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INTERVIEWEE: MAJ (BGEN) WILLIAM LYE

INTERVIEWER: QUILLER GRAHAM

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Maj (BGen) William Lye

Interviewed 07 December 2000

By Quiller Graham

INTERVIEWER: Canadian War Museum Oral History Program. Interview with William Lye. Recorded on 7 December 2000 in Ottawa. Interviewed by Quiller Graham. Tape one, side one.

LYE: My name is William Kirby Lye. I was born in Ottawa but moved away with my family at such an early age that I have no memory of this. But grew up in Guelph, Ontario, where my father, a graduate chemical engineer, was a manager of a plant that manufactured brewers malt and other material which is used in the brewing and baking industry. The plant subsequently became part of standard brands. All my schooling was done in the Guelph public schools including the only Collegiate Institute. My father was a very active member of the non-permanent active militia. He was a Major in the Wellington Regiment, a rifle regiment which was subsequently reformed into an artillery unit, and he converted to artillery and in the end commanded the 11th Field Regiment. At the outbreak of war, found he was too old to serve but was able to do the mobilization of the Field Regiment.

I had no military experience as such during my youth and I didn't really do any work in the summertime. I spent all my summers from Guelph at a summer cottage on Lake Huron. However, my father's activity in the militia made him a great believer in the Royal Military College of Canada as a school for me to go to when I graduated from high school. Now that became an early aim of mine. I subsequently finished my junior matriculation in Guelph and was accepted by RMC in August 1936. It was never at that point my plan to have a military career. Indeed my ambition, if indeed it was big enough to be an ambition, was to finish RMC, go to Osgood Hall and became a lawyer. But, because war came along before I was finished at RMC, with the rest of my classmates I took a commission in the Army and I have been in the Army ever since.

My first appointment was to the 1st Field Company of the Royal Canadian Engineers. And the reason for joining the Royal Canadian Engineers was again owing to my father's influence who said to me, "Look, you may wish to stay in the Army after the war and if you do, you should pick a corps that's going to give you the most advantages." He said, "If you take a commission in a technical corps you are guaranteed to a degree at public expense at the end of the war and I would recommend that you join either the Engineers, the Signals or the Ordnance Mechanical Engineers." And I selected the Royal Canadian Engineers for my commission. And as such, I found myself a very young Lieutenant in Halifax on the 1 November 1939.

I had no special military engineer training because at the Royal Military College there was, of course, limited time for special army training. The military training that we received was of a general nature, but we did learn something about watermanship, which is an engineer requirement, and we were well rehearsed in knots and lashings. And in the springtime, RMC used to climb on a train, go to Petawawa and spend a week there and we had some practical experience then with military engineering bridging equipment – the small box girder bridge, the folding boat equipment from which one could make a bridge or make rafts.

We also were exposed to practical artillery. We were taken out on the ranges. We participated in firing guns. We became proper gun crews and got the theory of all this at RMC, but never got any practical experience because there wasn't the time or the equipment for it. However, RMC had a very good idea that cadets in their summer holidays could arrange to be attached to permanent force units or schools. And I selected to do my summer training with the Royal Canadian Corps of Signals. So the summers of 1937, 38 and 39 I spent with Signals, the first year in Camp Borden. They then moved to Barryfield, just outside Kingston so my last two summers were in Barryfield. I therefore qualified in Visual and Line, Wireless Part One and Wireless Part Two. Having done all that, of course, I joined the Royal Canadian Engineers. So my exposure to military engineering as such was pretty limited, but this, I think, applied to just about everyone who left RMC about that stage.

When I got to Halifax, I found that my classmates that were with me, some six of us in fact went, were surplus to the officers that a field company needed. And it became apparent early that the Field Company, which was destined to go overseas with, the 1st Division would go minus us. We were employed initially as just junior officers doing Orderly Room, orderly officer duties. I looked after the transport portion of the Field Company briefly. Others became sort of supplementary officers to the Platoon Commanders who were there. Because during all this time, the Field Company itself was recruiting actively, bringing itself up to wartime strength. And it should be noted at this point that an Engineer Field Company didn't have just soldiers and not soldiers. The soldiers were, in fact, tradesmen and it was the aim of the recruiting people to ensure that the appropriate number of electricians, plumbers, carpenters, masonists, draftsmen, etc, were in fact signed up to become part of the war establishment of the unit. Because, in addition to the requirement to be soldiers to learn how to handle a rifle and fire it properly, to march, and to do your route marching, and to keep yourself physically fit, in addition to that there was a field engineering requirement which soldiers in the Engineers had to learn about bridging, demolition, mine clearing, water supply and all the myriad things an Army needed to enable it to move and to fight. It wasn't always possible, of course, to get the appropriate numbers and the appropriate trades, and one was lucky if you could get a high percentage of them. But in the end it all seemed to come together and so a Field Company could drop its military leanings and become a construction unit, if you liked, and build cabinets, huts, do a little bit of road maintenance. All this is part and parcel of the training of a Field Engineer. On the subject of having tradesmen in a Field Company, it always struck me that we were never able to recruit a cook as such and nearly always ended up having our meals cooked by a surplus mason.

