The Alexander Stobo Ambulance

The Story of the Ambulance

Donated by the

Class of 1903, Princeton University

in Memory of

Alexander Stobo

1st Lieut., F.A., 1st Division, A.E.F.

By

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THIS is the story of an ambulance given to the American Field Service by the Class of 1903, Princeton University, in memory of their classmate, Alexander Stobo.

I first saw the ambulance in the Syrian desert on Thanksgiving Day, 1943. I had left our Company camp 30 miles east of Cairo early in the afternoon by motorcycle to meet a convoy of "C" Platoon 485 Company American Field Service ambulances, which were moving south from Syria, where their personnel had been in training. I crossed the Suez Canal north of Ismailia, and after a long, dark drive found the Platoon leaguered for the night, and engaged in cooking a Thanksgiving dinner of bully beef stew which, though a far cry from the turkey at home, was later duly appreciated. The cook handed me a plate full of stew, and I took it over to a nearby ambulance around which a lot of the men were grouped. As I sat down beside it, the name Alexander Stobo inscribed on the plaque of the ambulance caught my eye, and, as I read the plaque, a warm feeling of thanksgiving swept over me as it was to do time and again during the next two years of intimate contact with that plaque and that ambulance, and I felt closer to home for finding in the desert, in that strange place, an ambulance given by men I knew and in memory of one whom I remembered so affectionately from my early youth.

My travels and my career in the American Field Service from that point on were closely tied to that ambulance. We crossed to Italy on the same LCT (Landing Craft, Tanks). During the late weeks of 1943, and the following January and February, I was posted to another Platoon, but when the time came for "C" Platoon to take over front-line work with the New Zealand and Indian Divisions in what was later called "Purple Heart Valley," in front of the German stronghold of Cassino, I was sent to "C" Platoon as Platoon Sergeant. On February 28, the Platoon moved under cover of darkness to take up its new position. Alec's ambulance

was being driven at that time by Stockton Hopkins of Philadelphia, a close friend of mine and one of the outstanding men in the Field Service. "Stocky" used to take particular pride in that ambulance. And, as happens in war, this ambulance came to be a very personal thing to him, as it did to its later drivers. "Stocky" called that ambulance "Stobo," and, if anyone else was talking about what a good ambulance he had, "Stocky" would always say that no matter how good it was, it couldn't stand up to "Stobo." This pride that men have in war in whatever they are depending on, whether it be a rifle, a howitzer, a jeep or an ambulance, is a feeling that makes them do what they have to do especially well, and all the men that were connected with Alec's ambulance had that pride to a very great extent.

So in that early spring of 1944, we found ourselves in the valley in front of Cassino, in mud so deep that most of us were wearing high rubber hip-boots. The men that were actually doing the fighting under those appalling conditions were miserable, and none of us were very comfortable. The casualties were high. On March 15, when the second unsuccessful attack on Cassino was initiated by 2000 bombers which came over, starting at eleven in the morning, we began working day and night in order to bring the wounded back. There were two ways of getting the wounded out of Cassino. One way was straight forward—out the main road of the city, past the rubble left by the bombers and on down that road a few miles, where at least the wounded were out of mortar range and where the doctors were able to do what operating was necessary to keep the most serious cases alive. But the Germans would have none of our using that road. They trained their guns on it night and day, and finally, after we had lost several ambulances on this road, the authorities decided that the gains were not worth the losses, and we had to go back to an old route that we knew and hated. It was safer, as a rule, but it was long and very bumpy, and for the wounded, for whom the slightest jar is torture, this route of evacuation was pretty tough going. It was a little country lane just wide enough for an ambulance to creep through, and in those long March nights when a fog would settle over the valley, it sometimes took an ambulance over three and a half hours to make that eleven-mile evacuation.

It was on that road that Alec's ambulance was hit for the first time. A man named Pat Harrington was the driver. Hopkins had been driving for three days straight and was so tired out that I had told Harrington to relieve him. There were two wounded men in the ambulance as it started back on the long route—the man on the top stretcher had been wounded in the foot by a mine, and the one on the lower stretcher was in a serious condition. He had been hit by the blast of a mortar shell in the stomach and had lost a lot of blood. An orderly had been sent along in the ambulance to give him blood plasma if needed. Harrington had, therefore, to drive most carefully. As he was nearing the end of his trip, the orderly had decided that it was necessary to administer plasma; he had hung the tube from the top of the ambulance and the blood was slowly giving the badly wounded man new strength. Suddenly shells began to burst around them, and Harrington found himself in the middle of a barrage which apparently was trying to hit some tanks in the nearby fields. The only thing to do was to keep going, which he did. A shell hit to the right in front of the ambulance, tearing a great chunk out of the front framework between the side window and the windshield. Harrington was temporarily stunned but not hit. The orderly in back thought that he was hit, but found to his relief that the blood came from the plasma jar and tube, both of which had been broken by shrapnel. The wounded men were both all right. Luckily, they were not far from the Aid Station for which they were heading, and all arrived there safely. This was the first but a long way from the last time that Alec's ambulance was hit. After that Harrington always felt that the ambulance was good luck for him. We later traced the course of the shrapnel that had hit the front windshield, and indeed it was a miracle that none of them were hurt.

