**Records of Service: Do No Harm Transcript**

**Anthony Wilson-Smith:**Hi, I am Anthony Wilson-Smith, president and CEO of Historica Canada. The way we see the world today is informed a lot by our past, both the good and the bad. This is where our podcasts come in. Podcasts like “[Residential Schools](https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/residential-schools-podcast-series)”, a three-part series created to honour the stories of survivors, their families, and communities and to commemorate the history and legacy of Residential Schools in Canada.

**Riley Burns: “**I didn’t want to be an Indian, I didn’t know who in the hell I wanted to be. I wasn’t accepted by the white man; I was accepted by my own people in my reserve.”

**AWS:** Subscribe to Historica Canada Podcasts for deep dives into our past. You can listen to “Residential Schools” on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, or wherever you get your podcasts. Never stop learning.

**AD READ:** In 1971, Canada became the first country in the world to adopt an official multiculturalism policy. It was meant to preserve cultural freedoms and recognize the contributions of diverse groups to Canadian society. Today, multiculturalism is a defining feature of the Canadian identity, but for much of our history, that wasn’t the case. Today it’s a defining feature of the Canadian identity. But for much of our history, that wasn’t the case. Listen to A Place to Belong: A History of Multiculturalism in Canada, a five-part series from Historica Canada. Join us as we explore the history of multiculturalism in Canada. Subscribe to A Place to Belong on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, or wherever you get your podcasts.

**Betty Dimcock:**“We had to wash out the dirty, old, soiled, infected dressings and hang them on the line in the sun and used them the next night, that night. Boys fanned flies off the wounds in the daytime, to try to prevent the maggots. And we had of course unfamiliar medication and treatment. It was quite a new experience.”

**Maia Foster:** Welcome to “Record of Service”, a podcast presented by Historica Canada. I’m your host, Maia Foster. In this series, we bring you interviews with Canada’s veterans—their stories of life, loss, and service. This episode, we hear from Canadian medical personnel. We’re all over the map today, with accounts from the North African Campaign, D-Day, the Korean War, and more. But first, tales from the Canadian Dental Corps.

Just a warning to those that may be listening with young ones around, today’s story contains graphic descriptions.

**Ralph Yorsh:** “During the Depression, times were tough, and a lot of people couldn’t afford to get anything more done than emergencies. In other words, they would arrive at the dentist with a raging toothache when something had to be done. Because a third of the country were unemployed, so dentistry was rather low on people’s list of priorities.”

**MF:** This posed a problem at the outbreak of the Second World War. For Canadians wanting to enlist, they needed to be ‘dentally fit’ to serve.

**RY:** “They couldn’t have decayed teeth. They could have missing teeth, but they had to be in sort of a decent state of repair to go overseas. So, there was an awful lot of dentistry to be done and not enough dentists to do it.”

**MF:**This led to the creation of the Canadian Dental Corps, which trained dental students to use field equipment. Dr. Ralph Yorsh was one such student. He studied dentistry at the University of Toronto, graduating in early 1944 and serving with the Royal Canadian Air Force in Yarmouth, Nova Scotia.
**RY:**“Our major job was keeping people healthy and comfortable. About the only thing which was - and this didn’t help the war effort but it certainly helped this one man - we had one man on the station and I looked at him and I said, ‘Come into the dental clinic, I want to have a look at you.’ And he came in. Well, this poor fellow, his upper front teeth literally were so badly crowded that they stuck straight out. He couldn’t close his lips. I’m sure he’d never kissed a girl in his life. He came from some village somewhere and no one had done anything about it. I thought he would be much happier, and these were the only facilities available to me at the time, so I said to him, ‘We’ll take up your upper four front teeth, your central and lateral incisors, I will make you a temporary partial denture to replace these and we will bring these teeth in where I feel we can get them and where they belong.’

“Well, I proceeded to do that and he was the most delighted man in the world. The only problem was his sergeant came a while later and said to me, ‘I wish you’d left that man alone; he was the best man in my section, he was the hardest worker. Now, we can’t even find him. He’s out chasing girls day and night.’ But on the other hand, he was one very happy airman.”

**Robert Burden:** “I was born in Springhill on the 28th of April 1922. My dad was in the First World War and I figured it was just the correct thing to do.”

**MF:**When Robert Burden first enlisted in the Royal Canadian Army Medical Corps, he was told to report to Cogswell Street Military Hospital in Halifax. Not yet 19 years old, Burden weighed only 110lbs, and was slated as Category B: fit for base units of medical service.

**RB:**“I told them, no, I wasn’t interested in going to a place that wasn’t going to move and I wanted to go to Aldershot Military Hospital, which I thought was going overseas. And they gave me a ticket and I went to Aldershot and on the fourth day of January 1941, I became F84526, Private Robert Arnold Burden.

“It was sort of crazy when I first started out because they were just building the new hospital building. I swept the floor, scrubbed the floor, shined it and waxed it and after I moved beds in, I was taught how to make a hospital bed and a few more basic things and I became a medical orderly.