While we were at RMC we got very limited experience with any Field Engineering tasks, but we were in fact given a great deal of the lectures on the organization and the employment of engineer units as part of the military force. In fact, RMC had on its staff a Major of the Royal Engineers on attachment from the British Army.

As I mentioned previously, there were more officers than a Field Company needed while we were in Halifax. Halifax itself was the Headquarters of the Engineer Training Center, as such. It didn't really do much in the way of training, but it was an establishment on paper, which had never been activated. However, it was seen necessary at this point-- a training center for Engineers would be necessary in Canada-- and in the initial step of that, a Lieutenant Colonel C.R.S. Stein was appointed as Commandant of the Engineer Training Center. And he had come straight from the Royal Military College where he had been the Staff Adjutant. So we knew him well. When he arrived, he noticed that we were fairly surplus to establishment and he arranged for the surplus officers to be employed in the embarkation staff facilities that was going to be utilized in Halifax to load the troop ships and send them onto England. And some of us were also loaned out to the District Works Officer who learned a little bit about the Works Office and how they operated --and also to keep us out of mischief, more than anything else. And shortly after, the 1st Division was embarked and was sent on its way to England-- the 1st Field Company, of course, being part of that-- those of us who were graduated early from RMC were sent to Nova Scotia Technical College by Colonel Stein, who believed we should have a little more instruction in some of the aspects of Engineering that would be useful to us as young officers of the RCE. And we did a course, really, from January until May of 1940 as students of Nova Scotia Tech, studying reinforced concrete design and utilization. We learned a great deal more about electric generators and motors than we had learned while we were at RMC and really we had a tremendous time because while we were at Nova Scotia Tech, measles swept through the Barracks where we were stationed and we had a lot of spare time. We got into a great deal of trouble. We completely upset the Halifax Club and, indeed, did all the things that young officers should have an opportunity of doing. In the end, however, it became apparent that we were going to have to leave Nova Scotia Tech and also go to Petawawa to establish the first Engineer Training Center. Colonel Stein was to be the Commandant of that and he had been joined at Halifax by Major Charles Stainer (ph), the Royal Engineer who was attached to RMC from the British Army.

It was decided that the advance party for the training center to be established in Petawawa would be commanded by Major Stainer and he would have six young officers, all of whom had left RMC the previous fall to go with him to establish the camp. We had a picked group of NCOs and men in this party. I guess it was a total of about forty of us. And we took off in trucks and private cars for which we got permission and we got mileage. And we drove from Halifax to Petawawa in the spring of '40-- I think, probably, the first organized convoy that went through that spring. The roads were usually a mess. But we had a wonderful time. We had a staging party that nipped ahead and arranged for first class accommodations for all of us. The officers were put up in the Admiral Beatty Hotel in Saint John, New Brunswick, the first night. We stayed at the

Madawaska Inn in Edmundston the second night. We stayed at the Chateau Frontenac in Quebec City the fourth night and we stayed at the Chateau Laurier the next night and from there went on to Petawawa. I should point out at the same time that the men also did extremely well by this. Because it was too early in the year for motels to have much in the way of custom, but they were all getting organized for it and they were delighted to have someone come in and say, "Have you got rooms for forty people tonight as a special rate." And the men had a wonderful time, we all ate well and by the time we got to Petawawa, we were a pretty happy group.

The initial camp was, in fact, under canvas. Tents were erected, and I must say, at this point before I left Halifax, Colonel Stein took me aside and said "Lye, I am going to give you my personal cheque and I want you to take it and organize and stock a proper Officers' Mess for the Training Center and I expect it to be, if not operating, ready to operate when in fact we arrive."

The forty-man advance party was hard pressed to draw the canvas, erect the tents and ensure that there were messing facilities available and equipment to cook meals and things of that nature. We had advance notice when the main party would arrive. It was not too large. And when they did arrive, at least they had tents to cover them and I was happy to be able to report to Colonel Stein that the Officers' Mess and its bar was ready to start operation when he deemed it necessary.

With the arrival of the main party, of course, the organization for the expansion of the accommodation was put in hand by others and I moved over to become an assistant to the Chief Instructor and some of my colleagues who had been in the advance party with me, went to the designated Commanding Officers of the Training Companies that would in fact be utilized to train the recruits who were being sworn in at various places in Canada, so that when they would arrive there would be engineering courses and an organization that would handle them in training them to be a) soldiers and b) sappers.

While I was working with the Chief Instructor, who was in fact Major Stainer, the Royal Engineer Officer, I was involved in a lot of various things. First of all, I was told that I had to run a series of junior NCO courses which would be formed from the initial recruits coming in who had been identified as having had some military experience, some knowledge of militia engineer units, and who might be specially trained to become Lance Corporals and Corporals to assist the training companies in their job in looking after the recruits. And I must say that this was a challenge because I still hadn't had a great deal of instruction in field engineering myself. However, we were fortunate in having quite a collection of pamphlets and training books that the British Army had published and supplied. One of them, which I called by Bible, was the manual of Field Engineering Vol II. Night after night, I kept my light on while I studied up the appropriate chapters that I then went proudly to instruct my neophyte Corporals the next morning. It was had work. But I must say there was a great deal of satisfaction in some of this. I can tell you that one of the young sappers whom I instructed in one of those first junior NCO courses, at the end of the war had been commissioned, stayed in the Army, in the Engineers, and when I commanded the School of Military Engineering in the 1960s, he was a

Lieutenant-Colonel and my Chief Instructor. In addition, during all this training of junior NCOs, one of my requirements while the weather was good was to give the officers their physical training.

