonial Office in a higher grade after a spell at home"[152]—would greatly affect the direction of Bruce's career.

In a last show of respect for their first Commanding Officer, as Bruce's ship steamed up the Straits of Malacca in August , regimental signalers on the Port Dickson foreshore flashed the message "Selamat Belayer" (Good Journey and Farewell). He could see a long line of bonfires and flaming torches being waved by the men he had trained. One day Bruce would look back on this as one of his proudest moments. After a long voyage which took them through the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea, past the pyramids at Giza and the Sphinx at Cairo; through the Straits of Messina and into Naples's glistening harbour, Bruce and Diana rounded the bend at Gibraltar and arrived at Tilbury Docks, east of London.[153]

Bruce had had a glittering career up until now. If anyone could say they had made a success of so ghastly a thing as the Western Front, he could. An allure of medals, a reputation built on impressive leadership and comradely respect, and a telling scar on his right cheek all attested to this wartime success. His interwar years had proved just as commendable, taking a difficult task in Malaya and making a success of it, and he had by now established himself as a

---

[151] Taken from unknown newspaper clipping covering the speech given by Sir Shenton Thomas, the High Commissioner, in the Federal Council on September 1, 1938.
[152] From Sir Thomas Shenton's letter to the War Office, undated
[153] Locations derived from Diana's photo album

respected figure in the British Army. But the next 6 or 7 years of his life would prove to be his most difficult; by the time Britain entered the Second World War in September 1939, George Bruce was a markedly different man.

CHAPTER VII

Lincoln

On November 28 1938, with the Bruce family now back in England living in the married quarters at the Lincolnshire Regiment Depot, their second son Hamish Donald McIllree Bruce was born. From photos, it seemed the Bruces were happy to be back amongst friends and family. Bruce once again signed up for the regimental sports teams. The family visited Diana's parents in Tonbridge, Kent, where the two toddlers frolicked about on the lawn as their father watched on lovingly. At nearby Deal, Diana took an ominous picture of a torpedoed ship that had floated ashore. They made a family trip to Chesil Beach in Dorset and climbed the ruins of Corfe Castle. During an outing to the village fair in Farnham, Diana hastily snapped a picture of the Duke of Kent walking past a cake stand. But as everything on the outside appeared bright for this young family, on the inside, their world was coming undone.

A few months after the war broke out, with the threat of German aerial bombing imminent, Bruce decided that his family would be safer living in Canada, with his mother in New Westminster, British Columbia.[154] While the First World War was essentially a war fought abroad, the Second World War turned the home front into a battlefield. By mid-July 1940, the Battle of Britain was underway and by mid-September, the Blitz. Between June and September

[154] From Chapter 1 of Heather Bruce's unfinished 'memoir'

24,000 children were approved by the Children's Overseas Reception Board to be evacuated overseas, 1532 of whom went to Canada. Over the next year, a further 6000 were privately evacuated to relatives and foster families in Canada.[155] Diana had expressed an interest in doing this, and so the necessary arrangements were made. One day in June Bruce accompanied his wife and children to the train station at Lincoln. But when they were on the platform, Diana turned to Bruce and told him she had decided not to live with him again. As Bruce recalled it:

> She said, 'I'm sorry Bruce but I'd better tell you I honestly don't think it's any good our going on and I don't intend to return to live with you after the war.' She said we were not really suited to each other, we would never be happy. Our friends and interests were different and my whole and only interest was in soldiering and soldiers. This came as a complete surprise to me, as she had never before mentioned any such intention nor had I given her any reason for so doing. I had no opportunity then of discussing the matter with her and did not still believe she really meant what she had said, but thought that she would return with the children at the conclusion of hostilities and that we would then make a home together again. I thought that war strain and excitement was the real cause of her announcement and that a period of separation would improve matters.[156]

Whether or not Bruce was as unaware of his wife's disposition as he implies in this text is hard to tell, because it was taken from a petition he later drafted for custody of his children. What is certain though is that Diana's resentment had been building up. As Hamish later recalled, "Her claim was that if she hadn't met Bruce, she would have gone to Hollywood."[157] Diana felt that marrying Bruce had set her ambitions back. For someone who purportedly lived "with a camera on her shoulder,"[158] it seems the army wasn't a big enough stage.

---

[155] Angus Calder, *The People's War: Britain 1939-45* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1969), p. 139.
[156] Taken from Bruce's 1948 petition for legal custody of his children, following his divorce from Diana.
[157] Hamish Bruce, interview with author, March 22nd, 2016
[158] Hamish Bruce, interview with author, March 22nd, 2016

As Diana set off to Canada with the children, Bruce returned to his duties, not taking seriously his wife's threat, putting it down to 'war strain' and believing that a separation would improve matters. As she was going anyway, he might be forgiven for not taking her words as seriously as she had intended them, and for thinking that, when hostilities were over, they could resume life as normal. He could further count on his mother to keep an eye on things. This break would also allow Bruce to return fully to his soldierly duties.

In October 1940, Bruce is made Brigade Commander of 204th Infantry Brigade (later the 185th Infantry Brigade, part of the 79th Armored Division), formed in the North Midlands out of battalions from four different regiments. His experience in Malay would have lent him good experience here.[159] The brigade would be part of the operation to breach Hitler's Atlantic Wall (D-Day); however by that time Bruce had already relinquished its command in favor of a higher posting in the colonial service. He had been promoted to Major-General to raise the 82nd West African Division, which was to assist the already established 81st West African Division as part of XV Corps, in driving the Japanese from Burma.[160] On June 15 1943 he embarked for West Africa, bringing with him his "skeleton" Brigade Headquarters from 185th Infantry Brigade. He established Divisional Headquarters in Ibidan in Nigeria, and was appointed Area Commander Headquarters Nigeria area. On August 1 1943, Bruce was appointed Commander Headquarters 82nd Division.

At this stage Bruce had worked his way near to the top of the army chain of command. He was a divisional commander in charge of 28,000 men, a number at the high end of regular

---

[159] Taken from Bruce's service records, obtained by request from the Army Personnel Centre, Historical Disclosures, 65 Brown Street, Glasgow, G28EX

[160] 'The History of the Tenth Foot 1919-1950; Compiled from War Diaries, Officers' Narratives and Other Sources by Major L.C. Gates, M.B.E., M.C. Late the Royal Lincolnshire Regiment, Edited by Major-General J.A.A. Griffin D.S.O. Colonel of the Regiment,' pp. 217-218, housed at the Lincolnshire Regimental Archives

division sizes in the Second World War. It was a feat of which his father Donald, who had died ten years earlier from heart-failure, would have been proud.

