

The Bi-annual Newsletter for the DUNCALF Family

How Sapper Duncalfe Got G.B.S. Autograph

by Laurie Duncalfe

As Military hospitals go, the 5th Canadian General Hospital in England was very well situated. It sat on the high side of the Thames on the grounds of the Astor estate, Clivedon

As a patient of the 5th General in the spring and summer of 1941, I was enjoying a privacy rare in the life of a soldier. I was the sole occupant of a ground level porch at the end of Ward 10.

There I was roughing it on a beauty-rest mattress. I had four meals a day in bed, a radio, plenty of reading material, a view, and no guard duty.

A particularly balmy June evening found me lying in state reading Alexander Woolcott's *While Rome Burns*. From far up the path that passed a few feet from my bed came the faint putt putt of a small motorbike. It grew louder.

The particular chapter I was reading concerned itself with incidents in the early career of singer Paul Robeson. Woolcott recalled, with malicious leasure, how Lady Astor on a visit to Robeson's Drury Lane dressing room exchanged discourtesies with the Negro star. At the time, Robeson was wowing London audiences in the role of Joe, in the musical *Show Boat*.

"Such a rush of southern blood in her head", Woolcott reported, "that she seemed to think she was benevolently visiting one of the cabins on the old family plantation."

"WHY, LADY ASTOR . . ."

Just at this point in my reading, the motorbike approached to a point almost opposite my bed and conked out. The lady driver dismounted the vehicle, which was little more than a girl's bicycle with a motor, and tried to start it again without success. A closer look revealed the stalled cyclist to be none other than Lady Nancy Astor.

"Lady Astor," I called out.

The hostess of Clivedon gave me a quick look, walked her motorbike toward the porch, leaned it against the post and came over to my bed.

"And what's on your Canadian mind?" she asked.



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I offered Lady Astor the open book with my finger on the paragraph recounting her Robeson dressing room visit.

As she read, I could detect a head of steam generating in the facial features of England's first woman MP.

"How dare this man Woolcott - and who are you?"

My sheepish answer was, "just another Canadian soldier!" Then I hastened to add something to the effect that it isn't very often you are reading about a famous person at the very moment they pass by on a motorbike and stall in front of your bed.

THE LADY MELLOWED

Lady Astor's attitude mellowed quickly and she asked me the standard what's-wrong-with-you and how-do-you-feel questions. She wanted to know if I had seen the castle and grounds.

I told her I hadn't because of a distinct aversion to conducted tours. (It was the custom at the hospital for a group of soldiers to go on group tours of the castle and grounds).

"I suppose," said Lady Astor, "you would like my personal invitation to see the castle by yourself!"

I mustered: "It would be nice."

"You've got it," said Lady Astor, and she was off again walking her motorbike down the path toward the castle.

A week or so later the ward nurse appeared with a very pleasant woman from Clivedon - a social secretary. If I would dress, the pleasant woman would be waiting for me at the front of the hospital with an Austin. I would be driven to the castle and Lady Astor would show me around.

During the next few weeks I had several conversations with Nancy Astor and peppered her with questions.

FRIEND OF SHAW

George Bernard Shaw was a friend of Nancy Astor's and it was more than interesting to hear personal anecdotes about the great man. I kept firing questions.

One evening the viscountess dropped by my porch and told me that Shaw was going to be her house guest. If I was a good patient she would invite me to have tea with him. Although tea wasn't exactly my idea of the top English beverage, the thought of the company - Viscountess Astor, George Bernard Shaw, and Sapper Duncalfe - was something to think about.

As it transpired however, Shaw's visit to Clivedon was delayed and in the meantime I was informed that I was to be invalided to Canada.

On Lady Astor's next visit I told her about my impending boat ride and mentioned that it was a shame that Shaw wasn't going to have the opportunity of meeting me.

I thanked Lady Astor for everything. She said all Canadians were crusty and although I was one of the crustiest private soldiers she had ever run across, she thought she would like to give me a going away gift.

NAME WORTH DROPPING

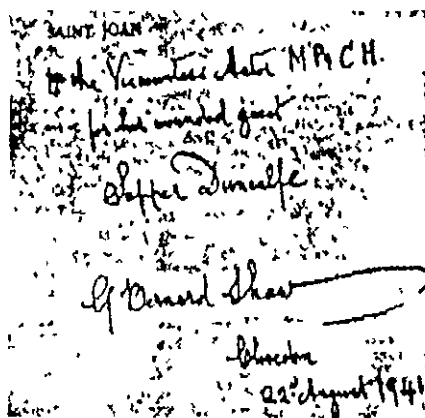
I assured her that when I got back to Canada I would name drop Lady Astor at the least provocation and that was going-away-gift enough.

But she insisted that there must be something I would like, so to close the subject I said she could get me a personally autographed copy of Shaw's Saint Joan,

She explained that Shaw didn't autograph - a fact I was aware of.

Two weeks after arrival in Canada, I received a note from Lady Astor with an enclosure. It was Saint Joan with the fly leaf inscribed:

"To the Viscountess Astor MP, CH,
for her wounded guest
Sapper Duncalfe
G. Bernard Shaw
Clivedon
22nd August 1941"



The above is an account taken from a Canadian Newspaper (date unknown) sent to me by Lloyd Duncalfe some months ago. The photograph of Laurie Duncalfe is from an entirely different newspaper cutting, but is the best of the several photographs of him that I now have. More information about Laurie was given in his obituary:

"ADVERTISING EXECUTIVE DIES AT 69, L. C. 'Dunc' Duncalfe, 69, 1036 12th Ave. S.W., died Thursday following a lengthy illness. Mr Duncalfe was best known as CFCN's Pelican man, the master of ceremonies for a popular radio amateur show during the 40s. He was active in music circles as an adjudicator of musical festivals.

Prior to joining Lovick Agencies in 1949, he was employed with Western Printing and Lithographing. At the time of his illness, he was an account executive for Lovick Agencies."

I also have an obituary notice for Laurie's father, Henry G Duncalfe, together with a photograph. I am saving this for the next Dossier in the hope that I can locate his birth in England and discover from whom he is descended.

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Notes and Queries

My first task in this section must be to legitimise one reader of the Dossier and to apologise for making her illegitimate in the first place. Will those of you who have copies of Tree D please amend the date of the marriage of John Platte Duncalfe [D056] to Kate Rosina Morris [D618] to read 1908 and not 1912.

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Last autumn I spent some of my time in the Chester Record Office on a systematic search of the Cheshire Quarter Sessions files beginning with the year 1699. I began in 1699 as most of the records before this date are written in Latin, which I am unable to read. Four quarter sessions were held each year