From March through May 12, "C" Platoon was on that line in front of Cassino. Most of us had looked at the stronghold ahead of us for so long that we had begun to doubt whether we really ever would get past it. Although the line stayed in the same place, the numbers of wounded never slackened, and the ambulances in the Platoon continued to be very busy. On May 12, the final attack on Cassino started, and six days after that we were across the Rapido, looking back at that Monastery that for so long we had watched in enemy hands. During those six days of terrible fighting, I had been driving Alec's ambulance, alternating with Harrington

and Tom Snyder. The ambulance literally never stopped going and never once did it fail us. On May 18, our Platoon Officer and my very close friend, Bob Bryan, was killed, and I left the ambulance to Harrington and took command of the Platoon.

During that summer, as we moved slowly but surely northward, morale was high, stimulated by the fact that we were again beating the Germans and by the confident belief that the war would soon be over. "C" Platoon stayed in the line until July, when we were relieved for a much needed rest. We were sent back to Orvieto, a beautiful hilltop city north of Rome, and there spent a wonderful month, with the ambulances being used mostly to carry swimming parties to nearby Lake Bolsena and to procure wine from the local winery. The weather was warm, the swimming was fine, and all of us enjoyed that brief respite. We were doing some work during this time, evacuating casualties from General Hospitals in Orvieto to the airfield, where they were flown south to Rome and Naples. This work, however, usually was over by noon-time, and we had the rest of the day to do as we pleased.

By the end of August, we were back with front-line troops just north of Florence on the approaches to the Apennines. Alec's ambulance during the next two months was attached to the 6th Armoured Division (British), and then to the South African Division. Harrington was still driving it during these months, when the rain seemed to come down harder than ever. The ambulance was hit several times by shrapnel, but never badly enough to keep it long out of action. There were not a great many wounded to be carried during this period, and often, when I came around to see the men at Harrington's post, I'd find them sitting in the back of the amublance with a couple of South Africans playing bridge or poker. The weather grew colder as we advanced into the mountains, and the evacuations again became difficult. About this time, Charlie Pratt took over the ambulance from Harrington, whose record had been superb, and who time and again had been commended by officers commanding units to which he had been attached.

Pratt and Alec's ambulance continued the standard of fine work which the two previous drivers had set, and the end of November found them still with the South Africans, who were fighting among some of the highest peaks in the Apennine range. Pratt was attached to the Coldstream Guards of the South African Division, when, on November 26, the ambulance was pierced by a dozen or more shell fragments during a German barrage of the area, and had to be returned to the workshops in Florence for minor repairs. Fortunately, at the time the ambulance was hit, Pratt was in the cellar of an Italian farmhouse where his Regimental Aid Post was functioning.

Early in December, "C" Platoon was shifted for the first time to the East Coast of Italy. We were attached to the Polish Corps of the Eighth Army. The hoped-for break-through into the Po Valley during the fall had failed, so that once again the forward movement of the Fifth and Eighth Armies had been halted. It was a bitterly cold winter high up in those mountains. The snow at one time was four feet deep, and no ambulance could move without chains on all four wheels. Early in March, when British Divisions relieved the Poles, Pratt began his long association with the Regimental aid post of the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders, 78th Inf. Division.

In April, that Regiment led the Eighth Army offensive which, together with the American Fifth Army, succeeded in crushing completely the German Armies in Italy in about two weeks. The Argylls were among the first to cross the Senio River and enter the City of Lugo. Just before reaching Conselice, they were caught in a sudden barrage of shell-fire. Charlie was standing outside his aid post, too far from the door to duck inside in time. A shell burst a few yards away, and fragments hit him in the arm and back. The ambulance was hit in several places. Pratt's wounds were not very severe; he was evacuated to the rear, where in a couple of weeks he was perfectly well again. The ambulance was repaired and continued with the Argylls under the care of veteran driver Wilbur Bernardi, of Winnetka, Illinois. This was the last heavy action of the war in which the ambulance was involved. However, until the Company was withdrawn from the Eighth Army, it continued with the troops that began the occupation of Austria.

I last saw the ambulance in Udine, Northern Italy, July 26, 1945. Our company had been ordered to prepare to move from Italy to the India-Burma Theatre of operations. Lt.-General McCreary, commanding officer of the Eighth Army, was reviewing the company, and we were saying farewell to the Eighth Army

after our long and close association with them from Africa to Austria. We left Alec's ambulance that day, and subsequently it was turned over to the proper authorities, and I like to believe it is continuing to fulfill its mission in peace as it had done so gloriously in war.

Alec's ambulance, therefore, which began its career with the American Field Service in the Becca Valley in Syria toward the end of the summer of 1943, did its last job in the mountains of Austria in the early summer of 1945. It had gone a long way, actually a total of about 25,000 miles. It had carried wounded men of many nations—Americans, British, Canadians, French, New Zealanders, South Africans, Polish and others. It had been through a long, hard campaign in Italy, in which victory had been achieved finally and completely and at a high cost in human lives.

It was always a great source of pride to me to have this ambulance of Alec's in the Platoon which I commanded, and in the Company which I later commanded. Whenever a new man took over the ambulance, I always tried to tell him what I knew about Alec and tried to convey to him a little, at least, of what I felt about him and the men who had given this ambulance in his memory. I knew that, if these men who were about to drive the ambulance appreciated the things that Alec and men of his kind stood for, they would not fail to give the best they had to the job at hand; and indeed it worked out that way, for the men who drove Alec's ambulance in this war reflected the spirit of Alec Stobo and gave everything they had to the cause that saved the world from tyranny.