CHAPTER VIII

Arakan

> *It's [a division] one of the four best commands in the service. A platoon, a battalion, a division and an army. A platoon because it's your first command, some 30 soldiers; because you are young and because if you are any good, you know the men in it better than their mothers do, and love them just as much. A battalion because it's the unit with a life of its own. Whether good or bad depends upon you alone. You have at last a real command. A division, because it's the smallest formation that is the complete orchestra of war, and the largest in which every man can know you.*[161]
>
> - *Field Marshal William Slim*

The 82nd West African Division was formed of three brigades, the 1st and 4th from Nigeria and the 2nd from the Gold Coast, who had fought in East Africa in 1941. Other units which were added to the Division each had battle-tried soldiers within their ranks which greatly assisted in the welding together of the division.[162]Integration was swiftly completed in Ibadan despite problems that arose; many Europeans were 'milked' from the division as reinforcements for the 81st Division, and there was a widespread outbreak of bilharzia.[163] Extensive training was

---

[161] Field-Marshal Viscount William Slim, *Defeat Into Victory; Battling Japan in Burma and India 1942-1945* (London: Cassell, 1956), p. 1.
[162] Taken from the file 'Arakan Assignment—Being a History of the 82 (WA) Division; from its formation in West Africa in August 1943 to the Conclusion of its part in Burma in May 1945' - E 2018, *Closed Until 1972* WO203/2644, File No. 537, National Archives Kew, London - page 2 (here on referred to as *Arakan Assignment, Kew*)
[163] Ibid.

carried out in the thick tropical jungle with every effort made to anticipate the problems that the division would face in fighting the Japanese.[164]

In the summer of 1944 the division arrived in India after a six week sea voyage.[165] Here it resumed jungle training, planning and reorganization. Official reports regretted that the troops spent their time in the "depressed" region of Bihar, for the Africans consequently "never formed a really favorable impression of the Indian until they fought alongside him in battle. Their conversion, then however, was complete and Indians and Africans were firm friends thenceforth."[166] Regardless the division was battle-ready, and in September of 1944, "their impatience to 'get forward' was eventually rewarded" when they began to move into the Arakan, the westernmost part of British Burma, with Chiringa, the base of the 81st Division, as the concentration area.[167]

Of interest is the sign that Bruce designed for the division. It seems that wherever he was, he relished the chance to express his creative side. In depicting two crossed spears passing through an African head-pad, it acknowledged the part played by the Auxiliary Groups in a West African division; groups who carry the heavy loads of a unit by head in traditional African style. [168] They often enabled a whole division to move across country that a non-African division could not contemplate. In the tangled, jungle-clad mountains and swamps of the Arakan, their service

---

[164] Ibid., page 3
[165] Taken from Maj.-Gen. H.C. Stockwell's 'Farewell Broadcast' made on the Departure of 82nd (WA) Division from Burma, Rangoon, 22 April, 1946, housed at IWM London
[166] *Arakan Assignment, Kew*, p. 3.
[167] From the pocket-sized book housed at the IWM London Archives titled 'Arakan Assignment; The Story of the 82nd West African Divison,' p. 4 (here on referred to as *Arakan Assignment, IWM*)
[168] *Arakan Assignment, Kew*, p. 2.

would prove vital. The motto Bruce penned for the Division was "Through our carriers we fight."[169]

The Third Arakan Campaign

In order to understand the third Arakan Campaign it is necessary to recall the situation at the end of the second Arakan campaign, which had come to a standstill with the monsoon of June 1944, after the failure of the Japanese attempt to invade India by the coastal routes. Lieutenant General Sir Philip Christison, Commander XV Corps, provided a summative assessment of this campaign:

> In this campaign they [the Japanese] had lost 10,000 killed alone in Arakan, while the XVth Indian Corps had sustained over 10,000 casualties, of which 3,000 were killed. We had secured complete command of the sea and the air, and by the end of the monsoon had made up our losses. We were thus for the first time able to plan to use the mobility conferred by the possession of sea-power and air-power to seize and retain the initiative and force the Japanese to fight on ground of our own choosing.[170]

In October 1944, Supreme Allied Commander, South-East Asia Command, Lord Louis Mountbatten, drew up a new strategy for Burma with the goal in mind of re-capturing Singapore, which had fallen to Japan in February 1942. Consequently, on November 15, XV India Corps, of which 82nd West African Division was a part, broke off from Lieutenant General William Slim's Fourteenth Army and became an independent Corps. Its task was to clear the Japanese out

[169] Ibid. page 3
[170] Taken from a book found in my family Bruce file titled 'XV Indian Corps; History of the Arakan Campaign 1944-1945, With the compliments of Lieutenant-General Sir Philip Christison'- page 3 (here on referred to as Christison, *XV Indian Corps*)

of southern Arakan. For the operation, code-named 'Romulus', the Arakan was divided into two sectors, the Mayu and Kaladan.

Bruce's divisional plan was made up of three tasks. 1) to support the left flank of the 25th Indian Division as it operated down the Mayu Peninsula, by an advance down the Kalapanzin Valley. 2) To protect the eastern flank of the XV Corps. 3) Having achieved these two objectives the division was to proceed into the Kaladan Valley to relieve the 81st West African Division and continue the advance on Myohaung.[171] In short, their role was to establish British control of coastal Arakan, and to seize Akyab Island at the end of the Mayu Peninsula, which held an important airfield which the Allies planned to use to support the Fourteenth Army's eventual drive down Central Burma.

Opposing Bruce in the Mayu Sector was the 55th Division Infantry Group , under the command of Lieutenant General Hanaya, whose job it was to hold the Mayu sector as long as possible.[172] Christison related finding an 'Order of the Day' issued by Hanaya in February 1944:

> Whatever situation you are in, you fight to the last. Keep on firing till your last round has gone. Then fight on with your sword. When your sword is broken, turn yourself into a human bullet and charge into the enemy. Keep shouting 'Long Live the Emperor' until the very end. Then you can die bravely.[173]

Bruce's division was up against soldiers who were not only motivated by a selfless courageous streak, but also a desperate desire to prove themselves before their maker. As the historian Jon Latimer has written, "The life of the Japanese soldier belonged to the Emperor, and his highest duty was to die an honorable death in that service."[174] Numerous accounts from Burma attest to

---

[171] Ibid.
[172] Ibid., p. 4.
[173] Sir Philip Christison, *The Life and Times of General Sir Philip Christison* (IWM London), p. 167. (here on referred to as Christison, *Life and Times)*
[174] Jon Latimer, *Burma; The Forgotten War* (London: John Murray, 2004) p. 29.

Japanese soldiers—when they found that they had failed in their objective and were surrounded—bowing to their Emperor and blowing themselves up with grenades.[175] Moreover, Bruce would have to learn a whole new conduct of warfare. In the Arakan, Christison noted the unusual tactics of "Japanese thrusts and long-distance raids," which caused his men great consternation.[176] Night attacks by Japanese patrols were a common occurrence: "rumours abounded and there was much shooting at shadows."[177] It would be the hardest test of Bruce's leadership so far.

D-Day for the Arakan

2 Brigade set off at dawn on 14 December, supported by tanks and artillery, to occupy the hills around Buthidaung. They met only light opposition (where they expected a complete Japanese battalion) and within two days had established a bridgehead on the east bank of the Kalapanzin.[178] 1 Brigade made its assault crossing and linked up with 2 Brigade to occupy the village of Kindaung. 4 Brigade meanwhile drove south, meeting little opposition, and successfully linked up with the rest of the division at Buthidaung.

The advance south was stalled south of Kindaung when a party of about 150 Japanese soldiers with two or three field guns had been dropped in a "broken difficult country." In hand-to-hand fighting the division's first serious action was fought.[179] No prisoners were taken. According to the Japanese historian Saburo Ienaga, field service regulations actually forbade

---

[175] Christison, *Life and Times*, p. 129.
[176] Ibid. p. 123.
[177] Latimer, p. 30.
[178] Christison, *Life and Times*, p. 123..
[179] Ibid., p. 9.

Japanese soldiers to allow themselves to be taken prisoners alive; "if captured wounded or unconscious, they were to commit suicide immediately consciousness was regained."[180] Moreover, a soldier was deemed a hero if he "consummated tragic death in battle" and his soul was later "enshrined in the Yasukuni Temple in Tokyo."[181] The advance proceeded and by the New Year "the enemy were at long last abandoning their happy hunting grounds in the Kalapanzin Valley."[182]

From D-Day onwards, the Divisional Engineers "came into their own": as movement meant bridging chaungs, widening and shoring torturously winding roads, building ferries to cross wide rivers, and answering to the endless cries for 'water, water', great responsibility fell on their shoulders. They were ingenious at erecting 'Bailey bridges' "which the African had not yet seen before," and which contributed greatly to the surprises the division was able to spring on the enemy.[183] By December 31, the Japanese had evacuated Akyab Island, which was occupied by the 25th Indian Division; and the 81st Division, joined by 82 Recce Regiment, were within 10 miles of their objective, Myohaung.