Just about this point, Colonel Stein moved on and he was replaced by Colonel Richards, Colonel Jim Richards. And it was my misfortune that Colonel Richards overdid it in his PT first thing in the morning before breakfast and he came down with pneumonia. Shortly after that, it was deemed to be too cool in the morning for such activity on behalf of all these officers and I was relieved of that requirement. However, with the assistance of another one of my classmates, who was also in the Chief Instructor's office with me, we were given the task of drafting the promotion examinations for the NPAM, the Non-Permanent Active Militia, for Lieutenant to Captain, Captain to Major, which were of course used across Canada for all this sort of work.

We had to do an awful lot of improvising at Petawawa, especially in the winter of 40/41. When you consider that there were no lakes immediately adjacent to Petawawa where we could study rafting and floating bridges. Nor could we do much in the way of demolitions. The winter was severe, but it did in fact put a crimp in your ability to teach much in the way of field engineering when the equipment you had was difficult to use even in the best of times. We were able to take over a couple of buildings that had been used for the Air Force. I am not quite sure what the history was, but we had a couple of big hangars which we managed to get hold of and we put the floating boat equipment, the floating bridging equipment on a frame, put wheels on the frame so we could push the framed floating boat equipment around the floor of the building and go through the motions of putting them together to make bridges or keeping them separate to make rafts and things of that nature. The rest of it really was an awful lot of lecturing and very little else. It was difficult in the wintertime to do much in the way of training the men in games. We couldn't play baseball. We couldn't play basketball. We didn't have the facilities that would enable one to do this and by and large that was one of the weaknesses as I recall it from the Training Center at Petawawa. I don't know what happened subsequently, but that was it at that point.

My employment at the Training Center was terminated in early summer of 1941, early spring really. It was in March. I reported to the 16th Field Company Royal Canadian Engineers in Debert, Nova Scotia. The 16th Field Company was one of the Units to form the Royal Canadian Engineers 3rd Canadian Division, 16th and 18th Field Companies and the 3rd Field Park Squadron with the CRE and his Headquarters all assembled in Debert.

INTERVIEWER: And the 16th was a Militia Engineering Unit?

LYE: Yes. The 16th Field Company was a Militia Engineering Unit from Montreal. The 6th Field Company was from the West Coast and the 18th Field Company, I believe, was from I think Hamilton/London, Ontario. But we were a diversified group, as a matter of fact.

Because it was a temporary camp under framed huts and framed facilities, with no engineering equipment, per se, there was really no engineering practical training carried out. Although there was a great many lectures and internal courses by the junior officers who were a little more qualified. I, as a matter of fact, can't remember that I did anything that was really outstanding. I can't even remember commanding a platoon, as I was one of the last officers to join the Unit to bring it up to wartime strength. I was probably just a surplus individual in Headquarters. I don't remember much about it, but I can remember helping the Adjutant, the CRE Adjutant, to organize and carry out a formal drill and drill parade when someone visited the place. It turned out that the Adjutant, of course, was one of my seniors at RMC, as was the case of two of the subalterns in the 16th Field Company with me.

We very shortly all qualified for and carried out our embarkation leave because it was determined that the 3rd Division Engineers would go to England before the remainder of the Division as they had work to be done in helping the British Army build encampments and storage facilities in the southern part of England. We then embarked in June of 1941 on the ship; the ocean liner was the BITANIC. It was a very comfortable voyage. There were no storms. We had no threats from submarines that any of us were aware of and we landed in Scotland safely and went by rail to Aldershot where we were concentrated very briefly before going out to the Lideshot, Bramshot, Greyshot, Hazelmere area where a great deal of construction work was going on.

We were given that area and, in fact, went under canvas again as a complete unit. There were no permanent buildings and the sappers and the junior officers and NCOs really had formed part of a construction workforce here, utilizing their basic training as tradesmen. Carpenters were employed as carpenters, not as military engineers. Same thing goes for plumbers, electricians, painters, you name it. And for the rest of the time in that area, not a great deal of military training went on at all. They were all too busy doing construction.

I took a motor transport course at Camp Bordon, that's Bordon in England not in Canada, where I learned how to ride a motorcycle and drive all kinds of trucks and carriers and things. I took a couple of camouflage courses, one of which was in Tunbridge Wells. Luckily, we were well established in the middle of a forest as well as I can remember and I had a little concern about improving the camouflage of the unit when I got back because I had a hard time finding it.

But the course that really impressed me was when I was told that in October I was to go to take a Commando Course at Inveraillort Castle in Lochaillort. I spent from mid-October to mid-November in an area that had at least 140 inches of rain a year, most of which I think fell in that month. But it was a very active course. We were given instruction on climbing near mountains. We were taught self-defence by no less personages than Messrs Fairburn and Sykes who were responsible for developing the Fairburn/Sykes dagger or the FS knife that all commandos carry. We were taken out on practical exercises. And I can remember panting while I struggled for the anti-tank rifle over my shoulders, through the water and the bog and the low hills around Lochaillort.

