CANADIAN WAR MUSEUM

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

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INTERVIEWEE: CLAIR E. ADAMS

INTERVIEWER: D.W. EDGECOMBE

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Clair E. Adams

Interviewed 18 December 2000

By D.W. Edgecombe

INTERVIEWER: Canadian War Museum Oral History Program interview with Col E. Adams recorded on December 18, 2000 at Ottawa, Ontario. Recorded by David W. Edgecombe. Tape one, side one.

ADAMS: My name is Clair Edward Adams. I was born in a little place in Eastern Quebec called Sawyerville, which was a farm community. My father had a number of jobs to raise enough to keep us alive. He looked after the farm. It was a mixed farm. He also worked as a guide for the sports who fished on the Restigouche River for Atlantic salmon, mostly Americans. And he also worked at night as a guardian on the river. I worked in the lumber woods, which was on our farm, and in 1939, when my brother joined the Armed Services, I couldn't wait long enough to get into the Army. I was only sixteen at the time, so I cut some pulpwood on the family farm and got enough money to take me to Montreal where I joined the Armed Services. I thought I was going to get into the artillery, but after taking a driver's test, and I had never driven before, on Craig Street in Montreal, I was ordered to stop in a hurry by the Sergeant who was conducting the test. And I was advised a few days later that I had qualified as a driver and was assigned to the Army Service Corps to be attached to the 11th Field Ambulance from Guelph.

INTERVIEWER: Could I just ask a couple of questions before we go from there, Clair? Where was your father and mother born? Were they Canadian born?

ADAMS: Yes they were with ancestors from Scotland. My mother was born in the village of Port Daniel West and that was far east on the Gaspe coast. And my father was born in Sawyerville on the farm where I was born.

INTERVIEWER: And how far did you go in school before you signed up?

ADAMS: We had a local school in Sawyerville, which was a country school, which had a maximum grade of grade seven. And I took a course in Matepedia, which was five miles away – the village of Matepedia. And graduated there in Grade 9. And, of course, after I got out of the Service, I took University courses in London, Ontario at Western University.

INTERVIEWER: They can't have been terribly observant or rigid, I suppose, in early '39, or late '39, in the enrollments or they would have picked up a 16 year old. How did you manage to smoke that one by?

ADAMS: Well, I had gone to Montreal and went to the Craig Street Armoury and they never asked me about my education.

INTERVIEWER: How about your age?

ADAMS: Well, I told them I was 18.

INTERVIEWER: And what was this-- in the fall of '39?

ADAMS: No, that was in the winter of '40.

INTERVIEWER: The winter of '40.

ADAMS: Yep, I'm going to come to that in a moment.

INTERVIEWER: Okay. Let's talk a little bit about your training in the Service Corps while attached at 11 Field Amb.

ADAMS: We met up with the Field Ambulance in Camp Borden in June of 1940. And took my first driver's test and training in Camp Borden which was not too much in the way buildings. Camp Borden was pretty empty in those days. So, I had my first leave from Camp Borden where I hitchhiked back down to Sawyerville and a strange happened there. I was picked up on the road going to visit some friends near a place called Broadlands by two American lawyers from Idaho. They wanted to talk to me. And I was in uniform then, of course. And a strange thing happened. When I was hitchhiking out of Montreal to get back to Camp Borden, the same two lawyers picked me up just outside of Montreal and they said, "Where you going?" And I told them. They said, "Well, we want to go to Ottawa. So, we'll take you to Ottawa and then we'll drive you to Camp Borden." Which they did. It was my first visit to Ottawa. I communicated with them for several years after the war until the Americans got in the war and then I lost track of them. Is this being recorded?