The apparent fluidity of the operation should not belie the fact that this was a major engagement in one of the most trying campaigns in the war. As the medical historian Ben Shephard has written, "to fight in Burma was to inhabit every Western schoolchild's nightmare — thick jungle, murderous climate, fanatical oriental enemy."[184] And it posed as many problems mentally as it did physically. In the previous Arakan campaigns of 1942-1943, casualty lists

---

[180] Saburo Ienaga, *Japan's Last War* (Australian National University Press, 1979), p. 49.
[181] Latimer, p. 38.
[182] Christison, *XV Indian Corps*, p. 9.
[183] Ibid.
[184] Ben Shephard, *A War of Nerves* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2000), p. 221.

showed entire units succumbing to neurosis.[185] It was said that there was no point in counting psychiatric cases in the 14th Indian Division when it returned from its Burma Campaign in '43, because the entire division "was for practical purposes a psychiatric casualty."[186] In efforts to stem this tide, psychiatrists were poured into the sub-Continent: the Indian Army, which had 6 psychiatrists before the war, had almost a hundred by 1945.[187] On top of the heat ("a debauch of sun" as Orwell described it[188]), there was the constant menace of disease. The historian Louis Allen described Burma in 1945 as a "beautiful land" but one whose "green depths harboured all sorts of deadly diseases and parasites."[189] It was for this reason a "medical war as well as a war of bayonets, guns and aircrafts."[190] On top of all this there were "the endless and unusual problems of maintenance and supply, for the solution of which there was no precedent."[191] For one man in charge of 28,000 troops, it was a lot to handle. The effects were starting to wear on Bruce.

---

[185] Ibid.
[186] Ibid.
[187] Ibid., p. 222.
[188] George Orwell, *Burmese Days* (London: Penguin, 1986), p. 33.
[189] Louis Allen, *Burma; The Longest War* (Phoenix Press, 2000), p. xv.
[190] Ibid.
[191] Lieutenant-General Sir Philip Christison, *XV Indian Corps; History of the Arakan Campaign 1944-1945* (Headquarters XV Indian Corps) p. 126. - booklet found in my family's Bruce file, p. 26.

Disgrace

CHAPTER IX

'Two Episodes with Commander 82nd African Division'[192]

In his 'Personal Diary,' Lord Louis Mountbatten recalled a visit to the Headquarters of the 82nd West African Division on December 20, where he met "Major General Bruce, a tall and fiery Canadian from the Lincolnshire Regiment."[193] Bruce's job, it seems, was to escort Mountbatten to the front. This was no easy task and involved crossing several muddy chaungs (tidal rivers) in their jeep. When they came to one particularly muddy chaung, they were only able to cross with the help of their 20 man African bodyguard, who "with much splashing, noise, and laughter," pushed the car through the mud. It was then decided that none of the rest of the jeeps should follow, and so the guard was dispensed with; but not before "Boy Browning [a visiting officer] took the loaded rifle of one African, the 15th Corps Staff Officer had a tommy gun, Bruce an

[192] The title for Christison's chapter on Bruce in *The Life and Times of General Sir Philip Christison,* housed at IWM, p. 144.
[193] *Personal Diary of Admiral the Lord Louis Mountbatten*, 1943-1946, edited by Philip Ziegler, p. 162

ivory handled pistol, and I had an automatic, so off we set to find the Front."[194] Mountbatten continued:

> As we drove along Bruce said to me: 'They have probably left some booby-traps and mines on this road, as we have not had time to clear it yet. Please keep a good look out on the road.' Five minutes later he said: 'Do you see those foothills on the left? Yesterday they were full of Japanese snipers.' At this, I suggested we should take off our hats and remove the flags from the car so that we should look less conspicuous. To this he readily agreed.
>
> He was without exception the most dangerous and fiery driver I have ever driven with. There was no proper track; we constantly had to cross small chaungs and banks. His method of negotiating these was to go into four-wheel drive, double reduction gear, and then go as hard as possible at the obstacle. Having practically thrown us out of the jeep at the first obstacle we refused to sit in the jeep when he was negotiating subsequent ones. One of us used to guide him if it meant going off the narrow track but after he had nearly run down Boy we refused to guide him any more and left him to his own devices. When we got back into the jeep he frequently started off before we had sat down so that we all fell over backwards. He had not been able to find out where the Front was that morning and I began to wonder whether we should find the Japanese lines before our own, since warfare here is very open and fluid, and the front is moving rapidly.
>
> Finally we came to two British doctors, both very blood-stained and one heavily bandaged, standing in the road, so we stopped and Bruce asked what had happened. They said they were under mortar fire and had had their Advanced Dressing Station hit, to which Bruce replied: 'More fool you for putting your Advanced Dressing Station in a silly place. However, let's go and see what has happened.' So we scrambled out.[195]

---

[194] Ibid.
[195] Ibid., pages 162-163

Mountbatten then climbed up to the Command Post of the front-line Battalion, where he could see fires from the dumps the Japanese were burning as they retreated from Kindaung.[196]

I include this long quotation for two reasons. Firstly it is written by Mountbatten, who was at the time no less than Supreme Allied Commander, South-East Asia Command; in charge of all Allied operations in the South-East Asian Theatre. Secondly, it's one of the few examples I have where Bruce's voice is 'heard'. I say 'heard' because this was a diary entry and so Bruce's speech wasn't related word for word; yet Mountbatten also had no reason to exaggerate or falsify what he said. Or at least that's what I initially thought.

The first time I read this account, it made me laugh and filled me with a sense of familial pride. Bruce is acting less like the 'coming man in the army' he was presaged to be 30 years earlier, and more like his son John, acting in total disregard for authority. I assumed that naturally he was fed-up with carrying out his duties, fed up with the blowsy heat, and was satisfying a rebellious streak that he had kept bottled up for years. I was even somewhat moved that my great-grandfather was in a position whereby he could make such a striking impression upon Mountbatten (which certainly didn't subside). It was only later, after hearing a 'family story' about Mountbatten and Bruce, that this episode took on another dimension.

Mountbatten was a controversial character, known to be an egoist and a shameless self-publicist. This is something his appointed biographer, Philip Ziegler, constantly had to struggle with when writing his life. Ziegler grew so sick of Mountbatten's tendency to "rewrite history with cavalier indifference to the facts, to magnify his own achievements," that there was a time he actually found it necessary to place on his desk a notice saying, "REMEMBER, IN

[196] Ibid., page 163

SPITE OF EVERYTHING HE WAS A GREAT MAN."[197] After reading this, it was hard not to question the veracity of Mountbatten's account of Bruce, especially when taken in context with a particular family story.

Rumors had circulated during Mountbatten's lifetime about his 'open' relationship with his wife Edwina; their adulterous liaisons are freely acknowledged in Ziegler's book.[198] Indeed only half-joking, Mountbatten later declared; "Edwina and I spent all our married lives getting into other people's beds."[199] Perhaps less known, but still *there*, were the accusations of Mountbatten's bisexuality. Bruce must have got wind of this because, as the story goes, he once approached Mountbatten at a parade and handed him a bouquet of flowers. Where or when this was, I have little idea, that's as far as the story goes. But it is hard to believe it was invented by a family member because it doesn't represent Bruce in the best light. That Bruce might then have been 'hazing' Mountbatten in the jeep episode, becomes imaginable; that Mountbatten then set out to destroy Bruce, for personal reasons, does too.

