

Excerpts from Eulogy to Desmond
Lt. Col. William Desmond Cuthbert Holmes, M.C., R.E., retd.
22nd January 1922- 3rd March 2000.
Brentwood College Memorial Chapel. 9th March 2000.

Early days in Victoria, 1922-1947

Cicely tells the story that only an elder sister can tell. Desmond was 10 years old when as part of his daily chores at Maltby Lake he mounted his horse bareback to ride off to Benson Rock to get the daily milk. His trusty steed decided enough was enough and threw him off to land on the ground near the manure pile with hundreds of cuts from broken milk bottles. Cicely raced to the house to find some ointment but could only find Iodine which she immediately proceeded to liberally administer: as only elder sisters can. Not a sound did Desmond make as the iodine scorched itself on the open wounds.
Such was Desmond at 10 years old.

Desmond attended Brentwood College; the school co-founded by Cuthbert his father. Cicely tells another story of being part of a plot to import a small jug of gin into the school for some special occasion. Cicely as the supplier of the firewater waited on the perimeter of the schoolgrounds while Desmond, in the dark, crawled half a mile in the undergrowth to the edge of the school grounds, just a few yards from here, and then half a mile back again. Unknown to Desmond, his escapade was conducted under the watchful eye of the HouseMaster who promptly confiscated the contraband. Notwithstanding this intrepid adventure in 1938 he was made head prefect, received his rugby, soccer and cricket colours and was the school-shooting champion.

After a brief and unenlightened stint in San Francisco selling books for the Oxford League, at the age of 17, he rode his Indian motorcycle across Canada to Kingston, Ontario where, in 1939 he entered the Royal Military College. After two years he graduated as the senior cadet, as the B.S.M. and was distinguished with the Sword of Honour. As a result he was offered a commission in the Royal Engineers in the British Army. During WWII he served in numerous theatres of war including the 8th Army in North Africa, at the Anzio Beachhead in Italy, as a paratrooper at the battle of Arnhem and in France and Germany.

1947 Married Patricia

In the autumn of 1946 Desmond met Pat at a party in Bude, North Devon hosted by Desmond's old school friend Harry Rogers, an ex-Brentonian from Victoria. Desmond at that time was Adjutant at Chepstow Boys School. Because Desmond was away from his home at Christmas time, Pat invited him to spend the season with her family at Dunsley Manor, her home in Kinver, Worcs. In the evening, Pat would go to feed the horses in the stables and Desmond would go to help muck out. Pat's father, Harry Siddens, sensitive to the innocence of his daughter, would yell out of his bedroom window "What are you two up to out there?" This led to Desmond proposing marriage to Pat at the Lyggon Arms Hotel at the Boxing Day Party. Pat, a recent graduate of Lawnside Girl's School, Malvern and an innocent nineteen-year-old, ignored the question and just put it

down to the forwardness of Canadian boys. Dad continued his pleadings and still searched for an answer to his proposal. On a New Year's Day gallop across the Kinver Ridge with Desmond in the lead, on a horse called Freedom, and Pat some yards behind, on a pony called Paddy, Pat remembers Desmond hollering into the wind at the top of his voice "Pat.Pat". Unaware of Desmond's intent, she yelled back "Yes?". Desmond at this point became jubilant having secured the answer he sought. Seeking the paternal permission almost stopped the happy event when Harry asked the direct question "Do you have any money". To Desmond's reply of "No". Harry resigned his only daughter to the Fates, and with his consent the rest is history: 5 children and 54 married years full of challenge and change.

1950/51 Korea

With Vicki, a two-year-old and Richard a baby in arms, Desmond left to the United Nations Korean War. Maj.-General Tony Younger, Retired Engineer in Chief of the Royal Engineers, and Desmond's commanding officer at the time sent this letter:

...When he first came under my command, I was really pleased with him. He had an excellent way with his men and his energy and cheerfulness indicated that he was an officer of the highest quality. Sometime in late August 1950 I was told to send a good officer to Korea to act as the advance party for our unit which would be following later by troopship. I selected Desmond and he flew out at once.