The whole course was taught in a very "go to hell" attitude towards danger. Although observing the safety precautions was necessary, one really passed things like grenades and mines around as if they were every day parts of equipment like pounds of butter or bags of sugar. You really got an attitude that was developed because you were physically pushed to the extreme. You weren't allowed to anything unless you doubled. You were never given any opportunity to sleep when you were out of camp. In camp, you had a bed and all you had to do was to double across the parade square to go and get yourself washed. Double back again. There, I learned how to wash. Well, first of all, clean my teeth, wash and shave in a cupful of hot water. It was not a happy course from the point of view of hardship, but it in fact had a great impression on anyone who attended it because by being forced to push yourself beyond limits where you never believed you'd come close, you developed really a pretty aggressive attitude toward life. But you also had impressed upon you the absolute necessity of keeping yourself and you men in first-class physical condition.

And really, it was because of this course, I think, that I found myself posted in January of '42 from the 16th Field Company to the Canadian Engineer Reinforcement Unit at Coals, not far from Farnborough, which in itself is pretty close to Aldershot. But I was responsible primarily for training, not commando training as such, but in the utilization of ground in the elementary tactics of tactical movement. And I was told that I would be responsible for keeping the people physically fit whom I was training. The role of the reinforcement unit at that point was to ensure that troops being posted across as reinforcements for units in England were assumed to have had proper training as soldiers and as sappers in so far as equipment in Canada would permit. Therefore, they were on arrival at the CERU, before being posted to units, they were in fact put into training sub-units where they were given refresher courses primarily in field engineering to ensure that they were introduced, however briefly, to new equipment which was not available in Canada to ensure that when they went to a unit, they could fit into these Field Companies and Field Park Companies, what have you, as trained sappers up to the same standard as those who were in fact forming the units at that point. NCO courses were given at CERU. Special courses in bridging and in demolitions were again given at CERU mainly to junior officers and NCOs.

This really was the drill at that point and I was only there for about six months and I was promoted and posted to the 1st Field Company as part of 1st Div Engineers who were there at that point in Eastling Wood, I think it's called down near Adamville in the Duke of Norfolk's area in the South Downs. From there we were moved as a unit to battle, which was in the Hastings area. And indeed one of the houses we took over as part of our Field Company establishment overlooked, I was told, the actual field of the Battle of Hastings. So it was in that general idea. And as 2 I/C of course I was not responsible for training although I did some work in lecturing the young officers and making sure that they knew how to do their work, but my basic responsibility was in administration. And I was concerned, of course, with running the Headquarters when the Commanding Officer was out with the Platoon Commanders and the Platoons doing what training they could do on the training areas they had. Which wasn't much. We couldn't do very much in the way of engineering. But at least we did have an opportunity to participate in a bridging

exercise called EXERCISE SPINACH, which was a whole series of various challenging bridging and rafting occasions where you were racing against time and someone else was going to pick up the bridging after you and provide it for you at the next obstacle you met. This was a very good exercise. It made us live in the open, under canvas, or under a poncho if you like, and the CO had to balance the effort being put into the bridge making with the ability of keeping the troops well-fed and well-rested. Another interesting training exercise that we did while I was with the 1st Field Company was to take the entire unit by road to the School of Military Engineering at Ripon up in Yorkshire, once again to give them an opportunity of seeing and handling new types of bridging and rafting equipment that were available there that had not been available to us at any other place.

It was while I was with the Field Company that the CRE was asked to carry out an inspection of the Reinforcement Unit to ensure that they were sufficiently training the soldiers who were sent to the field units. I was part of the inspecting team and at the end of the inspection, the CRE, who headed the inspection, gave the Commander of the Reinforcement Unit a rather poor report. And it was alleged, following that, that the Chief Engineer Army said to the Commanding Officer of the Reinforcement Unit, "What are we going to do about this?" and the CO of the Reinforcement Unit said, "Give me Bill Lye as Chief Instructor for six months and I'll pass the next test." And in fact, I was then pulled out of the 1st Field Company and sent to the Reinforcement Unit as Chief Instructor. But not before I went through the interesting exercise of going with the unit to Inverary in Scotland as part of a Brigade combined operations training which was in fact the activity that it was concentrated on in combined operations, ultimately to be used in the assault on Sicily.

I reported as Chief Instructor to the Reinforcement Unit and got down to business as quickly as I could. It was rather interesting to see that even in the short time that I had been away, having been an instructor there the previous year, how much they had in fact had improved in all aspects. They were teaching very realistic courses now in bridging and demolitions. Mostly to NCOs and junior officers. We were able to send our own officers to long bridging courses at the SME Ripon. They would come back to the CERU and become instructors in their field. And all in all, this improved the standard of training that the Reinforcement Unit was able to give. I had initial difficulty owing to the fact that I was a very young Major – age 25. And the Wing Commanders who commanded the training Wings were all very fine gentlemen who had had First World War experience and they were somewhat aghast at the measures that I insisted on being adopted to ensure that physical fitness was high on the list of standards to be met by people who were under instruction, whether they be NCOs or sappers who just arrived from Canada.

