

Of mortars and morphine: one physician's D-Day

Charles E. Baker

The letter reproduced here with minor abridgements was written by Dr. (Major) Charles Baker as a report on his participation with the 3rd Canadian Division in the D-Day landings on the beaches of Normandy on June 6, 1944. Dr. Baker's field ambulance unit was assigned to Nan Red, the code name for the portion of Juno beach near St-Aubin-sur-Mer. Dr. Baker's letter was submitted to us by Dr. C.E. Robinson, who has been researching war diaries written by members of the unit he commanded after the war. Lt.-Col. Caverhill, to whom Major Baker's letter is addressed, was Dr. Robinson's commanding officer in 1946. As Dr. Robinson wrote to us, the "detail, clarity and eloquence" of this letter are remarkable, especially in view of the circumstances of its writing. Here is a glimpse of a medical soldier who has the sang-froid to throw a landmine into the sea "like a discus," who describes shrapnel wounds as "scratches," and who, having spent the previous day witnessing horrific deaths and attending to wounds inflicted by bullet and shell, is still capable of accounting to his superior officer for losses of matériel. Although the letter is dated June 7, it refers to some events after that date. Dr. Baker, who is now in his 90s, resides in a nursing home in Ohio. This letter is reproduced with kind permission of his daughter, Judi Baker Gerhart.

H.M.S. L.S.T. 409
7 June, 1944

Lt. Col. M. R. Caverhill
22 Cdn. Fd. Amb.

Dear Sir:

I am sorry to be a bit late with my [reconnaissance] report. ... I am once again on my way back to England, dirty and unshaven, with a uniform dirtier than it was in 1940. There is also another difference in that it has no left sleeve in my shirt or battle-dress blouse. If it wasn't for the splitting headache I have, from the bits of metal in my skull and the pain in my useless arm I would be comparatively happy.

A [situation report] of Nan Red beach as I saw it, is a bit confusing.

I went across the channel in L[anding] C[raft] T[ank] 707 with a splendid Canadian officer as skipper. He was Lieut. C. J. Holland of St. Thomas Ont. We hit Nan Red beach at 08:55 on D day. The beach was being shelled, mortared and sniped. The tide was high and we passed over the beach obstacles: a mine exploded on our right and dam-



Courtesy Judi Baker Gerhart

Dr. (Major) Charles Baker, fifth from the left, with officers of the Royal Canadian Horse Artillery, 1st Field Regiment, August 1941. As Dr. Baker tells it, most of the men have mustaches because Hitler had said they were a bunch of boys.

aged the craft slightly. As we were coming in there was a ship on fire away off to our left. Just before we went in, [a] L[anding] C[raft] I[nfantry] on our left went down. The ship's company waved good-bye as they slid under. ... I left the craft ... with Major MacPherson and driver Etherington in my jeep ambulance. It was a dry landing, just as Lieut. Holland had promised us. Shells were bursting all around us. We moved a few yards and then had to stop in a traffic jam of S. P. arty [self-propelled artillery]. The beach was sandy but unfortunately had a high wall behind it. The beach obstacles were solid steel and each one had a teller mine tied on it. These were the new type mine and it was impossible to use a safety wire on them. I stepped on a mine but it did not go off. It was quite loose in the sand so I picked it up and threw it out to sea like a discus. There were several hundred men lying in the sand close to the wall. Some of them were wounded. Others were just sitting there waiting to get wounded apparently, because each shell burst picked off a few more. ... I was very much amazed to see all these men sitting on the beach. I asked an R.E. [Royal Engineer] officer why these men were not off the beach. He said that there was a belt of mines just off the beach and that we couldn't go east or west because of snipers and mines. The snipers couldn't see the men against the wall. The snipers were shooting sailors in the craft and the craft were replying with A[nti-] A[ircraft] guns. One German ran down to the beach and threw hand grenades into a craft. Someone killed the German with a sten gun.