A short time later I was amazed, and delighted, to see a headline across the front page of one of our newspapers, "The bravest officer I ever met". This was a statement by the commander of an American infantry battalion (Colonel William Holley), about Desmond. Almost surrounded by North Korean forces on an isolated hill and with his radio batteries run flat, the Colonel had to make contact with his boss, but the route out was under heavy fire. However, Desmond volunteered to go and succeeded in making the trip.

When we were reunited again in Korea, Desmond and his Troop worked endlessly on engineer tasks. I should explain that there was only one good road in Korea, that leading from the port, Pusan, to the capital, Seoul. The rest were tracks for bullock carts and pedestrians, and we were putting dozens of heavy lorries along these. The work required to repair damage and widen the roads, as well as to make usable river crossings, was endless. We toiled at this through all daylight hours seven days a week. We moved north, building many bridges, and then, when attacked by massive Chinese forces, moved south again, blowing them up.

In April 1951, our Brigade was faced by an entire Chinese Corps. One of our battalions, the Glosters, were surrounded and lost. To save the other two battalions from a similar fate, an attack was launched by the Commander of the 8th Hussars. Desmond and his men held a ridge to cover the withdrawal of the battalions and were attacked continuously. His junior officer and several of his men were killed, but he held fast and finally returned to safety with his remaining men on the backs of the 8th Hussars tanks.

He was awarded a very well deserved Military Cross for his action on that dreadful day.

Of course the war went on after this battle, and the cumulative strain on us all was immense...All I can say is that when the chips were down and we faced enormous danger, Desmond was superb

In 1952-54 Desmond served in Fort Belvoir, Va., USA as the British Liaison Officer. During this time Patrick was born and Pat was introduced to the vastness of Canada as she drove across the country for her first real visit to Victoria.

1957-1961, Nigeria.

The period 1957-61 was simply an incredible period in their lives, as time moved from the past to the present; a shifting epoch from pre-colonial times to modern. Desmond was responsible for the building of the Uba-Bama Road between Maidugari & Yola, an extremely remote area of Northern Nigeria in Hausa country. The closest European was some 50 miles away, no phones, no power, chemical loos and water by the bucket from the well. I recall when I was 7 years old going with Desmond to the job site and watching rough bush trails being transformed into viable roads by lines of some 3-400 Nigerian labourers rhythmically chanting and breaking the ground with pick-axes. When we left 4 years later, with communications now established and Desmond's road complete, the primitive working conditions were replaced by bulldozers and trucks: an incredible transition from raw manual labour to the technology of the day. A time long gone.

Leaving Nigeria, Desmond spent two years at Regimental Headquarters in Aldershot. During this relatively quiet period the twins Peter and Michael were born. We spent a couple of years in the peace of Hartley Wintney where Desmond polished up his golf game and for a little entrepreneurial activity started a 500 battery chicken plant in the old barn at Sherwood Farmhouse; just to keep things exciting.

1963-65, C.R.E.Ops Aden.

In 1963 he was posted as C.R.E., Ops. to Aden on the southwest tip of the Arabian Peninsula, a port of strategic military significance at the head of the Red Sea. After the remoteness of Nigeria it was an exciting and vibrant ex-pat community. At Christmas time in 1963 Vicki and I held a teenage Christmas party with Patrick and the twins safely tucked upstairs in bed. As the party was ending an object, about the size of a cricket ball, thrown from the outside shattered the window and bounced into the centre of the living room floor. Desmond immediately recognized it and shouted to everybody to hit the ground. The object was a grenade, which then exploded, shattering glass and flying shrapnel that wounded several of the guests. Gillian Sidey, 16-year-old daughter of the R.A.F. Commandant of the Steamer Point Hospital, was struck in the neck. She was rushed to hospital in an ambulance with Pat by her side but tragically died on the way from a severed jugular vein. That was the start of a series of terrorist actions and the Radfan War.

1967, Return to Victoria.

Shortly after Aden, Desmond retired and decided to return to his native Victoria. Joining his brothers Pip and Vincent in the family firm of Pemberton, Holmes Ltd. Desmond and Pat settled in Metchosin and Desmond became a realtor of note. So many people and clients remember him traipsing them up the rocky hills of Metchosin and Sooke as he pointed out the best sites for a home and the finer points of otherwise thick bush and undergrowth. One of his clients said that Desmond was the only realtor in Victoria who, when asked where the property was, would actually put on gumboots and wade through the bush to find each corner property pin with the use of a compass and plot plan.