We did a great deal of demonstrations for visiting groups from units who were nearby. One of which was rather a feather in our cap when the Staff College at Camberly asked if we could put on a bridging demonstration for them. CERU Reinforcement Unit was lucky in that it had adequate dry bridging facilities for building bridges on dry land. But we also had a small lake, which enabled us to do a wet bridge or a series of rafts. A

different thing we did get involved in was a little bit of research to see if in fact the time spent in providing gun emplacements for the artillery pieces could be improved upon as digging them in was such a bill on the time available. An officer of mine, a chap called Jerry Fodey (ph), who was responsible for the demolition wing of the CERU took on the challenge and he developed a method by using a template, an earth auger and a series of 808 cartridges and found that he could blow a requisite gun emplacement depending upon the pattern required by the type of field piece that was involved in a fraction of the time that it would take to do it by hand and indeed end up with something that was very difficult to distinguish as a gun emplacement or as a crater from enemy shelling. And we actually demonstrated this, not only in CERU, but also down near the White Cliffs of Dover, as a matter of fact, to see whether it could be done in chalk and flint. And it was very successful but never adopted, I am afraid, by the Canadian Artillery, although I am told that the Guards Armoured Division who attended the last demonstration was so impressed that they actually took upon themselves to utilize it. I never heard much more about it.

My period as Chief Instructor of the Reinforcement Unit came to an end in October '43 when I had been selected to attend the Canadian Army Staff Course in Kingston, Ontario at the site of the Royal Military College. The course that I was going to would be number eight. Prior to that there had been six of seven at RMC, one in England because the British Army had established the organization for a four month course, and the Canadians had decided it was more efficient to do it in Canada than to carry on doing it in the UK. It was a four-month course, very difficult from the point of view of utilization of your time to cover a great volume of work. The basis of the whole thing was really a demonstration covered then by tutorial system whereby the student body split up into small groups and discussed discussion papers, wrote operation orders, div appreciations, all the things that a young staff officer was supposed to be efficient at. Then practical training was done in the field around Kingston. Exercises known as tactical exercises without troops, or TEWTs, were conducted to examine the various aspects of tactics and warfare. You studied the attack, the defence, the withdrawal, assault crossing of obstacles, utilization of minefields and the staff work that was required to ensure that it all worked. At the end of a four month course, the students were deemed to be qualified for Grade 2 staff appointments in the Canadian Army and they were therefore posted either to staff vacancies in the rank of Major or senior Captain in Canada or in England or subsequently in Northwest Europe or Italy.

INTERVIEWER: Canadian War Museum Oral History Program. Interview with William Lye. Tape one, side one ends.

INTERVIEWER: Canadian War Museum Oral History Program. Interview with William Lye. Tape one, side two.

LYE: I completed the staff course in the spring of 1944 and in May, I returned to the United Kingdom and was appointed to be Staff Officer Royal Engineers at the Headquarters of 2nd Canadian Corps. I was in fact the senior Staff Officer to the Brigadier, Chief Engineer, who at that point was Brigadier Jeff Walsh. I had assisting me

two Captains, one in Intelligence-- Engineer Intelligence--and the other in Stores and Equipment.

I should remind you that the role of the military engineer is to enable the Army to move and fight, and in order to do this you have to have people who can, in fact, overcome obstacles or create obstacles; can make roads or clear roads; and to maintain roads; to provide facilities for fresh drinking water; to remove mines from minefields and get lanes through those minefields for the attacking infantry and armour; to ensure that all buildings taken over that might have been booby trapped are in fact cleaned out before they are utilized by your own troops. And in order to do this, you have to ensure that if you build bridges, those bridges have to be maintained as long as they in use. And this creates a problem, which has to be faced not only in the individuals, but in the equipment for them.

For example, if it's decided that a bridge must be built over a certain river, engineers from a divisional engineer [unit] can in fact be allotted to do that. They can build the bridge and they can maintain that bridge for a limited time. If the people for who they built it press on so quickly that they run up against another obstacle, we're in trouble unless someone has taken over from the first group of engineers to free them to take care of the problem at the second obstacle. And this sort of simplistic approach is really the basis of the movement of engineer troops in the theatre of war whereby you have Corps troop engineers taking over from divisional engineers, army [level] troop engineers taking over from corps troop engineers. And in each case, moving forward always in support of the engineer group in advance of you.

The responsibility of the SO RE 2, the position I held, was in fact to coordinate this at the level of the Chief Engineer of 2nd Canadian Corps. And this we were able to do reasonably efficiently because the Headquarters was in fact a well organized, smooth functioning, senior Headquarters. General Simonds, who commanded the 2nd Canadian Corps, had assembled a group of senior staff officers who were in fact experienced as possible. A great many of them had served with him with 1st Canadian Division at the landing in Sicily and he had brought them back to the UK to be promoted and to be his immediate staff at 2 Corps, so that we had the Chief Engineer, Brigadier Walsh, had been the CRE 1st Division, LCol Walsh. The Chief of Staff, Brigadier Elliot Roger, hadn't been with the 1st Canadian Division but he was a permanent force engineer of some seniority and had very great ability. He was Chief of Staff. The Signal Officer 2 Canadian Corp, Brigadier Clark, who had been in Sicily and now had become a Brigadier at Corps Headquarters. The Chief Royal Artillery, the CRA, Brigadier Mathews had been with General Simonds before. So, by and large, we had a first class nucleus of very impressive, efficient specialists serving General Simonds.