I gave morphia to men lying in the sand. I dressed a lot of North Shore [(NB) Regiment] wounded there. Most of the men did not have shovels so we got them started digging holes in the soft sand with their hands. A shell explosion blew my hat off so I decided to move a bit. I went about fifty yards west and another explosion bent my glasses a bit and broke a man's back. About a hundred yards west along the beach there was a ditch through the barb wire into the mine field. This was just west of the sea wall. I think that this ditch was specially dug to be covered by rifle fire. I bent the wire back and crawled part way through. I was going to toss a coin to see whether I got killed by a shell or a mine but a shell explosion behind me made up my mind for me. It landed me flat on my face in the mine field. I ran along the ditch and was greeted by a rifle shot from the corner of a house off to the east about sixty yards. The shot missed me and I jumped into a bomb crater which happened to be in the edge of the ditch in a little hillock. The next shot covered my face with dirt. ... After a few moments I heard a burst of sten gun fire. Someone else was firing at my sniper. I raised my pistol with my tin hat over my hand. Just as I reached the edge of the crater the shell-dressing was shot off the back of my hat. I fired over the edge of the crater. I heard a rifle bang on the cobblestones and someone running away. Just then two beach riflemen came along the ditch. The three of us ran to the gate of the house and round the corner. We couldn't see anything but smoke. I posted the riflemen there as sentries and went back to the beach. I got Etherington and the jeep and brought them up through the S.P. arty to the ditch. I had no wire cutters so I couldn't get the jeep through the wire. For lack of a wire cutter we lost the jeep. Etherington and I crawled along the ditch. As we went along I kicked up a mine. It was a dummy mine — just two round pieces of tin with a block of wood between them shaped like a tellermine. There was a sharp steel spike on top of the mine about three inches in length. I decided that this was a dummy mine field and that it would be safe to bring the wounded across it. I went back to the beach. A mortar bomb blew part of a man's head off and wounded me in the leg. Etherington and I herded a few wounded up the ditch. I remember particularly having a bad time getting a blinded North Shore soldier through the wire. Next time I go to war I'll take a wire cutter with me. Mortar bombs were coming over six at a time. We got a few men up the ditch between each series of six bombs. Then I had four men carrying a badly wounded man on a

stretcher. A bomb lit on the stretcher and killed all the stretcher bearers and the patient. They were laid out just like a cart wheel. I was standing to the right of No. 1 and he stopped most of the pieces coming my way. Two pieces hit me in the head and covered my face and glasses with blood. One piece cut into the chest piece of my flak suit and didn't hurt me so please tell the boys that flak suits are a darned good idea. I was stunned for a bit and did a bit of grovelling in the sand. Then I ran up the ditch and hid in my bomb crater. A soldier hid in it with me and he cleaned my glasses for me. After the next six bombs had gone over I went back to the beach again like a darned fool. I was going to drive the jeep off somewhere even if it was across a mine field. The jeep was surrounded by S.P. arty and we couldn't move it. A single bomb came over and lit right beside me. It killed two men and knocked me down on my back. This time I got three pieces in my left arm and a few more in my face. I crawled under the jeep. A bomb set fire to the petrol on the S.P. arty. If the S.P. arty hadn't been carrying so much petrol on the outside of their guns they would not have lost four guns and burned up a lot of men. It was all started by a few small mortar bombs. I couldn't use my arm by this time so I crawled into my crater and stayed there. Bombs lit all around me but none of them touched me. The S.P. arty was burning merrily by this time. The ammo began exploding. It was about twenty yards north of me and although many pieces went past the top of my crater, none of them hit me. A sergeant crawled into my hole with me. My arm was soaked in blood and was stinging a bit. He cut my sleeve away dressed my wounds and gave me some morphine. The S.P. arty exploded and covered the whole area with smoke,



D-Day wounded awaiting evacuation to the casualty clearing station, Normandy beach-head, France, June 6, 1944.

Memories of a swashbuckling father

My father was born March 10, 1912, in Denzil, Sask. He grew up on the family farm, received his medical degree from the University of Manitoba and studied in Oxford. After the war he and my mother returned to Canada, boarded a train and, as my father likes to tell it, looked out of the window in Port Arthur, Ont., liked what they saw, and got off. He hung out his shingle and went to work as a family physician.

He took me with him on countless house calls, delivered babies, did general surgery, prison work, and was much liked by his patients. He would play the piano in patients' homes, just for a few minutes before going on his next call. In 1964 we moved to Long Beach, California, where he hung out a new shingle and started all over again. My mother died in 1992, and my father moved to Cleveland a year later.

He loves to tell stories. I don't know much about his activities during the war, but I heard the tale many times about how he hid inside a wine barrel, in the wine, to avoid German detection. He spent several weeks recuperating in Lady Astor's castle, and has fond memories of that time. He never returned to his unit, was pensioned for several wounds, and still has shrapnel embedded in his head.

For years after the war he read extensively, preferring war-related books and anything on Africa, where his brother resided. He learned to speak and read Finnish, German, French, Spanish, Russian and even Swahili. I always felt that he was a swashbuckler. He never drove the speed limit, and when stopped would say he was a doctor on emergency call. He taught me to drive when I was 12, much to my mother's chagrin. We had a summer cottage on Lake Superior, and he would load up our small boat so that one false move could easily swamp it. My poor mother worried all her life about the safety of myself and my brother Ron, who is now a physician in New Zealand.

My father's major passion in life turned out to be junk collecting. He would map out house calls so that he could stop at every garage sale and thrift store along the way. As he brought junk in the back door, my mother was taking it out the front to donate. When he accepted that he was going blind as a result of diabetes, he hired a liquidator who held 6 sales in our house in Long Beach over 4 months. There were suits of armour, animal pelts, swords, pistols, surfboards — just about everything you could imagine. MGM Studios sent buyers twice.

My father's solid love, generosity and passion are my roots. After 2 strokes, partial paralysis and total blindness, without complaint he continues to enjoy book and *Newsweek* recordings, vanilla ice cream and as much pampering as he can finagle.