We left Camp Borden in August, late August of 1940, to go overseas. Landed in early September of the next month and went by train to Aldershot where we stayed until we went to Europe. Actually, we went to a place just outside of – I forget now. We went from Camp Borden, well overseas, and from Aldershot to Brighton and then from Brighton to Folkestone where we were sent there to divert the Germans into thinking we were going to go across there. And in July 5 in 1944, we drove to the docks in London to take a ship to Normandy. Prior to that we were very busy waterproofing our vehicles and getting ready for our equipment for the Normandy landing.

And we moved by night off the Normandy shores to just outside the Carpiquet airport which was still occupied by the Germans at that time. And I had to send some of my troops, of course, with the advance units of the Field Ambulance. There were three companies in the Field Ambulance. And I had soldiers, drivers, attached to each one. In

those days, we had jeep ambulances, which would accommodate three stretchers and a driver and a co-driver or an orderly. And the first night we deployed just outside of the village of Verson in Normandy, and unfortunately I had my friend driver – a good friend of mine – he didn't dig in like they were supposed to and get out of sight so the Germans dropped some grenades on the unit and he was one of those that were killed.

I had a responsibility, of course, because the Field Ambulance were subject to the Geneva Convention. They weren't allowed, the medical officers weren't allowed, to carry weapons so we had not only driver responsibility, but also protection. So I had this young man from Montreal who was doing guard duty and it was his turn to go and he pleaded with me not to send him. And I told him, "You've got to take your duty and go up there as a driver." So, unfortunately, within two hours he was hit by mortar fire. And that was because he drove too fast and raised so much dust that the Germans could see him when he was going through a hedgerow and they dropped their grenades on a hedgerow and he was killed. So I felt pretty bad about that. But we had to carry on.

We went in a little further closer to the river. It was so dusty in those days. But I had a young lad, very good friend of mine. We went out all the time. Chap by the name of McDonald came to me and said, "It was his turn to be relieved." And he didn't want to be relieved. He pleaded with me to leave him on duty. And I said okay. So, he went up with the jeep and with the sergeant in the Medical Corps and was run over by a tank and killed. Now, the reason why he didn't want to be relieved was he had just got word from home that his twin brother had been killed in Italy.

So, anyway, after a few more weeks we were up close to the Falaise Gap and the Americans were coming up on one side and we were coming in on the other. And the Germans started to retreat and were heading north. And we moved north. We were not too far from Foret de la Londe when I was awakened one morning by my CO, Captain Martin. And he said, "Sergeant, we had a vehicle hit by mortar fire last night." And one of my duties, of course, was to determine whether vehicles were recoverable or not. So, he said, "I want you to go out and look at it." So, I got on my bike and headed north toward Foret de la Londe and as I was going through our lines-- it was, as I recall, the Royal Hamilton Light Infantry who were part of 4 Brigade--they were out waving their hands, signaling me to stop. But I didn't pay any attention to them. I kept on going in the Foret de la Londe.

Now the Foret de la Londe had a nice little road through it. It was very narrow. And as I went on, oh a mile or so of the Foret de la Londe, there was a French couple that came out and they were waving their arms for me to stop. And I thought, there was something wrong here. So I turned back. And as I came back about ½ mile, I met the guy on the motorbike from the Toronto Scottish. And he said he thought his company was up that road. And I thought, "Well maybe I didn't go far enough." So I turned around with him and --we didn't exchange names-- and rode on. We crossed a railroad crossing and up a sharp incline and a sharp turn to the right. And as we got to the top of that incline, the lad from Toronto Scottish was just a few feet ahead of me. Maybe eight or ten feet. And a German sentry stepped out the side of the road and said, "Halte." So, needless to say I

was shook up and I know he was. He stopped to put his hands up, but I didn't. I was in the middle of the road and I just grabbed the handlebars of my bike and I lifted it around so it was facing this German sentry and let the clutch out and went at him and turned at the same time. He fired and missed. But his comrades across the road didn't miss. One of them got me under the arm. Just a scratch actually. And the other one got me in my ankle. It was just like a hammer hitting my ankle.