And General Simonds' way of running things was to brief his Brigadiers and send them out to supervise the work going on in the field in their respective responsibilities and leave the running of their offices at Corps Headquarters in the hands of their senior staff officers who then reported directly to the Chief of Staff and vice versa. So it was never any surprise to me if the phone rang any day and I would have on the end of it Brigadier

Rogers saying, "Bill, where is the 85th Bridge Company today?" "Sir, they are at such and such a place and they are doing this." "Could they be diverted because 2nd Canadian Division has run into a bit of an obstacle that would appear could be overcome in fairly short order if they had bridging equipment available to do it?" "I'll look into it immediately, Sir," I would answer. I wouldn't bother trying to find my Brigadier somewhere out in the field. I would get on with seeing what I could do to provide this bridging equipment that apparently 2nd Canadian Division might need in order to support his infantry in a breakthrough.

Now this worked in all directions. I had to deal to my senior formation behind me at Army Headquarters, where there was an SO RE 1 looking after the same sort of work that I was doing. And I had to keep in touch with the CREs of the Divisions that, in fact, formed part of the 2nd Canadian Corps.

And this sort philosophy of always supporting the people in the front went on in all respects. If you remember, you got to help them move and fight. You had to find roads that were safe to travel. You had to maintain those roads and keep them safe to be traveled over and in decent condition so that weren't torn up in bad weather. You did your very best to ensure that your divisional troops were relieved as quickly as possible by engineers from a senior headquarters so that the equipment could be freed if necessary, the bridging was taken up and a permanent bridge installed if it looked as it that was the answer. All these things had to be coordinated from the Corps point of view in my office where I worked for the Chief Engineer and supported by the Chief Engineer Army and his office at the Army level. It was a demanding relationship because one had to ensure that in addition to ensuring that troops were relieved so that they could move forward, you had to also take care of the fact that new equipment was being turned up all the time, new types of mines were being discovered, information on them had to be disseminated to the operators so that the engineers supporting the attacking infantry were aware of what they might come across in minefields that would require working on. And in addition, the engineers in the forward area came across a mine that had never been known to be present before, it was their responsibility to pass that information back to me so that information could be disseminated as widely as possible by my staff. Keep in mind the simplicity of keeping the forward engineers as free as possible to support immediately the attacking forces and multiply it all by all the task that engineers might be required to do to give you some idea of the volume and the diversity of my responsibility.

When I was posted to 2nd Canadian Corps, the Headquarters was north of Dover and stayed there to the best of my recollection until it finally moved to assembly areas and then to the continent after D Day. I can remember, we had a couple of coordinating conferences in Dover Castle. So it wasn't far from Headquarters to Canadian Corps and staff officers such as myself and my two SO RE 3s were encouraged to move around the countryside as much as possible during off duty hours, if they were any, to give the impression of large bodies of troops assembling there to give information to the enemy that, in fact, that might be the site of main launching of the attack across the Channel to the continent. At that point, I was acquainted with a lot of new pubs that I had never heard of before. One of which stands forth as a pub called the Dog and Duck at a place

called Plexgutter. Years later I can recall being at Chatham at the school of Military Engineering asking people there if they knew about it or was it just a mirage. I was assured that not only was it still there, it had always been there, and in fact I could find it on all the road maps of that part of the country. It was famous to me because Plexgutter itself consisted of one building which was the pub, the Dog and Duck, it had an elected Mayor, the pub owner and he was duly elected into that position by his wife and his daughter. And his daughter was known as "the most beautiful girl in Kent". And I can recall how disappointed I was to discover that all she could say was, "Well, deary, dear." No matter what you said to her. We always found that the Cherry Brandy Inn wasn't far from the Dog and Duck at Plexgutter and it was open for ½ hour longer and we used to go from the Plexgutter to the Cherry Brandy Inn, across the front of which was listed the number of famous people who had in fact visited there: amongst whom were Doug Fairbanks, and his wife. I can remember this.

However, in due time, 2 Headquarters moved out. The Corp Commander and his principal Brigadiers went in advance of us. The main headquarters moved across the town on a Liberty ship and we landed over at the special pier at Aramesh and took up position in a Corp Headquarters inland well short of Caen. It was a shock to a great many of us who hadn't been near guns and any concentration to find that General Simonds had purposely positioned his Corps Headquarters in the middle of an artillery concentration, firing at the enemy, so that we would become used to battle noises. It didn't make sleeping very easy.