Judi Baker Gerhart
Bay Village, Ohio

fumes, burning cordite and burning petrol. The grass started burning all over the mine field and all around my hole. My face was scorched a bit. The sergeant and I decided to make a run for the house. Shells were exploding all over the place. A mortar bomb lit in the ditch in front of us. It didn't explode. The sergeant grabbed me or I would have stepped on it. We reached the house safely.

The men who had been unlucky enough to stay on the beach under and around the S.P. arty were burned alive. Some of them were probably wounded previously by mortar fire and could not move but I cannot for the life of me understand why they all stayed on the beach. As they burned up, they screamed blood-curdling screams that I can hear yet.

As the sergeant and Etherington and I made a run for it along the ditch, the ammo was going up continually. We ran around to the corner of the house where I had posted the sentries. Quite a number of wounded had gathered there so we sat down for a bit and hid from the flying steel. Finally we got everybody down into a big cement basement under the building. We cleaned up the basement and made a small hospital there. D[river] Etherington proved invaluable to me throughout the whole show. He is one of the coolest and best medical orderlies I have ever had. With S.P. arty exploding all around him he salvaged the mortar bomb case of serum and dressings from the jeep. The serum I think saved a soldier's life because he was practically dead when we gave it to him. Etherington and a gunner from the 19th F[ield] Reg[imen]t did nearly all the dressings for me as I could only use one hand. The boys were very much afraid, of booby traps in the old house. A North Shore sergeant walked through a doorway and had his brains blown out onto the floor beside him. There was an old bed and a lot of junk in the basement which they were afraid to move. A couple of us with five or six holes in us decided that a few more holes wouldn't make much difference. We threw the junk out. Nothing happened.

We dressed everyone, laid them in rows, gave them morphine etc. The ammo explosions were dying down so Etherington and I went to look for our jeep. All that was left of it was two front tires and the two petrol tins on the bumper. We salvaged the petrol and then hid while more ammo went up. As the ammo kept exploding and the petrol was burning everywhere, we couldn't go back onto the beach via our ditch. I took two stretcher squads and we sneaked west along a hedge and then across the mine field in single file. Half way across a sniper shot at us. We hugged the ground for a few moments. Then there was a burst of sten gun fire which I deemed to be in the direction of the sniper. Finally we ran for it and hid behind a wall. ...

We gathered up all the wounded from among the burning S.P. arty. Most of the men there were dead, including the engineer officer who had told me I couldn't get off the beach. Etherington put the fire out in a burning Arty jeep and backed it into the water away from the main fire. Then we went along the beach to the B[rigade] D[ressing] S[tation] and reported the location of our patients. I sent



Gilbert A. Milne / National Archives of Canada / PA-137013

Canadian infantry landing at "Nan White" beach, Bernières-sur-Mer, France, June 6, 1944.

Etherington back to the cellar and told him to wait for the A[dvance] D[ressing] S[tation] to arrive. I dressed a few patients in the sand. The next thing I remembered I was lying in the sand and a patient was trying to give me a drink.

I reported to the Beach H[ead] Q[uarters] on Nan Red beach that I was wounded and that I thought I should go to hospital. Just then an L.C.I. beached with some wounded aboard. I was sent aboard to see them. When I came out of the hold we were going hell for leather for another L.C.I. that was sinking. We rescued everyone off that craft just before it sank. There were several seriously injured cases. When I finished dressing them we were alongside H.M.S. Waverly. The next thing I remember I was lying in the officers mess ... talking to Commodore Ottway-Ribon. I was made very welcome by the officers ... I had several doses of morphine and eventually fell asleep. I slept about twelve hours. Then I attended a burial service for Lieut. Holland and Pte. Shaw. Lieut. Holland (the skipper of my craft) had lost both arms and part of his head in a mortar bomb explosion.

About 16:00 hrs 8 June '44 all wounded were transferred from H.M.S. Waverly to L[anding] S[hip] T[ank] 406 bound for England.

As we pulled away a cruiser was firing salvos at an enemy strong point.

I was ashore between five and six hours. When I left

there were about thirty-five dead men on the shore and eighty or more wounded gathered up into a bunch at the house and another bunch near the groyne on the beach. ...

As I came away there were beached craft on every beach to the west of us as far as I could see.

I lost the jeep and all the equipment with it. I hope that loss did not bother you too much in the assault. If it is necessary I can send a statement to the Q[uar] M[aster] Capt. Scattergood for the write off.

I lost all my personal equipment and clothing and Etherington also lost his. When I get some clothing coupons ... I will make out a claim and send it to you for your signature.

As soon as my scratches are better I would like to come back to the unit if that is satisfactory to you. It is the best place for me in the army and I was quite happy there.

If you will be so kind as to ask the A[ssistant] D[irector] M[edical] S[ervices] to put in a special request to the R[einforcement] U[nit] for me I may find my way back to the unit one day.

Give my regards to everyone in the unit. I wish them all the best of luck in the coming campaign.

Yours sincerely
Charles E. Baker
Major