As I rode on and kept on going and went back through the forest and came into our lines, there was a ½ dozen soldiers that stepped out with their bayonets to stop me – bayonets on their guns. So, I sat down on the sidewalk in this small village. There was a French farmer came along and he said, "Vieullez-vous un petit peux de calvados." And I said, "Oh, oui Monsieur." So, he had a bottle of calvados and he gave me a glass full of calvados and it's pretty powerful stuff. It's farm-made calvados. I really didn't need that morphine that the doctor gave me when he came to examine me.

So, anyway from there I was evacuated by ambulance to the Canadian based hospital just south of Normandy and was evacuated to England where I spent about a month in hospital and about two months getting back on my feet. And then I was sent to as a reinforcement to Holland and was subsequently assigned to the 66 General Transport Company RCASC. And I served with them until the war ended, although I had some experiences there with some encounters with Germans. They were being imprisoned at the time. So, I did get a chance to go to Amsterdam the day the war ended. But then it was back to England and back home to Montreal and then to Sawyerville. So, I was retired from the Army in, I guess it was October 1945 and went back to work on the farm for a short period.

INTERVIEWER: Let me ask a few questions to perhaps provide a bit more information. You spent the best part of the three and half years in England. What was it like in England in terms of both training and living for a young soldier at that time?

ADAMS: Actually, I found it very nice. The people were generous to us. And the training I enjoyed because I learned to drive army vehicles and eventually was promoted to corporal and then to sergeant before we went to Normandy. So I found it very pleasant, I think.

INTERVIEWER: What about leaves and so on. You got out and met the local girls?

ADAMS: Oh yes. My first leave I went to Edinburgh. And I always went to Scotland when I got my leave. We got leave about every six months and, of course, travel vouchers and I enjoyed that. It was a great experience.

INTERVIEWER: Was there a sense of restlessness waiting, and waiting and waiting for something to happen?

ADAMS: There were from some points of view. But from my point of view I was employed almost 18 hours a day trying to keep the thing going. Getting their vehicles

repaired and getting them in shape for our trip to Normandy. But, of course, initially we had the group of vehicles that were all replaced before we went to Normandy. So, it was a very busy time for me as a sergeant. And [in] our organization, at the time as a sergeant I had responsibility for the Service Corps company which was not much larger than a platoon. Because one of the Warrant Officers who was transferred in a from another Service Corpscompany, didn't drive and had never driven and I had to teach him how to drive. But he never did learn. He was eventually charged because he illegally took a vehicle out. And I was the only one allowed to sign a worksheet in those days when we went to Europe. No, I was in Europe. But, in England I enjoyed my stay there pretty much.

INTERVIEWER: Let me back up a little. How many vehicles were involved in direct support to a Field Ambulance? Was it a full company?

ADAMS: Thirty-eight.

INTERVIEWER: Was that the Field Ambulance total mobile support in key ambulances?

ADAMS: There were six heavy ambulances and 11 jeeps.

INTERVIEWER: Once you got into Normandy then, your transport duties were involved essentially in casualty evacuation from the Field Ambulance back or from the units…?

ADAMS: From the units. We had what they called a CCP, Casualty Collecting Post, right in with the infantry. One of the problems that I had with the Field Ambulance Medical Officers, they wanted to take all of the heavy ambulances up into close to the front and I ordered my corporal I had attached to them to send them back. And the Major in charge of the Company was going to charge me with interfering. So they eventually did leave them with the motorcycles so they when they needed to call them up closer to put the casualties into them, they were safe. Because I recall, they had six of these ambulances attached to the Company and they all had flat tires from German mortar fire. And I had to go and scrounge tires because the ambulances had different tires from the other vehicles. I had to go and scrounge tires and go up with my people and repair the vehicles, remove them – the tires – the old tires and put the new tires on. That was quite an experience that.

INTERVIEWER: Were those ambulances British or Canadian vehicles?

ADAMS: They were Canadian.