“Maybe I caught on quickly, but soon I was put in charge of all the medical orderlies. They noticed that I had my grade 12 and the double-entry bookkeeping and a year and a half of typing and shorthand, so they moved me to the orderly room, where it was only staffed at that time by a major and one sergeant. A letter came in from No. 7 Canadian General Hospital in Debert saying they wanted a “category A" trained clerk to join their unit to proceed overseas immediately. And I had gained the weight, so I weighed 120, so I asked the major for a medical exam, he told me, go see a Medical Officer.”

**MF:**On November 11th, 1941, Burden shipped out to England, ending up in a hospital in the village of Marston Green, halfway between Coventry and Birmingham. He looked after injured Canadian and British service personnel, as well as civilian bombing casualties.

**RB:** “In 1942, we also looked after about a hundred of the battle casualties from the Dieppe raid.”

**MF:**In June 1944, Robert was sent across the English Channel as part of the Battle of Normandy, the Allies invasion of Western Europe.

**RB:** “We were the first hospital to go in an invasion, first Canadian hospital to go in after D-Day. We needed a space big enough to put a 600-bed hospital, all in tents. That’s 250 of a unit, plus our tents and the operating room and X-rays, lab, wards - everything was under canvas. We had to get a field big enough, clear of the mines, before we could set up. When we moved in, the Beachmaster said, ‘Get off the beach as fast as you can but under no considerations go outside of those white tapes’, that were, it was still all mined. And we sort of went up this road and height of land and were sort of congregating there when an ME-109...”

**MF:**That’s a German Messerschmitt fighter aircraft.

**RB:** “…came streaking just over the treetops and you could see the flashes of the machine gun and the cannon from the wings as they were coming straight at us. But he was so low – and you could hear the snap of the bullets as they went overhead - but he was so low that the bullets were all coming horizontal[ly] above us. So, they would hit somewhere beyond where we were; nobody was injured.”

**MF:**Robert also vividly remembered how his team of four admitted 450 to 500 casualties a day following the beach landings.

**RB:** “It was five days and five nights that the only time I left the admitting department in the tent was to go to the bathroom or get something to eat.”

**MF:** At the end of the war, Robert and his outfit liberated Stalag X-B, a prisoner of war camp near Sandbostel in northwestern Germany. They came upon soldiers and political prisoners who were in such bad shape that they were able to transport two men on a single stretcher.

**RB:**“Instead of getting five in an ambulance, we’d get ten in an ambulance to move them down. If you’d give them a cigarette, they ate it.”

**RB:**“They were fed a special diet every three hours, night and day. After two weeks, there were five of them out in the sun, out in the yard and I carried a camera all through the war. And I took pictures of those five men, I took five pictures actually of those five survivors from that camp.

“We just put them in the beds right from the ambulance. And then we would go in and get all the information, which was a little difficult because they were of every language of Europe. All the dialects of Russia and so on like that. And of course, we had no interpreters, we had to get all this information ourselves like who they were and where they’re from. One fellow was doing the one side of the ward and I was doing the other. When I went to put them in the main book (all the names) I said, ‘Oh, what were ya doing on this side of the ward?’ And he said, ‘Well I wasn’t!’ I said, ‘How do you explain this?’ The first man he saw and the first man I saw were Russians. The last name was the same, one initial was the same, one year’s difference in age, and they came from the same village. They were brothers. Neither one knew the other one was still alive, neither one knew that his brother was in that camp, and yet they landed in our hospital, their feet pointing to each other.”

**MF:**Between 1940 and 1943, Italian forces and the infamous General Rommel and his German Expeditionary force ran amok in North Africa.

Just a head’s up -- this next story contains graphic descriptions of wounded soldiers.

**Betty Dimcock:**“You see, Rommel, German general, was going through North Africa, very fast, so they couldn’t establish hospitals in North Africa. That’s why there was a great call for hospitals to be established in South Africa, because that was the first commonwealth country, or the nearest commonwealth country, to the fighting in Africa.”

**MF:**New Brunswick native Betty Dimock was 19 years old when she joined the South African Medical Service as a nurse.

**BD:** “The agreement was, we were on loan from the Canadian army, to South Africa, accepting South African pay and discipline. The pay was very poor, about one third of Canadian pay, the agreement was that we stay for one year.”

**MF:**Wounded Allied soldiers streamed in from the North. As Betty recalled, they would wrap badly injured soldiers in plaster and ship them south.

**BD:**“Some of them never made the trip of course. We had no antibiotics; it was before the days of antibiotics. Maggots did the work instead. And we had very few dressings. We had to wash out the dirty old, soiled, infected dressings and hang them on the line in the sun and used them the next night. Boys fanned flies off the wounds in the daytime, to try to prevent the maggots.

“One unforgettable case, a young English lad from the North African campaign with numerous injuries, in complete body cast, with maggots crawling out from under the cast in various locations. Removal of the cast exposed an unexpected severe shoulder injury. The area was filled with [a] foul-smelling purulent substance, crawling with maggots. Apparently, he had had no care since leaving Egypt.

“This patient begged me to get someone other myself to perform the procedure. Only because he was aware of what I would find, and he knew that I was not aware of it. I needed a soup ladle to remove the pus and maggots before I’d lost many meals. I had…it was bad. And that, for a young nurse, was a little bit rough.”