The evening after the escapade with General Bruce, Mountbatten returned to stay the night at General Sir Philip Christison's XV Army HQ, and as Christison recalled, they supposedly had the following conversation:

> M - That is a queer chap you have in command of 82 Division. He damned nearly had us walking into the Japs. He seemed not to know where his companies were, and he smelled strongly of drink.
>
> C - I know very little of him, his Division has only just arrived. They say he was a trooper in the Royal Canadian Mounted Police at one time. I noticed he wore a brace of ivory-handled revolvers and seemed a tough type.

---

[197] Philip Ziegler, *Mountbatten*, (New York: Knopf, 1985), p. 701.
[198] https://www.lrb.co.uk/v07/n05/nigel-hamilton/principal-boy
[199] Ziegler, p. 53.

M - Well find out more about him.[200]

(Firstly, it must be addressed that Bruce was not a trooper in the Mounted Police; either he was being confused with his father, or he was inventing his own mythology, like a young John at boarding school.) That Bruce was inebriated during the jeep journey came only as a mild shock after reading Mountbatten's initial report. Indeed he had always been daring, but now it seems he was flirting with death and putting others at risk. This was not his character. Something must have been troubling him.

Without the relevant letters it's impossible to tell how Bruce was feeling at this time. It's highly likely that he was suffering from 'PTSD', a term which would not actually be recognized until after the Falklands War in 1982.[201] 'Shell-shock' would have been more apt, or a 'case of nerves'. But as no medical records were held in Bruce's personal file, it is impossible to tell.[202] Perhaps he was drinking simply to relieve the constant pain in his shoulder, from the shell wound he had picked up Ypres in 1917 (which almost called for an amputation). Robert Graves, in *Goodbye To All That*, claimed he only kept himself awake and alive in the trenches by drinking a bottle of whiskey a day. Considering Bruce's circumstances, considering the time he spent on front lines and in hospitals, it's a wonder he didn't lose all self-control. And while it seems he came close to the edge a couple times, he could always count on his sheer conviction and courage as a soldier to extricate himself and others out of some trying situations.

As earlier suggested, the next time Mountbatten wrote about Bruce, his original impression of him hadn't much changed. He recalled his last visit to General Bruce, and how

---

[200] Christison, *Life and Times*, p. 144.
[201] Shephard, p. 379.
[202] In request for Bruce's medical records, I received the following response from the Army Personnel Centre (APC) at Kentigern House, Glasgow (where all service papers for soldiers who served after 1920 are held) - "if there are no medical records held within the personal file which contains the service records, after such a period of time there are no other places that the medical records can be held."

lucky as a party they were to run into their own forces and not the Japanese. He then recalled how his Deputy Chief of Staff, Major General Horace Fuller, "had not been so lucky."[203] Fuller, an American general who had been attached to the HQ to learn something about jungle warfare,[204] had been taken by Lieutenant General Christison to spend Christmas Day with Bruce.[205] He was in for a lesson or two about 'jungle warfare'. They had set off for the front in two jeeps with an escort jeep of four West African soldiers. Two of the jeeps had just crossed a dry nala (riverbed) when, as Christison recalled, "bursts of rifle fire and machine gun fire broke out from about 250 yards ahead." He continued:

> 'Out, all' I shouted and we dived for cover at the sides of the track. The escort jeep was still on the other side of the nala and the second jeep managed to reverse into it. So there we were, three Generals and two ADC's [aide-de-camp] in ditches either side of the road on which stood the now empty first jeep. We opened fire with our revolvers down the track, though we could not see any Japs.[206]

In the meantime the driver of the second jeep had crawled forward and attached a tow rope to the first jeep, and pulled it back into the nala. Once Bruce, Christison, and the ADC's had crawled through the nala and got back into the jeeps, they drove off to safety. But only then, in turning around, did they realize that they had left General Fuller behind. Christison recalled:

> The Commander 82 Division [Bruce] asked for covering fire, and he as his W.A. orderly crawled forward again. The Japs opened fire and I saw him replying with both his [ivory-handled[207]] revolvers while the escort opened up too. We still had not seen a Jap and I suspected they would be trying to get behind us and we must make a speedy get-away. At that moment the General [Bruce] came in sight dragging the American

---

[203] Mountbatten, p. 174.
[204] Christison, *Life and Times,* p. 150.
[205] Mountbatten, p. 174.
[206] Christison, *Life and Times*, p. 150.
[207] Mountbatten, p. 174.

> along the ground with the help of his orderly. We lifted him into the jeep of the escort who supported him and drove back to Division H.Q.[208]

When they ran into their first party of African troops, a "greatly excited" Bruce stood up and made them a speech in Hausa (a West African dialect) to the following effect: 'On this festive day, you will be pleased to hear that I, your General, have been engaged in hand-to-hand combat with the Japanese. We have come off victoriously.'[209] Wild and enthusiastic cheers followed from the Africans who clustered round and began to pull General Fuller out of the jeep. According to Mountbatten, it was only then discovered that "the Africans understood that poor old Horace Fuller was a Japanese General whom their General, Bruce, had gallantly captured for them as a Christmas present, and they were about to take delivery of them with glee."[210] Christison described the scene:

> Suddenly Africans came running from all directions, shouting and cheering. 'What is in this in aid of?' I said to an African Sgt.-Major. 'General, Sah' he said, 'Men very happy General has been to catch one Japanese man and bring him back. Very good joss, Sah'. The American uniform, not unlike the peaked caps the Japs wore , plus the fact that he was unconscious and supported between two Africans his face a whitish yellow, seemed to the troops to indicate we'd brought back a Jap.[211]

Naturally there was then considerable difficulty in persuading the Africans to realize that, "far from being an enemy, General Fuller was a highly placed and highly valued ally," as Mountbatten recalled.[212] Bruce and Fuller finally had to shake hands in in the jeep to

---

[208] Christison, *Life and Times*, pp. 150-151.
[209] Mountbatten, p. 175.
[210] Ibid.
[211] Christison, p. 151.
[212] Mountbatten, p. 174.

convince the Africans that they were on the same side.[213] But what came as an even greater surprise was the last paragraph in Mountbatten's diary entry:

> General Bruce has now succumbed to an in-growing toenail which has put him on the sick list and so Hugh Stockwell has taken over and it is possible to visit his Front in greater safety! I can hardly imagine a better Divisional Commander than the latter.[214]

Are we really meant to believe that after this death-defying rollercoaster of an episode, in which Bruce was described as "the stuff of which VC's were made,"[215] that he then succumbed to an 'in-growing toenail? The pain of an ingrowing toenail can be acute, no doubt, but not quite enough to justify relinquishing command of 28,000 men. Again what Mountbatten failed to mention in his 'Personal Diary' was Bruce's 'drunk driving'. I know of this because Lieutenant General Christison noticed before they set off in the jeep that Bruce had been drinking.[216] He was actually quite impressed, "Where did alcoholics get their drink in ARAKAN?"[217] Perhaps in sparing to mention the alcohol, Mountbatten was washing his hands of his part in Bruce's prior dismissal (his account was written a week afterwards). Of a man to whom it was said, 'Dickie, you're so crooked that if you swallowed a nail you'd shit a corkscrew!"[218] this sort of double-dealing would not be surprising. It was clear, however, that Bruce was having some sort of breakdown. It was as if in Burma, the emotional by-products of his work had caught up to him. He had devoted his whole life to putting his life on the line and it was finally taking its toll.

