



Newsletter, April 2001

Charles F.A. Downie, LDS RFPStGlasg (1950), 1926–2000

Henry W. Noble*

Bob McKechnie and I spent an enjoyable afternoon with Charlie Downie in November, 1999, just a couple of months before his death on 27th January, 2000. He corrected some of the detail of this interview in a letter dated 14th December.

Charlie Downie's decision to commit himself to dentistry was made on the golf course in company with partners such as Tom Sked, H.G.F. Rankine, George and William Richardson and Barclay Read. He entered Anderson College for preclinical education in 1945 and emerged from Glasgow Dental Hospital in 1950.

Upon learning that the chairman of the Local Dental Committee in Wishaw was looking for an assistant, he applied and was appointed at a salary of £1000 per annum plus 10% of gross income as a bonus. After one year he moved to Whifflet in Coatbridge and set up his own practice. An attractive red sandstone building surrounded by council housing caught his eye and with one loan of £350 for decoration he obtained dental equipment from Carruthers Dental Depot valued at just over £1000. This was secured by a loan from his mother and a bank loan for the rest. His first cheque from the Dental Estimates Board was a princely £64.

When a neighbouring practitioner, J.Y. Graham, retired this left a very good dental technician looking for a job. Although he had been earning £15 per week, he agreed to start with Charlie at £10 per week. Within three weeks of opening the practice Charlie was able to engage his first dental nurse and within six months he acquired the first of a series of assistant dental surgeons who, with only one serious disappointment, went on to establish themselves as notable members of the profession in practice, academic life and other fields of expertise. A doctor who specialized in dental anaesthetics came to the practice every Thursday and between 30 and 40 patients would be treated in an evening session from 7.30 p.m. to 10 p.m.

The practice flourished and when rooms next door became available they were acquired for £800 and provided another surgery and more comfortable accommodation for patients. At this time Charlie had two assistants and four or five part-time dental surgeons who were all paid on a percentage of their earnings.

In 1959, after he had been qualified for nine years, there was a national investigation into the manner in which dental fees were being cut. A meeting of the Local Dental Committee was held in Airbles Road Clinic. Charlie was appointed to represent Lanarkshire at a national conference of local dental committees. There was a feeling that the General Dental Services Committee was

adopting a rather wishy-washy line in contrast to a vigorous motion by the representative from Lanarkshire which caught the eye of higher officials.

In 1960 Charlie succeeded in being elected as a West of Scotland representative to the Representative Board of the British Dental Association, a post which he held for 30 years. In 1970 he was elected to the Council of the British Dental Association and he continued in this post for the next 20 years. In 1972 when Marshall Banks retired from the General Dental Council, Charlie stood for election and was successful. He served for 14 years on the Professional Conduct Committee and while he found this duty much more interesting than work for the British Dental Association it was at times a harrowing experience. In 1980 he was appointed chairman of the West of Scotland branch of the British Dental Association and in 1987 national president of the B.D.A.

Charlie wound up his political career in 1992 when he resigned from all the committees with which he was still connected. His efforts in support of his dental colleagues were recognised in 1987 by the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Glasgow when he was awarded a Fellowship in Dental Surgery; in 1988 when the University of Glasgow made him an honorary senior clinical lecturer; and in 1993 when he was granted an honorary diploma in general dental practice by the Royal College of Surgeons of England – the first Scot ever to receive this honour.

Apart from politics the other great interest which Charlie pursued in parallel with dental practice was the study of hypnosis. In 1964 there was an inaugural course on hypnosis attended by four dental surgeons and four medical clinicians. The dental surgeons were Duncan Cameron, Frank McGonigal, James Gall and Charlie. The medical clinicians were Professor McGirr, Dr Strewan Robertson, Dr Keir Fisher and Dr Wexman from Harley Street. Two weeks later a group of 10 interested surgeons invited Dr Hartland to address them in the North British Hotel, Glasgow. The lecture was continuous from 2 p.m. till eight in the evening. Matters then became more organized and, following an introductory course in Edinburgh, there was an intermediate course in Rotherham and a final course in Cambridge. Following an examination candidates were granted a certificate of accreditation by the Society of Medical and Dental Hypnosis. George Fairfull Smith was appointed hypnotist to Glasgow Dental Hospital and School but after he became ill, Charlie was appointed to succeed him. Charlie was eventually appointed a Fellow of the Society of Medical and Dental Hypnosis. He continued until his death to act as consultant in hypnosis to Bellshill and Monklands Hospital.

Charlie's other interests in cricket, golf and bridge were latterly superseded by painting. The large family dining room which served Charlie and Helen and their four daughters and three sons became filled to the brim with the most colourful paintings of scenes near and far which captured his attention in the years of retirement.