From there on in, the 2nd Canadian Corps Headquarters moved at fairly frequent intervals and each time we did it, the drill became easier and we did it more efficiently. And as we got past Caen, I stepped ahead of myself, get past Caen and really start moving up quickly, following up the withdrawing Germans, we discovered that we were moving sometimes every couple of days. Which was took a bit of disruption because the Headquarters Company had to send out reconnaissance parties, find an appropriate place for it, make sure the Signals people got the communications installed so that parts of Corps Headquarters could take to each other and other people. And indeed sometime later when my Chief Engineer, Brigadier Walsh, was posted to be Chief Engineer of 1st Canadian Army, his successor, Brigadier Kingdom Black, took something like two days to catch up to us. And when he arrived he said, "you have been on the move so often and so quickly, that it has taken me two days to catch up with you." And that's when I told him that it had been a great experience for me to find that I had really had been acting Chief Engineer 2 Canadian Corps while we waited for him.

In some places, of course, we stayed longer than others. We were in headquarters a long time near Gent. And we usually stayed when, in fact, something had to be cleared up and the general advance motion was held up until the clearance had been done. But, by and large, it was a very fluid battle as far as Corps Headquarters was concerned until we finally got held up at Nijmegan where we spent the best part of winter. Corps Headquarters was established at Wijchen, which was three miles short of Nijmegan, and we settled down there really for a fair length of time because for the first time in the

history of the Corps Headquarters, as I recall it, it was the only time we were billeted on the local citizens and I was in fact given a room in a very fine Dutch home.

Most of the work in Nijmegan area was involved in protecting the road bridge from further damage by the Germans. They on their part, did their utmost to ensure that further damage was occasioned. Because what they desperately wanted to do was to knock out one of the piers, or one or more of the piers, holding the center of the bridge up so that the repair of it would be difficult by any advancing army. And in order to do this they had all kinds of plans like floating dead cattle, bloated with gases that occurs in dead cattle, but stuffed with explosives and delicate mechanisms that would set them off like a mine if indeed anything solid were struck by the cow or the carcass. They also did it with one-man submarines. Anything coming down the river was in fact suspect and in order to protected the bridge we constructed a series of booms which would intercept the floating material and guide it toward the shore away from the bridge and when it was near shore it was taken under fire by depressed anti-aircraft guns so that it was blown up in situ and in an area where, in fact, couldn't provide further damage to the bridge or its supports. For this task we had under command the 1st Canadian Army Group Royal Engineers, know as No 1 CAGRE.

There was a bit of dust up on one occasion when the Commander of the Army group confessed to me that he had found a store of magnificent timbers which he had cut up into eight foot lengths, chained together and had used as a most effective boom. And the following day an irate Colonel of Royal Engineers came to see me to say that that timber had been his, had been ordered especially from British Columbia, cut into proper lengths so that he, in fact, could rebuild the railway bridge which had been badly destroyed by the Germans. There was nothing we could do about it except to take what enjoyment we could from the excellent boom that magnificent timber provided us.

We had a magnificent party at New Years and I say party. An excellent New Years dinner as a matter of fact. And it was the responsibility of the staff at the rear Corps Headquarters who got their hands on things like white flour, so that we could have white bread and white buns, instead of the rations and very good bread was provided normally. We had all kinds of turkeys and all kinds of delicacies. The liaison officer to 2 Canadian Corps was Allister Bucanan, the son of one-time Governor-General of Canada. And he was made the wine member of our mess and he did a great deal about taking over dumps of wine as we advanced up the coast and ensuring that the mess where the SO REs and GSO2s had their meals were provided with the finest of vintages possible. He outdid himself on this occasion as well. So we all had a very happy New Year.

Shortly after this, I was posted back to Canadian Military Headquarters in London, England as GSO to RCE Training and the contact here was that – because at this time Brigadier Walsh was Chief Engineer 1st Canadian Army – he was concerned less the reinforcements coming to the continent from the reinforcement unit at Caen were not, in fact, providing the type of soldier that he wanted and he put me there really as a liaison link between himself, who formulated the policy, and the CERU who carried it out, insofar as they were able to. And I was in-between, knowledgeable about his feelings on

engineer training and the abilities of CERU to carry them out so that I would be very helpful in interpreting things in both directions. And this I was able to do until June of 1945 when I was returned to Canada to the office of the Executive Officer RCE.

Because of the timing of all this, I was, in fact, in a great position to spend VE day in London which was an experience I will never forget. My routine at the CMHQ was really boring when compared with my operational experience as SO RE to the Corps Headquarters. Because in London at a very senior headquarters, the pace, of course, is not nearly as active as it was in the field and I found myself with an awful lot more time than I had heretofore experienced. The setup at CMHQ had me, and people like me, responsible to a Lieutenant Colonel in charge of training so that the Artillery G2 and the Signal RC GSO2 were colleagues of mine. We had usually adjoining offices and we collaborated on certain aspects of the training that we passed down to our reinforcement units and back, or maybe forward to, 1st Canadian Army Headquarters in the field. When people were visiting England from the continent-- for example, the CRE of 2nd Canadian Division came through, he had been evacuated for some illness--he had to come to hospital in UK and on his way back to the continent he stopped off and spent a day with me and he was able to bring me up to date on matters as they had been when he left.

One of my responsibilities was quoted as "Corps Liaison including theatres." And I interpreted this rather generously in meaning that if we wanted to see a play that was a theatre and therefore it was quite permissible for me to take the afternoon off and go and see the show with the CRE. My own boss had reason to question this, but he never pressed it too far.