---

[213] Ibid.
[214] 'Personal Diary of Admiral the Lord Louis Mountbatten, 1943-1946' edited by Philip Ziegler - pp. 174-175.
[215] Ibid., p. 174.
[216] Christison, page 150
[217] Ibid.
[218] Purportedly said by Field Marshal Sir Gerald Templar to Mountbatten.
https://www.lrb.co.uk/v07/n05/nigel-hamilton/principal-boy

Following reports that Commander 82nd Division was behaving in an "extraordinary manner and his Brigadiers could no longer loyally support him,"[219] Christison had no choice but to send for Bruce. His account of the incident is worth relating because it clarifies the bizarre excuse of the 'ingrowing toenail':

> He [Bruce] sent a message that he could not come because he was ill. My DDMS ordered him to be sent back to General Hospital to get him out of the way. He actually had a poisoned toe as an excuse. I consulted Leese and we agreed he must be replaced. So my AMS had the necessary Form 194E made out and I sent it by Terry (by then my Assistant Military Secretary) for the General to sign. Terry duly arrived at the Hospital and handed him the form which he read. Drawing a revolver from under his pillow, he shouted 'Tear that up or you are a dead man.' Luckily a doctor was present and calmed him down, and he eventually signed. The Form 194E - adverse report - did not necessarily finish an officer's career, though in almost all cases it meant no further promotion and loss of any temporary or acting rank.[220]

In signing the form, Bruce was relieved of command of the 82nd West African Division, which was given over to Major General Hugh Stockwell on 12 January 1945.[221] He departure was a great shock to his Division, who had come to regard him with affection.[222] It seems that Bruce recovered in hospital, at least enough for him to return to a job in the Army, though he would never return to any command position.

---

[219] Ibid., page 151
[220] Ibid.
[221] Christison. *Arakan Assignment, Kew*. p. 10.
[222] Ibid.

CHAPTER X

Return 'Home'

Bruce's career in the army was not over and for two years he worked as President of the BAOR (British Army on the Rhine) Revision of Sentence Board. BAOR was the name given to the 21st Division, which after the Normandy landings, crossed the Rhine into northern Germany and three months after the war ended became an occupational force. But Bruce found this tedious work (he had interviewed approximately 7000 soldiers under sentence) and requested successfully to be relieved on 29 April 1947.[223] His next appointment was as Director of Army Welfare Services, Middle East Land Forces.

One possible consolation for Bruce of his early exit from Burma was that he would get to see more of Hamish and Heather, now 9 and 10 respectively. It was now, pending retirement in Egypt, that he drafted up a petition for custody of his children. He had continued to make payments for their welfare while he was on active service, and had corresponded frequently with Diana on friendly terms about general matters and family affairs. She had made no allusion to the announcement she made just before sailing, and so it seemed her time in Canada had alleviated what Bruce hoped was 'war strain'. So when Bruce returned to the UK in January 1945—as the trans-Atlantic crossing was considered reasonably safe—he wrote to Diana and

[223] Letter dated 29 April 1947 from Colonel G.McI.S. Bruce OBE MC (11344) to The Deputy Military Secretary, HQ BAOR, subject: 'Application to be relieved from present employment' - contained in my family Bruce file

asked her to return to England with the children. But Diana stalled. It was only when he was serving with the BAOR in Brussels six months later that he received a letter from his wife telling him she was sailing to England with the children to live with her parents at "Waverley" in Walmer, Kent.

Obtaining special short leave, Bruce arrived at Waverley at the beginning of August. He later recalled that he was immediately made to feel unwelcome:

> She was out shopping when I arrived and her reception of me when she returned was cool to say the least. I tried to surprise her by jumping out from behind a curtain and she simply said 'Oh! it's you is it?'. She referred to what she had told me on her departure for Canada and said she was still of the same mind and did not intend to live with me again.[224]

Bruce occupied a separate bed in his wife's bedroom on the first night, and was thereafter told he'd have to sleep elsewhere. When he remonstrated that he only had five days leave and wanted to be near the children, she suggested he get accommodation in a local hotel. This was not possible and so her parents intervened and offered him a separate bedroom in the house. Hamish later recalled, "How could they not? For someone who'd been through what he'd gone through, after the war."[225] Over the next three days, Bruce made several attempts to discuss the position with his wife with a view to making a home together, but she said there was nothing to discuss, she had decided not to live with him again. Of course she made no mention of 'Reini', who was now the deciding factor in her strong desire for separation.

Diana met Reini (Rinaldo Anthony Wassman) soon after arriving in Canada in 1940. Reini was a naturalized Canadian of Swiss birth. In Vancouver he was in the 'egg business',

---

[224] Taken from Bruce's Petition for custody of his children, drafted on 25 August 1948
[225] Hamish Bruce, interview with author, March 22nd, 2016

running a chicken farm, and did well for himself when he secured a contract with 'White Spot', a successful restaurant in Vancouver. He later sold the business for a substantial profit and set up a construction firm.[226] Later in her life, Heather described the moment Reini appeared on their doorstep:

> My mother always said that when she arrived, she didn't know how to boil an egg because she'd always had a cook and servants — it must have been a very harsh education for her but it wasn't long before word got around there was a beautiful damsel in distress and, pretty soon, a charming (smarmy), good-looking (smarmy) Swiss waiter (as my grandmother used to say) came calling. One day, he drove up to the house, knocked on the door and introduced himself. (He was married at the time with two small children of his own — but that's never stopped his philandering ways). There began a torrid affair...[227]

The children's suspicion of Reini had nothing to do with their loyalty to Bruce. It was more of an instinctual distrust. "He was a ladies man" as Hamish recalled, "a Swiss-trained hotel manager with all the credentials. It had nothing to do with Bruce."[228] Further they had only heard bad things about their father from their mother. One particular story Diana often told them was what had happened on her honeymoon night with Bruce—their first night alone together. Heather used her imagination to explain this one:

> I must guess that Bruce must have been petrified to find himself alone with this delectable porcelain pudding when all he had been accustomed to was the company of his fellow soldiers-in-arms and, don't forget, he was eighteen years older than she. Needless to say, he got blind, stinking drunk before he roughly

[226] Hamish Bruce, interview with author, April 30th, 2017
[227] From Chapter 1 of Heather Bruce's unfinished 'memoir'
[228] Hamish Bruce, interview with author, April 30th, 2017

> bedded his new wife and, supposedly, I was conceived of that union and thus sealed my mother's fate. [229]

It's unlikely that Bruce, on his honeymoon night, was the 'petrified' prude Heather here makes him out to be. This is, after all, a man who had bedded the 'belle of the ball' beneath a tamarind tree ten years earlier. Heather was echoing the words of her mother. "It's loaded, it's mother's story," as Hamish recalled:

> It reinforced her reasons for making the choices that she did[230]...Mother had that guilt complex. She was sent to Canada to be safe, and she had an affair with a neutral[231]… She had a huge cover that she had to maintain. She betrayed her life as a British citizen, and here she was in this land of milk and honey.[232]

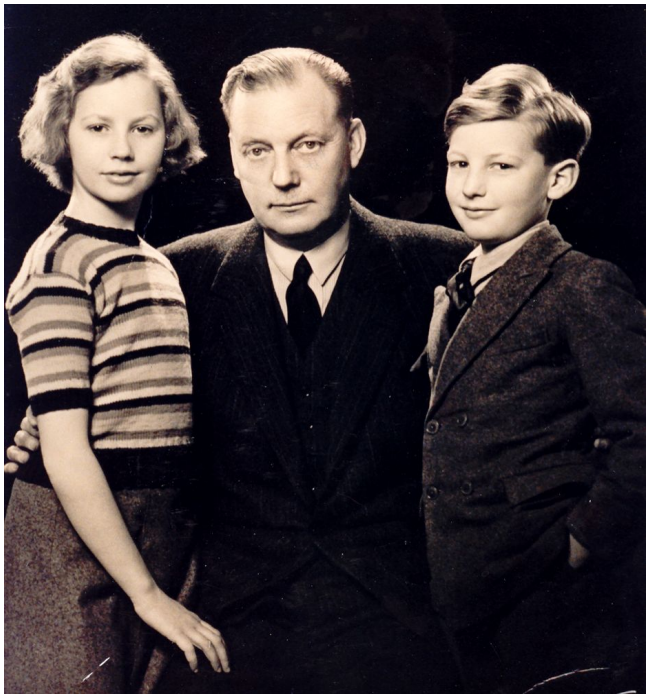
Hamish explained the 'guilt complex' as stemming from the fact that Reini was exempt from war service while Bruce was a professional soldier. In order to allay the guilt she felt for having taken up with Reini, she had to then discredit Bruce, and she did this by thus maligning him in front of his children.[233]