**MF:**After a year in South Africa, Betty opted out of a second contract.

**BD:**“I wanted to get into the Canadian army, so I thought, this is time for me to go home. It was very hard to leave these boys because they were really wonderful boys and accepting the circumstances well.”

**MF:**In the Spring of 1944, Betty was stationed in England.

**BD:** “When we first went to England we’d been associated with antibiotics, which was penicillin. And that was given every four hours, at least. Sometimes more frequently. And a big amount, it wasn’t too well purified and of course, keeping needles going, keeping them sharp and everything, we had to do that. And so, some of the needles were not too sharp when we had to shoot them into the boys. They just screamed; it was terrible. We didn’t like doing it, we had to do it. And they’d hide. That was a hard, hard treatment really for them, getting these shots of penicillin. And it was hard for us to do but it’s the first experience we had with the results of antibiotics.”

**MF:**Betty stayed with her unit, No. 23, until shortly before V.E. Day, when she joined the reinforcements for No. 1 Canadian General Hospital in Nijmegen, Holland. At the end of the war, she returned to Canada.

**BD:** “When I got back, I think the rations were still on somewhat, and it was a different life. Everybody had changed, civilians as well as military people. Because I mean, it was a war that took the women back to work.”

**Leonard Wells:**“They were on small ships, maybe 30 people, or 20, some of them were junks, some of them were powered.”

**MF:**Leonard “Scotty” Wells served aboard HMCS Cayuga during the Korean War, assisting the Republic of Korea’s Navy.

**LW:** “They occupied a lot of the islands behind enemy lines, and they still retain those islands. So, our job was to help these people. And we would go in and if we had extra provisions, we’d send them ashore because they’d send us a message that they we're running out of provisions or they had no rice left or something. So, we’d give them what we could.”

**MF:**While serving in Korea, there was a doctor that made an impression on Leonard and his shipmates: Doctor Cyr.

**LW:** “He was an officer, he was a short, kind of heavy-set guy. Not many officers would come into the mess deck of lower ratings like us, but he would often come down into the communications mess or the seamen’s mess and talk to you. He was a real, nice guy. And like whereas the other officers generally were British, you know, not to associate too much with the lower deck people. But he was not that way.”

**MF:**Not only was Cyr chummy for an officer, but he was a darn good physician, as Leonard recalled.

**LW:** “We were on a very big raid one day, and we were giving gunfire support – and I don’t think there was another ship there, except the ROK Navy. And there [were] a few guys shot up and there were three or four of them brought back to our ship, which is normal. They were badly wounded, and I remember as if it was yesterday. I was sent back out from the bridge for something, and there [were] three or four stretchers laid out off the captain’s cabin. And Dr. Cyr came out; he’d just finished operating on one of these fellows. And you could - he was just dripping in sweat. You could see, I mean obviously the pressure the guy was under was unbelievable. But he was just dripping with sweat, and according to all records he actually saved their lives. He had – he took a bullet near one guy’s heart out. He did pull a Captain’s tooth one night, who had a wisdom tooth that was really bothering him something awful. This was before this particular action, but the Captain said ‘I gotta have this tooth out.’ Cyr went and read a book on dentistry. Next morning, he pulled the Captain’s tooth and he said, ‘That was the best job I ever had done.’”

**MF:**And then one day…

**LW:**“My friend was a decoder, he was a communications specialist, he decoded the message that Cyr was likely an impostor. The message was taken back to the captain, and the captain said, ‘I don’t believe it, it’s not possible.’ So, I guess he called Cyr in, and Cyr admitted it. So – that he was an impostor, that he wasn’t a doctor. So, the next time we seen him, it was a couple of days later. We were - I think it was the [HMS] Ceylon, it was a British cruiser, we pulled alongside the Ceylon, and we sent him over on a stretcher. Because he’d taken drugs, and then he was sent back to Tokyo, I think, and flown back to Canada. And discharged.”

**MF:**After his discharge, Cyr’s “impostor tricks” continued, first as a warden in a penitentiary and then as a minister at the Good Samaritan Hospital in Anaheim, California. Cyr was still barred from Canada when HMCS Cayuga was planning its reunion in 1979.

**LW:** “One of our mess mates on the Cayuga was on the Vancouver Police Department so he arranged for Cyr to come to Canada, because he was really forbidden from coming to Canada. So, he did come up for the reunion, so he was just the same as ever, we all shook hands.”

**MF:** “Record of Service” is a production of [The Memory Project Speakers Bureau](https://www.thememoryproject.com/) and archive, connecting veterans and Canadian Forces members with school and community groups from coast to coast. The Memory Project has been made possible in part by the Government of Canada. We are a program of Historica Canada, a non-profit offering programs that you can use to explore, learn, and reflect on Canadian history, and what it means to be Canadian.

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Next time on Record of Service:

**Frank Tomkins:**“He was a hardworking man, you couldn’t find a better man to work, but come pay day, you know, we’d go on a toot, ‘til it was time to go back to work, and he’d drink to get drunk and then he’d cry, sit there and cry, ‘I should have been killed, I should have been killed.’”

