

Stephen Alexander MacKeith wrote this six months before his death for his grandson Edmund MacKeith-Prince.

(Edmund used two personal accounts of the Second World War for a school project, this and excerpts from Anne Frank's Diary).

About the Second World War. Here are some fairly reliable memories of a man, who is now aged 88, together with a few of his personal thoughts.

When that war began, I was 33 years old. I was a registered medical practitioner. I was the 'whole-time' resident deputy medical superintendent of a mental hospital in Sussex. I had been married for 1 8/12 years. We had one child, aged 11 months.

Like most British people of the time, I had no burning hate for the Germans; but I had a great distaste for their Nazi government and its ideas, and for its internal and external policies. We British had become convinced, gradually but firmly, that a war with Germany was inevitable. We expected that, when the war came, the British government, like other governments, would adopt various war-time authoritarian measures, such as conscription for military or other service; and so it turned out.

I personally expected to serve, as a doctor, in one of the armed services; but I knew I would not be 'released' to do so until the British Medical Association, acting on behalf of the government, and balancing carefully the civilian and military medical needs, decided to 'release' me temporarily from my civilian job. That time came in August of 1940, and it was then that I enlisted, as a Lieutenant, in the Royal Army Medical Corps, to serve as an army psychiatrist.

I do not remember what I was paid, then or subsequently, by the Army. It was roughly comparable to what I was paid in civilian life. It was more, and soon considerably more, than the pay of a private soldier. (That system applied, with variations, to all armies in the Second World War, including those of the U.S.S.R.)

I wore an officer's khaki uniform. I fetched it, from the shop of my military tailor in Regent Street in London, on the day before I was due to report to the R.A.M.C. officer's preliminary training depot near Aldershot. To save time, I put on the uniform straight away in the shop. I then made my way on foot down Regent Street, in order to catch a train to a station near the house in a suburb, where I was to stay overnight. It was only gradually that I noticed that every private soldier that I met was saluting me, and that it was my duty, always to return the compliment!

(Perhaps that passage will serve to answer a few of your questions, and as an introduction to the start of the Second World War).

In the Army, I personally remained in the United Kingdom (U.K.) for a period of 2 9/12, from August of 1940 to May of 1943. I held, in succession, a series of appointments or 'postings', as listed below. For the Army, the U.K. was a place, not only for territorial defence, but also for recruitment, personnel selection, basic training, specialised training etc.

Personally, I first was area general psychiatrist to two Army Areas in succession, in Aldershot to begin with, and then in the Sussex and Surrey area. I usually had meals in an 'officer's mess'; and I slept in a 'mess' or in lodgings. I did psychiatric consultations, most on an out-patient basis. These consultations concerned a variety of mental illnesses and disabilities; they were not all that different from my previous

out-patient work with individuals who were civilians. In addition, there was some forensic psychiatry for military courts.

Area psychiatrists also had an important role in the military vocational guidance, of new recruits in the 'General Service Recruit Intake Procedure', and of obvious 'misfits' in various regiments.

After my two periods as an Army area psychiatrist, I held various other posts. In turn, I was an instructor at a training centre for new army psychiatrists, Command Psychiatrist at Western Command, and a Deputy Assistant Director of Army Psychiatry at the War Office. I also worked briefly at a War Office Selection Board for candidates for commissions as officers.

That last job I did while I was waiting to go overseas, as a Lieutenant Colonel, to be Advisor in Psychiatry to the Allied Forces Headquarters, then based at Algiers in North Africa. (This headquarters would later move on to Caserta, near Naples, after the Allies' successive invasions of Sicily and the Italian mainland).

I served overseas, in this appointment, for 1 7/12 years, from May of 1943 to December of 1944. The posting produced a great change in the nature of my duties. My clinical work with individual patients persisted, but was steeply reduced in amount. On the other hand, I became heavily involved in organisational matters, such as the development of medical policy, the formation of new medical units, the posting of individual medical officers, and in medical administration generally. In the forward and lines-communication areas, I visited medical and other units; and at headquarters I wrote occasional general advisory reports.

In Algiers, I was billeted, but without meals, in the cottage of an elderly French lady. Military life in an overseas expeditionary force was very different from life in a training command in the U.K. Even the non-combatant members of a medical corps here were vividly conscious of the dangers, terrors, and discomforts experienced by their combatant colleagues serving in the firing line. Long separation from his wife, children, relations and friends often exerted a powerful influence on the soldier's frame of mind.

It was hardly surprising that there was a stream of patients for the army psychiatrists to see. It was, moreover, natural that the numbers of 'psychiatric casualties' increased, sometimes very greatly, at times of specially active fighting in the forward areas. This produced a severe drain on 'man-power'. It was essential to develop adequate facilities for the reception, management and treatment of these people. I do not remember that my own 'feelings about the war' changed substantially during my period of service in the Mediterranean region, though my degree of optimism or pessimism about the probable duration of the war varied in accordance with the content of the news bulletin.

In the December of 1944, I was recalled to the U.K. by the War Office from my appointment at Allied Force Headquarters in the Central Mediterranean region. This was because it was expected that I would be needed for a similar posting on the 'Second Front' in France. I travelled home in relative safety, in a hospital ship, being allowed to do so because I was a non-combatant medical officer.

As things turned out, other arrangements were made for an Advisor in Psychiatry on the 'Second Front'. I therefore became available for an impending vacancy – as Command Psychiatrist to Southern Command in the U.K. I myself was delighted with this posting, since my wife and children were due to return from Australia to the U.K. in the spring of 1945.

My work in Southern Command from January of 1945 to January of 1946, was very similar to the duties performed in Western Command in an earlier period, with addition of lectures, delivered at the R.A.M.C. Officers' Training Depot and at sundry other places, on our army psychiatric experiences in North Africa and Italy.

The public state of mind in the U.K. had altered greatly. There was a considerable amount of war-weariness and discontent with rationing, etc. On the other hand, there was developing an increasing faith in the ultimate victory of the allies, and of optimism that the end of the war would come sooner rather than later.

I personally was demobilised in 1946, beginning my 'demob leave' in January of that year. Subsequently I resumed my pre-war civilian medical appointment in Sussex.

Stephen MacKeith

April 1995

(I have transcribed this from the photocopy of Stephen's tidy small writing, five pages of it. I have retained the punctuation – what a lot of commas! – but have used ` quote marks rather than `).

I note that Stephen was demobbed just in time for the birth of their third child, William Henry Stephen MacKeith (known as 'Billy' when young, later 'Bill') on 30 January 1946.

Lucy MacKeith

December 2007)