In February 1946, Diana wrote Bruce a formal letter restating her desire for a separation. Bruce in turn filed for custody of the children, but this was not granted him until the divorce was made absolute on January 1 1949. As per his request, the children were to remain in the care and control of their mother until he was in a position to make a home for them. But on February 5, Diana married Reini and filed her own petition to take the children back to Canada with her—this time to live with her new husband. In her petition, she argued that "Both my son and my daughter have been continuously with me ever since they were born, and during the past four

---

[229] From Chapter 1 of Heather Bruce's unfinished 'memoir'
[230] Hamish Bruce, interview with author, April 30th, 2017
[231] Hamish Bruce, interview with author, March 22nd, 2016
[232] Hamish Bruce, interview with author, April 30th, 2017
[233] Hamish Bruce, interview with author, March 22nd, 2016

years they have seen the Petitioner [Bruce] on only three or four occasions."[234]She spared mentioning that this was because the petitioner had been on active service for the better part of the last four years. She also made it appear that they had a good relationship with Reini: "Both my children are well known to my husband, and they are fond of him. They knew him when we were in Vancouver during the war."[235] Without a permanent home, it seems Bruce had little



Bruce with Heather and Hamish circa 1946

ground on which to fight his wife's petition. So according to her testimonial, he concurred with the arrangements. He would continue to contribute towards the cost of their education. On February 29 1949 Bruce left the army on retirement pay. He was granted the rank of Honorary Major General but never received any of the awards that usually came with this. In April, Diana travelled to Canada with the children.

[234] Taken from Diana's petition for custody of her children and permission to take them to live in Canada
[235] Ibid.

Soon after their arrival in Canada, Reini received a phone call telling him that the sawdust in the building next to his construction firm had caught fire; that his business was in flames. When he went to check his insurance, he learned that it had expired, as he hadn't been told when his annual payment was due. Luckily Reini was the owner of two properties in Vancouver, and he had saved up a bit of money. He and Diana went into business together, taking over the lease of a hotel in Radium Hot Springs, BC, and for a while everything seemed fine. But all along Reini had been having affairs.[236] When he began an affair with a doctor's wife in the Vancouver Lawn Tennis Club Association, it became too awful, and Diana had no choice but to file for divorce. Reini later married his mistress and they too then separated. When Diana wouldn't have him back, that was it.

One day in 1971, in his room at the Sylvia Hotel in Vancouver, just a block away from where Diana was staying, Reini swallowed a handful of barbiturates. His last act was to arrange for flowers to be sent to Diana on the anniversary of his death, for the next ten years.[237]

[236] Hamish Bruce, interview with author, April 30th, 2017
[237] From an email exchange I had with Sage on 4/29/17

CHAPTER XI

Merdeka

In August 1957, Bruce was invited to ceremonies in Kuala Lumpur celebrating Malayan Independence. As the 'father of the Malay Regiment,' he was asked to speak live on national radio. He prepared his speech in Malay, and practiced for many days to perfect it. The speech provides a fascinating insight into Bruce but also into the time in which he was living. It was a particular moment in the history of Britain, the shedding of its imperial dominions was well underway. A lot was changing for Malaya too; as one empire was losing a colony, that colony was tasting its first sweet airs of sovereignty.

Bruce took this opportunity to look back on the legacy of the regiment, and he found it cause to celebrate. As a piece of historical literature, Bruce's writing echoes the colorful language of that dying empire, and the values of a generation who knew only war. In a way he mostly dwelt in his speech on what Orwell spared in his reflections of Empire. In addressing the legacy of the Malay Regiment, the structure of opportunity that was borne out of it, Bruce ventured to show that this relationship of ruler and ruled wasn't always black and white, so to

speak. That, at least in the case of the Royal Malay Regiment, it was a cause for good as it bore fruit for both sides.

After thanking the new government for inviting him to attend the 'Merdeka' (Independence) celebrations, an invitation "that stemmed from the old soldiers in this country", and remarking on the success of the celebrations, Bruce talked about the history of the regiment and his good fortune to have been selected to command it. He related his experience:

> I arrived at Port Dickson in early 1933 and found a skeleton staff and 25 Recruits who had been carefully selected. Of these 25 only two remain now serving in the Regiment, one is Col. Raja Lope and the other Lt. Col. Mohamed Taib bin Jais. I am sorry to say some of the first squad were killed in the Japanese war, some died under Japanese rule and some are now usefully employed in civilian jobs.
>
> Now as regards the Staff, there was the Adj. Capt. Exham, now Major General Exham GOC Nigeria, then came RSM McCarthy, now Capt. McCarthy MB., of him more anon, then CQMS Field, and now a civilian in Kedah and finally our No.1 Clerk Lim Paul, a Malayan born Chinese, an efficient loyal quiet man with a great sense of humour. He is now Senior clerk in the Fed Army Records Office. Our first Tailor was Kwong Yuen, who made all the first uniforms and mufti and who is now Garrison Tailor Port Dickson, and two faithful Indians, the storeman and groundsman, both still employed at Port Dickson and working very cheerful and well. The devoted service of these Chinese and Indians for over 20 years to the Malay Regiment may perhaps be looked upon as a small example of the friendly and happy relationships between the four races, Malay, British, Chinese and Indian, that is necessary to the future of this country.
>
> I must for the sake of my old soldiers say a word about RSM McCarthy. There are two types of RSM's, one is the robust bull necked type who roar like a bull, the other is the lean spare type with a horrible smile, whose eyes, when he is behind you, seem to be boring red holes in the back of your neck, McCarthy was the latter type, smart as paint, a parade voice like a saw cutting galvanized iron and he spoke fluent Malay with a strong

> cockney accent, although off parade this was not noticeable. He was very fair, had a strong sense of humour and was much admired and loved as all good Sergeant Majors are, by everyone. We watched Chelsea being beaten last year by Manchester United, and I assure you all he has not changed…
>
> When I left in 1938, we had Band and Drums, the main barrack buildings were up, the Officers Mess was ready for occupation. We had 10 Malay Officers, all chosen from the ranks. The only test that the Malays had not had was the test of war, and how they would behave was the unknown factor. Well, you all know how well they fought at Pasir Panjang and how well they have done against the Terrorists. I must say the best news I heard in the war was from a neutral source who described their fighting during the last days before the fall of Singapore.

The regiment was a pride of Britain, but more personally, of Bruce. After all his trials, it was his chance to look back on perhaps his greatest achievement. What shines forth is his evident pride, but also his sense of humour and enduring lightheartedness. In closing, he paid service to the regiment's fallen soldiers, contatulated Malaya on its Independence, and wished "the Federation Army and the country every success in future."[238]

While giving the speech, however, the radio station didn't anticipate its length, so the operator switched him off halfway through but did not tell him till the end, and allowed him to continue, while nodding and smiling as he spoke. According to Mona, Bruce's second wife, only when Bruce was finished speaking did he clue into what had happened, and he then had a good laugh.[239]

---

[238] Radio Broadcast Talk by Major General G.Mc.I.S. Bruce OBE, MC. Recorded at Radio Malaya Studio, Kuala Lumpur at 1500 Hrs 6 Sep 57 and Broadcast at 2045 Hrs 10 Oct 57 - found in my family's Bruce file

[239] Jay, remembering what Mona had told him

CHAPTER XII

You Must be Polly's Boy

One day towards the end of 1952, John arrived at the address he had found in the archives at Somerset House.[240] He had no phone number, so he came without warning and presented himself at the door.