INTERVIEWER: When you came back from recuperation in England, you went to 66 General Transport Company. Was that a 1st Canadian Army unit or was it a Corps unit?

ADAMS: It was 21 Army Group.

INTERVIEWER: 21st Army Group?

ADAMS: Yep.

INTERVIEWER: This was a general trucking organization, basically?

ADAMS: Basically trucking, yeah.

INTERVIEWER: Basically moving any commodity that had come to hand?

ADAMS: Yes, that's right.

INTERVIEWER: You mentioned that there were some interesting experiences with German POWs when you were doing that. Could you describe that a little bit?

ADAMS: Well, yes. When war ended, we were in Njimegan. As a matter of fact, we weren't supposed to, but Sergeant Laing decided to head for Amsterdam and the Germans and all their weapons were along the side of the road between Njimegan and Amsterdam. And it was pretty scary, but we went to Amsterdam and back and met a couple of girls up there and we were heading up there for the next night then the sergeant, who was with me, hit a hole in the road and lost control and broke his arm. So, I had to return with him. So, I didn't get back to Amsterdam until many years after the war.

INTERVIEWER: Your data sheet indicates that you were mentioned in dispatches during the war. Could you describe the incident that led to that?

ADAMS: Well, that was a strange thing. I was home and out of the Army when my mother got a letter saying - I had been reported killed twice to my parents. And my mother got the letter signed by the Chief of the Armed Forces of the day, congratulating her on the award that was given to her late son which was the MID. And I was very proud to see that and the fact that by this time, of course, I had been home working in Montreal at the Longue-pointe Ordnance Depot and I was proud to get the MID. And also my parents were happy. I used to write them, after they had notices that I had been killed a couple times. It was strange that they couldn't get their records straight for one reason or another.

INTERVIEWER: What specific incident led to the mention in the dispatches?

ADAMS: I have no idea. Never came out.

INTERVIEWER: Where were you when the German cease-fire was announced – the German surrender I should say - was announced and what was your reaction to that?

ADAMS: I was in Njimegan at the time with the 66 General Transport Company. I was Platoon Sergeant. And it was a very happy hour when we received notice that the war

was ended. As a matter fact, four or five people from my platoon and myself got into a jeep and headed for Amsterdam, which was a great place to celebrate. And we were there overnight and back the next day and the next day I went to – not to Amsterdam, I'm sorry – it was a place in Belgium just outside the border of Holland. So, I want to retract that Amsterdam. Amsterdam I went to the next day. It was about two months later when I was sent back to England from my assignment, a little after the war ended.

INTERVIEWER: How long did you stay in England after, or was that just in transit?

ADAMS: I was in England about a month.

INTERVIEWER: Was that as still part of the unit or as part of demobilization?

ADAMS: Demob, yep.

INTERVIEWER: And where were you sent in Canada for demob? Back to Montreal?

ADAMS: Back to Montreal, yes.

INTERVIEWER: What was that process all about?

ADAMS: Well, I guess that's where I had signed up. And as a matter of fact, I was let off the train for a month's holiday in Camilton which was the closest train center to – Camilton, NB, that is – to where my home was. And it was a great thrill to get home. As a matter of fact, there was a taxi driver from a place across the point, which was just across the river from Camilton. We didn't have any bridge at that time. It was a ferry. So, as we got off the ferry and crossed the point, this guy, he didn't know me and I didn't know him. And he said, "We'll take you home," and he said, "it won't cost you a cent." And that was nine miles away. And he did. It was great. So getting home and getting acquainted with all the people again was a wonderful experience. And after the month, of course, I had to go to Montreal and get my discharge.

INTERVIEWER: How long did that take?

ADAMS: Oh, I guess, it was about two weeks after I left for Montreal before they called me in to get a discharge.

INTERVIEWER: So, basically, your signing out, checking you out medically and so on and so forth?