Like his office at Pemberton, Holmes Ltd., his cars were to most people unbelievable. Maps, brochures, cigarette packages, Listing Agreements and Sales Agreements were all stacked in his inimitable style. And what was not in the car was on the Dining room table at Lombard, an area sacrosanct and not to be touched. Despite the apparent confusion Desmond continuously was one of the top salesmen at Pemberton Holmes Ltd.

Farming in Metchosin was a life unto its own. Pat, with a string of ex-race horses, trained them as hunters and ran a very popular riding school for young children. This was the main stay of the Sherwood Creek Farm.

Not to be outdone, and with a keen eye to minimizing property taxes Desmond launched into being a sheep and free-range chicken farmer. Dressed in his 50-year-old Cowichan Sweater he would oversee his flock and his brood with pride. As sheep herder, realtor and gentleman farmer all rolled into one Desmond tended the animals in his off hours, selling off wool to knitters in Cowichan, lambs to a downtown Grecian Restaurant and augmenting the income with the sale of free-range eggs to the staff at Pemberton Holmes.

His "bete noir" were the rams who, perhaps attracted by the famous Cowichan sweater, regularly tried to get the better of him. Desmond was not a man easily startled. When working on a fence one day his backside presented a very attractive target for our cantankerous old ram. The ram grasped the opportunity and at full pace butted Desmond to the ground, whereupon, with a string of expletives, Desmond turned about and broke the handle of the sledgehammer over the ram's impenetrable head. The ram was very surprised to find someone with an equal temper and from that day forward there was mutual respect.

In true entrepreneurial form, in Metchosin Desmond decided to boycott the Liquor Control Board in favour of his own creations. In his spare time he created concoctions from apple or grape and sometimes both. After a shelf life of an indeterminate time ranging from a couple of days to a couple of years these fine libations were often undrinkable until the first glass had been finished, by which time one's palate was numb. They became the standard fare of the house to family, friends, clients and strangers alike who were always warmly welcomed into Sherwoods and often embraced as if they were old friends.

Many a dinner party was held at Sherwood Creek and often ended in a game of Scrabble. Seven letter words were not a patch on Desmond's variations, apparently conjured from mid-air and created for the moment. Those unaware of Desmond's extraordinary mind often fell into the trap of making a challenge to these obscurities, always to find that these rare gems were listed in the Oxford Dictionary. One that sticks in our mind is adding "ERS" to HUNK giving HUNKERS. At our outcry he gave some vague definition which none believed and sent us all reaching for the Oxford to our ultimate dismay.

Desmond's famous stories told around the dinner table were legendary; tales of brick houses being built in 48 hours in Wales, of his trainee-cook, when asked to cook scrambled egg for breakfast in Nigeria and being served a plate of custard instead, of our mud-home in Nigeria being surrounded by the local tribesmen armed to the teeth in full tribal war dress with spears and machetes chanting "Engineer Bar Coudy", which translated means "Mr. Holmes, where's our money", and of stories being on safari in Kenya escaping charging rhinos, of road trips through Europe and of sea voyages on the return trip home.

Desmond was a true Officer and Gentleman, with human failings, but above all he was a great man.

He was true to our family motto, "**Arte & Marte**" which translated simply means "By Right and by Might." He was true to the RMC motto "**Truth, Duty, Honour**". maxims that Desmond followed all his life. He was true to the Royal Engineers motto "**Ubique**" meaning everywhere. And in every sense of the word Desmond served Queen and Country all over the world.

A fellow officer of Desmond's, Major "*Pom*" Chittie, said that "Desmond was the bravest man I have ever known". He never hesitated in a moment of danger or hardship to do the right thing by his men, his friends and his family.

He was true to the Brentwood College motto, "**De Manu in Manum**" meaning from hand to hand he hands the torch. Today he hands us all the torch of his memory.

A memory of his years as a proud Canadian a loyal, and generous brother, husband, father, grandfather and friend.

Delivered at his Memorial Service by his loving family