> When I arrived by taxi at 207 Laudervale Mansions[241] I saw a bronze plaque that informed me that the block of flats was for H.M. Retired Army Officers. I climbed a comfortless spiral stone staircase to the third floor, and as I had given my father no forewarning of my coming I hoped he was in, and rang the bell. The door opened and what was to follow is painted into my memory. A man of 65 stood under the glow of a small pink bonnet shade. I was in darkness. I saw before me myself at the age of 65, the likeness even at the gap of 40 years was uncanny - extraordinary.
>
> 'Who are you?' he said,
>
> 'I am your son.'

[240] From 1837 onwards (for almost 150 years), all Birth, Marriage and Death certificates in England and Wales were held at Somerset House, before being moved to the National Archives

[241] Lavinia Whitehall, interview with the author, 5/1/17

He pulled me under the lamp and said after a brief scrutiny, ‘You are a Bruce alright. You must be Polly’s boy.’ He chuckled with satisfaction as he led me towards a drink cabinet in the sitting room. ‘John, this calls for a celebration.’ He had half a bottle of whisky under lock and key and we drank each other’s health and fortune.

We became father and son instantly and both were exhilarated. Unfortunately he died a few years after our meeting but during that time we got to know each other and caught up on the lost decades. He once offered me all his life savings, over 1,000 pounds, to reimburse me for his absence over the years.

After discovering my father I had a good turn of luck betting on the horses. He had supplemented his meagre pension by painting water colours of English soldiers in their full historic regimentals. He sold these to a shop in Bond Street called Fores for 4 guineas each and would complete about two a month. I called in at Fores and enquired as to whether by chance they had any water colours. There were three or four of my father’s signed Mc’I. I asked how much they were, ‘12 guineas to you, sir,’ came the answer.

I countered with ‘I think they are superb, I’ll take the lot. What is more I will take any more you can get of Mc’I’s work’ and I parted with the required cash.

‘Could I take your name, sir, and your address?’ he enquired.
I gave him a Greek name - I can’t think why as I did not look in the least bit Greek, ‘Catapodis - Nico Catapodis.’

The next time I saw my father he had a bottle of whisky at hand, ‘John’ he said as he filled my glass, ‘I’ve had a piece of luck - some stupid Greek has ordered an unlimited number of my paintings.’ He never discovered who had bought them and would have been cross if he had. I have many of them now and will split them between my three children. Bruce, as he insisted I call him, took me to his club the United Services at 116 Pall Mall, and introduced me to various

friends, all retired officers, who had known him well. He was brave to a fault, so it seems, from all accounts and was loved by his men who would follow him anywhere but incurred the displeasure of his seniors in the staff offices… My father and my grandfather were soldiers and I have both their swords in my study at Howletts. They are among my proudest possessions.[242]

[242] Taken from John's unpublished memoirs, pp. 7-9.

Afterword

That Bruce recognized John as 'Polly's boy' suggests that he knew about him all along. If we remember, Lady O had written Bruce 'many times but he never answered'. But Bruce was no longer the cavalier soldier of the 1920's, on minimum pay, and trying to make his mark on the world. He was an older man now, ashamed of his absence in his son's life, even if part of him felt that he'd done the right thing in not reaching out to John. Perhaps he had never wanted John to know of his illegitimacy, for his own sake. When a sixteen year old Hamish came to London a few years later to stay with Bruce (who was then living with Mona and her daughter Lavinia) he answered Bruce's house phone and it was John: "I'm your brother" John said, to Hamish's astonishment; "a mistake of your father's from India."[243] John then invited Hamish to the races, and the two brothers finally met. But Bruce was "quite angry" when he heard that John had called. As Hamish reflected, "It wasn't that he'd had an out-of-wedlock child, he was just protecting John." He told Hamish not to "spread it around." Whatever burden of shame Bruce might have felt, however, would have been by lightened by John's sheer exuberance at finding his father. Now was Bruce's chance to redeem the lost years. His two sons had stepped back into his life.

Bruce lived his last years happily in London; going to the races and meeting his old regimental friends 'Ponto' and 'Chunk' at his club. He kept painting until the pain in his

[243] Hamish Bruce, interview with author, April 30th, 2017

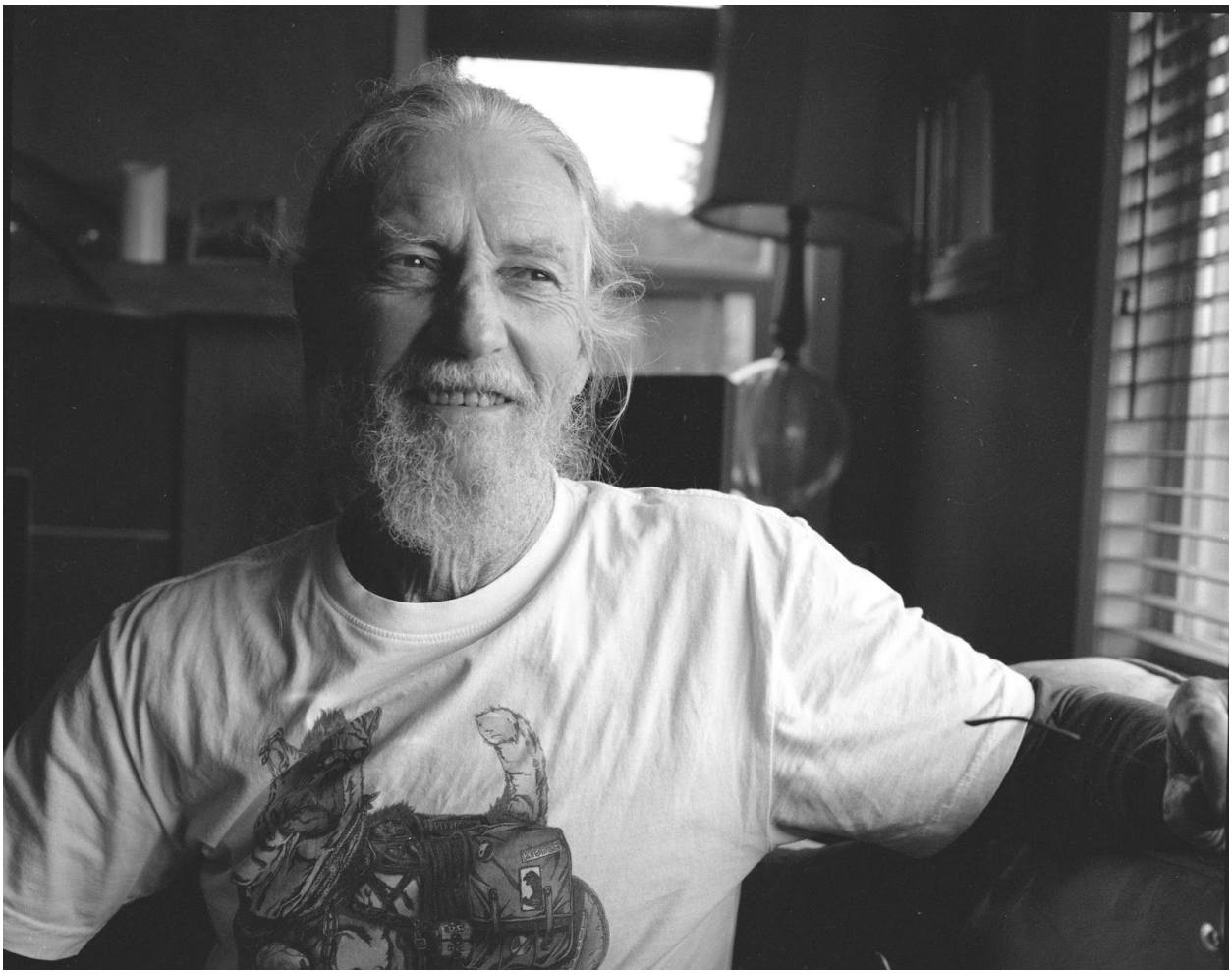
shoulder became too severe. He had a little fox terrier which he loved, and two budgies that used to sit on the edge of his pipe as he smoked. Every so often he'd be picked up by John's chauffeur and driven down to Howletts to spend the weekend with his eldest son. He never spoke about the wars, though Mona claimed she could hear his heart beating loudly as he slept.