While I was in London, I arranged with the appropriate authority to attend an Investiture at Buckingham Palace as it was very much my ambition to have my decoration of MBE pinned on my chest by the King and this I was able to accomplish on a very sunny day and appropriate photographs were taken and were very much enjoyed by my immediate family.

In June of '45, I returned to Canada to the office of Executive Officer Royal Canadian Engineers. It was my understanding that I was being posted eventually as S3 to an Engineer Battalion for service in the Far East. But at this point of the war, things were moving very rapidly, and before any of this could come to fruition the Japanese had, in fact, surrendered and it was not necessary so to do. And I spent really until September of that year with the Executive Officer of the Royal Canadian Engineers making recommendations for and retention of officers returning from the theatres of war as possible officers in the Canadian Army following the war. And it wasn't until September '45 that I left and went to Queen's University as student to continue my education.

It might be interesting at this point to realize that in order to get a degree in Civil Engineering, I had taken provision at my father's recommendation, to take a commission in the Technical Corps because at the end of the First World War, General McNaughton and General McBrian had managed to get through an Order in Council that any RMC Graduate who joined the permanent force in a technical corps was entitled to a University

Degree in Engineering at public expense. And one day I was going to the Lord Elgin cafeteria for my lunch from Army Headquarters in Ottawa and I ran into Lieutenant General Ken Stewart, who was in the outgoing Chief of the General Staff, who was having lunch with his wife. We had known each other since RMC. And I had a little chat with him and Mrs. Stewart and he suddenly said, "Have you arranged to go back to Queen's?" I said, "No Sir, I don't know what you mean." Well, he explained to me this Order in Council and said, "You go back to your office and draw the files that talk about that and I will go and see General McNaughton," who was just leaving the position as Minister of Defence, "and I will have him warn his staff to expect something from you." I drew all the files, a pile of them, went through them and discovered how to do it. And I did it. And for one of the few times in my life, my staff work was complete and perfect because I wrote a letter from me to my boss, from him to the Quarter-Master General, from the Quarter-Master General to the CGS, from the CGS to the Deputy Minister and from the Deputy Minister to the Registrar at Queen's University. They all got signed, nobody returned anything to me with a question. And that's how I and four or five of my colleagues managed to get back to Queen's and completed our education to degree standard.

When I left Queen's in the summer of 1947, I reported back to the Director of Engineers at Army Headquarter and for the next few years I covered a great deal of experience and some very interesting and outstanding appointments which I would like to mention. The first one in September '49, I attended the United States Marine Corps Senior Course in Amphibious Warfare at Quantico, Virginia. This counted as a foreign Staff Course, which really meant that I had attended two Staff Courses and had taught in another three.

I spent most of my time at Headquarters in Ottawa in one job or another. In December '54, I was appointed to the Directing Staff of the Canadian Army Staff College at Kingston, by which time, of course, I was a Lieutenant-Colonel. And I spent three years as Directing staff at the Staff Course, which I found really was a very rewarding experience as I was teaching very bright young officers basic staff work that would enable them to get on with their careers. At the end of my three years as DS, I was posted to the United Nations Emergency Force that was stationed in Rafah at the edge of the Sinai Desert where I was Deputy Commander of the Canadian Base Unit in the Middle East and found it very interesting dealing with other nine foreign contingents that formed that group under the direction of General Burns of the Canadian.

In August of '61, I was appointed Commandant of the Royal Canadian School of Military Engineering and Commander of Camp Chilliwack in British Columbia in a place called Vedder's Crossing. And it was interesting to me to go to a Training Center that during the war had simply been known as the A6 Training Center. It had become really the base for the Corps of Royal Canadian Engineers in Canada. And it was really a very professional school at this point with trade's buildings that taught most of the basic trades that the engineers used.

We ran officers' courses. We did the promotions exams and the practical side of the promotions from Lieutenant to Captain, Captain to Major and indeed, at one point got

very involved, of course, in the nuclear wars air protection. I even had Lieutenant-Colonels on my staff specially selected to be there to be the liaison between me and Vancouver Area Headquarters in the event of somebody dropping a bomb on us.

I was promoted Brigadier of September of '75, after I had spent only one year as Commander of the Base Unit Europe stationed in Germany. It was a sad affair for my family and myself that my appointment there was so brief. But because I was to be promoted Brigadier I had to come back to Canada. And for the next few years until 1970, I spent brief times in six or seven other appointments all of which were involved in the reorganization that was going on at that time, following the integration of the Forces. In June 1970, I was appointed Commandant of the Royal Military College in Kingston and I was there until July of 1973 where my last job was in fact to greet Her Majesty and Prince Phillip on a visit to Canada. I managed to organize a visit from them so that the Queen could unveil the cornerstone of a new building, which was being built. It hadn't advanced beyond the muddy stage, so we had to put the cornerstone on a special form on the parade square to enable her to bless it as it was necessary under the circumstances. And it was with a great deal of pride that I retired from RMC, a long time since I went there, as a Cadet in 1936. But I can tell you that when I went as a Cadet, I was lucky to have one room, didn't have to share it. When I left, I left from a residence with twenty-one rooms and seven bathrooms.

INTERVIEWER: Canadian War Museum Oral History Program. Interview with William Lye. Interview ends.

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