ADAMS: That's right. And when I got discharged, they offered me a huge pension. I had a choice. The huge pension was $3.75 a month for a war wound. And I was pretty well crippled until later on. And this I still suffer from. And they said, "Well, we'll give you $100.00 if you'll sign off here." And I said, "No, I'll take the pension." And just as well I did. Now, it's worth $2,000.00 a month. No, no, $2,000.00 a year. I got shot right here with a bullet. You know, how I said when I was on a bike.

INTERVIEWER: Yes.

ADAMS: I got shot. Went through right here. Chipped the bone and came out on top of my ankle.

INTERVIEWER: Just across the heel. So, okay, how does a young school boy who literally comes out of school and out of the farm, goes off to the continent for four years almost of war, how does he adjust to peacetime Canada and really starting his life all over again? And what sort of impact did the war have on that?

ADAMS: Well, I had my sights set on being a carpenter. Would you believe it! So, they would pay me .40 cents an hour towards my living and I was assigned to the Corinthian Construction. They are the people who built the Sun Life building in Montreal. They paid me .40 cents an hour and I worked like a dog until I got an opportunity to get a job. The carpenter who was assigned to me was a real SOB as far as I'm concerned. He said I was a fool to join the Army. I never learned a thing when I was an apprentice carpenter with him. I was given the job of drilling holes with a hand drill and a hammer and all sorts of dirty jobs. I never even learned anything. Is that still on?

And so somebody told me about a job that had become available at Longue-pointe Ordnance Depot. So, I went there initially and worked in a warehouse there and then I got assigned to an office into the cataloguing business. Because I was transport and knew a bit about mechanical things, I was sent to London, Ontario – 27th COD. And then from there, back to Ottawa. By this time, we were learning about the American Codification System which eventually became the NATO Codification System. So, I was involved in that for a couple of years and then was transferred to Transport Canada in charge of their Cataloguing, their Standards - the CGSB was there, the Canadian Government Specifications Board - and Quality Assurance. So, through that, I had an opportunity to, because I was in the codification business, to go to Europe. Initially, I went when the NATO HQ was in Paris and then to Belgium. So as a civilian, I was assigned to the Armaments Council, 135, as I recall and work with the NATO codification people along with, of course, my own job back home. So, I had many trips to NATO HQ, initially in Paris and then to Brussels.

INTERVIEWER: Did your job at Longue-pointe initially come as a result of Veteran's hiring preference or any kind?

ADAMS: Yes, there was a Veteran's hiring practice and that was the reason why I got the job because I was a Veteran. And it was an hourly paid job until I was moved to an office and then it became a monthly job – paid monthly. I think that the total sum was $90.00 a month. That was big for those days. And that was what I was making when I landed in London, Ontario - $90.00 a month. And I was talked into joining the Militia. So, because I had been a sergeant, I went into the Militia at Walter Barracks in London as a Warrant Officer. And then I applied for a commission. And because I was a Warrant Officer, I was commissioned and immediately promoted to Lieutenant and assigned to

command 4 Infantry Brigade Ordnance Field Park. That was in Wolsley Barracks. And I was promoted to Captain, then to Major and I arrived Ottawa in ’59 at the rank of Major and then several appointments at the rank of Major. When the restructuring of the Militia was made in 1963, I was assigned to command the 28 Service Battalion and was there until ’67 when I retired from the Militia and have been honoured by giving me the rank of Honoury Colonel which I served for six years, I believe. And in my civil life, I had done very well. Since I was in Transport Canada. And when I retired from there I was appointed President of Crown Assets Disposal Corporation where I served for four years. And I guess that’s pretty well my story.

INTERVIEWER: Well that’s quite a remarkable career. Thanks very much for the interview. Is there anything that you would like to add before we call it quits, as it were?

ADAMS: I don’t think it would appropriate to say some of my disappointments with certain officers. No, I guess I wouldn’t.

INTERVIEWER: Okay, thanks very much Clair. Interview with Colonel Clair E. Adams on 18 December 2000. Interview ends.

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