Bruce died on February 6 1966 at Queen Alexandra's Military Hospital in Westminster. At his bedside, holding his hand, were Mona and Lavinia. The cause of his death was cerebral hemorrhage, brought on by hypertension. He was 69. The Chief of the Malaysian Armed Forces ordered all units of the Royal Malay Regiment to fly their flags at half-mast.

***

On April 29, 2017, my cousin Sage asked me if I had seen the message Bruce's step-daughter Lavinia had left in the 'guest book' section of Diana's online obituary page. In it she had left her email address. I had been searching in vain to find Lavinia for a year, thinking she might possibly have some interesting papers on Bruce. Within twenty-four hours she had responded saying that she had lots of photos of Bruce, and "so many papers and articles about his military career." In many ways, this story is just beginning.

My grandfather John at Howletts with his tigers, 1971.



My great-Uncle Hamish at home in Vancouver, 2016. Photo by self.

Bibliography

- Allen, Louis. *Burma; The Longest War 1941-1945*. J.M. Dent & Sons, 1984.
- Aspinall, John. *The Best of Friends.* Macmillan, 1976.

  "Unpublished Memoir." 2000.
- Berton, Pierre. *Klondike: The Last Great Gold Rush, 1896-1899.* Doubleday Canada, 2001.
- Bew, John. *Citizen Clem; A Biography of Attlee*. riverrun, 2016.
- Brittain, Vera. *Testament of Youth.* Virago, 1978.
- Bruce, George. 1) G.McI.S. Bruce's Service records, obtained by request from the Army *Application to be relieved from present employment. 2)* Letter dated 29 April 1947 from Colonel G.McI.S. Bruce OBE MC (11344) to The Deputy Military Secretary, HQ BAOR. contained in my family Bruce file.Personnel Centre, Historical Disclosures, 65 Brown Street, Glasgow, G28EX. 3) *Radio Broadcast Talk by Major General G.Mc.I.S. Bruce OBE, MC.* Recorded at Radio Malaya Studio, Kuala Lumpur at 1500 Hrs 6 Sep 57 and Broadcast at 2045 Hrs 10 Oct 57 - found in my family's Bruce file.
- Calder, Angus. *The People's War: Britain 1939-45.* Jonathan Cape, 1969.
- Christison, Philip. *The Life and Times of General Sir Philip Christison* (IWM London). *XV Indian Corps; History of the Arakan Campaign 1944-1945*. Found in my family Bruce file.

- Crane, David. *Empires of the Dead: How One Man's Vision Led to the Creation of WWI's War Graves*. William Collins, 2013.
- Daly, M.W. *Imperial Sudan: The Anglo-Egyptian Condominium 1934-1956.* Taylor & Francis Ltd, 1993.
- Frost, John. *The British in the Sudan, 1898–1956: The Sweetness and the Sorrow*. Macmillan, 1984.
- Graybill, Andrew R. *Policing the Great Plains: Rangers, Mounties, and the North American Frontier, 1875-1910.* University of Nebraska Press, 2007.
- Griffin, J.A.A. *The History of the Tenth Foot 1919-1950; Compiled from War Diaries, Officers* Narratives and Other Sources by Major L.C. Gates, M.B.E., M.C. Late the Royal Lincolnshire Regiment, housed at the Lincolnshire Regimental Archives.
- *"Haileybury's Military Heritage."* Unknown author. Unknown date. https://www.haileybury.com/explore/haileybury/heritage-archives/haileyburys-military-heritage
- Harris, José. *Private Lives, Public Spirit: Britain 1870-1914.* Penguin, 1994.
- 'The History of the Royal Malay Regiment,' housed at the Imperial War Museum Archives, London.
- Ienaga, Saburo. *Japan's Last War.* Australian National University Press, 1979.
- IWM. From the pocket-sized book housed at the IWM London Archives titled 'Arakan Assignment; The Story of the 82nd West African Divison'. *IWM*. IWM. Arakan Assignment—Being a History of the 82 (WA) Division; from its formation in West

Africa in August 1943 to the Conclusion of its part in Burma in May 1945 - E 2018, *Closed Until 1972* WO203/2644, File No. 537, National Archives Kew, London.

- Latimer, Jon. *Burma; The Forgotten War.* John Murray, 2004.
- Lincolnshire Regimental War Diaries. 1st Battalion, Regi 1/1/1.

  Lincolnshire Regimental War Diaries, 2nd Battalion, Regi 1/1/3.
- Masters, Brian. *The Passion of John Aspinall*. Jonathan Cape, 1988.
- Mosley, Nicholas. *Julian Grenfell; His Life and the Times of His Death, 188-1915.* Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1986.
- Mountbatten, Louis. *Personal Diary of Admiral the Lord Louis Mountbatten*, 1943-1946.
- Orwell, George. *Homage to Catalonia*. Harcourt Inc., 1980.

  A Collection of Essays; Shooting an Elephant 1936. Harcourt, 1981.
- Perry, F.W. *Order of Battle of Divisions Part 5B. Indian Army Divisions.* Ray Westlake Military Books, 1993.
- Ramli, Dol. *History of the Malay Regiment 1933-1942,* in the *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society, Vol 38, No 1.* Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society, 1965.
- Sassoon, Siegfried. *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer*. Faber and Faber, 1965.
- Shephard, Ben. *A War of Nerves.* Jonathan Cape, 2000.
- Simpson, C.R. *The History of the Lincolnshire Regiment; 1914-1918, - L.355.31 SIM, Compiled from War Diaries, Despatches, Officer's Notes and Other Sources.* Lincolnshire Regimental Museum.

- Slim, William. *Defeat Into Victory; Battling Japan in Burma and India 1942-1945.* Cassell, 1956.
- Strong, Annie Hall. Skagway News. December 1, 1897. https://www.nps.gov/people/annie-hall-strong.htm
- Sunday Times, 2 June 1991, quoted in Malcolm Draper and Gerhard Maré's article 'Going in: The Garden of England's Gaming Zookeeper and Zululand,' in the 'Journal of Southern African Studies Vol. 29, No. 2. 3 June, 2003.
- Thomas, Shenton. 'Taken from unknown newspaper clipping covering the speech given by Thomas in the Federal Council on September 1, 1938. Found in my family Bruce file.
- Troyes, Chrétien de. *Arthurian Romances; The Story of The Grail*. Penguin, 1991.
- "W.D. Bruce Will Go To The Yukon." Guelph Mercury. Author and date unknown.
- Ziegler, Philip. *Mountbatten*. Knopf, 1995.