**Early Adventures of an Orthodontist: W. Stevenson, LDS, RFPSGlasg 1950,
DDO RFPSGlasg 1961, FDS RCPSGlasg 1967**

Henry W. Noble

Bill Stevenson was born and grew up in Grangemouth. He left school and took a job as an apprentice dental technician in the practice of W. Burleigh in Falkirk. Not only did he receive an excellent training in this practice but, as was the custom with the brightest and best of the trainees, he was encouraged to enrol as a dental student in Glasgow. He enrolled just as Chamberlain returned from Munich with the result that when he was about to enter the Second Year, the 1939 war broke out. He enlisted in the Royal Air Force in Stirling and was promptly sent South.

After initial training he was selected for training as aircrew and was dispatched from Liverpool in a group of 300 aboard the "Gloucester Castle" on the long memorable six-and-a-half-week sea journey to Cape Town. Then to Rhodesia where the RAF had established an Empire Training Scheme for aircrew. With this training course behind him, he was given his first assignment of delivering aircraft and he made numerous journeys between Rhodesia, Johannesburg and the port of Durban. These were aircraft not long off the production line and such deliveries were not without incident such as the occasion when a serious oil leak drenched his uniform and caused a forced landing at Ladysmith. A consequence was that his pals on the course had all been drafted before he was finally routed back to Durban to board the "New Amsterdam" with 3000 other personnel en route to Egypt via the Suez Canal where he joined a pool of aircrew after a brief introduction to the delights of Cairo.

The next posting was to 450 Squadron of the Royal Australian Air Force, a flight of Hurricanes, which in October 1941 were given the job of collaborating with the French forces in Syria who had joined the Allies to ensure that this route to the oil fields of the Middle East was secure. Bill recalls travelling North along the Transjordan route to the Bekaa Valley in Syria and back to Egypt via the coastal route. He was posted to Khartoum where a chance non-combatant incident proved his undoing. He was offered a flight as passenger in a Blenheim bomber which suffered a double engine failure at night and at low altitude. The plane crash landed, fortunately throwing both engines clear of the wreckage, among which Bill lay with fractures of the skull, jaw, vertebrae and one leg. He was discovered by a man with a donkey and survived an 80 mile journey to the nearest outpost followed by a four hour journey to the British Military Hospital in Khartoum. Thirty hours elapsed between the accident and his arrival at the hospital. However they managed to do a wonderful job on him and by January 1942 he was convalescing in Cairo but still remembers the agony of having to walk from one side of a parade ground to the other. Following a medical examination at Heliopolis he was pronounced fit for flying but not on Operations.

Fighter aircraft were now being delivered from the UK and from USA to the port of Takoradi in Gold Coast (now Ghana) and Bill was assigned the duty of ferrying them across Africa to the Sudan and then North to Cairo. He completed most of those deliveries without incident except for the occasion when, at Kano,

he crash-landed following an attempt to leapfrog over a Dakota which suddenly crossed the landing strip in front of him. Following the delivery of a P36 Mohawk fighter from Khartoum to Port Elizabeth in South Africa he returned in style as a passenger aboard a Short Empire Flying Boat from Durban to Cairo.

By 1943 the war in North Africa was won and Bill was appointed test pilot to the RAF Servicing Commando whose job was to prepare advance airfields for the RAF in the rapidly developing invasion situations which followed. This took him first, forty miles into the Libyan desert to Azizia, Colonel Gaddafi's home town. Whilst on Malta, Bill taxied out to the far end of the runway at Luqa airstrip prior to taking off and received a salute from Admiral Cunningham of the Mediterranean Fleet and Air-Vice-Marshal Conningham, Chief of the Mediterranean Air Force. They had wandered off to have a secret discussion away from everybody. Then across to Sicily with trips to Sardinia and Bastia on Corsica. From Lecce in the heel of Italy he followed the advance up through Italy to the Naples-Foggia line. A septic finger which resulted in blood poisoning was acquired at Catania in Sicily, and, resisting all attempts to heal, proved a useful catalyst in obtaining a spot of home leave. He was flown home from Naples via Tunis and Casablanca to St Mawgan in Cornwall and thence to Grangemouth for three and a half weeks where his mother had a remedy which promptly cured the septic finger.

It was now March 1944 and with the invasion of Normandy looming, Bill reported to Fighter Command H.Q. in London. He was sent to Northumberland for a brief refresher course and was then posted to the 504 County of Nottingham Squadron of Mark 9 Spitfires, one task being to dive-bomb the doodle-bug sites in Northern France which were at that time terrifying London. During this period Bill acted as wingman to his Flight Commander, his Squadron Leader and his Wing Commander in succession. The job of the "wingman" was to look after the leader and ensure that he was not shot down. He then transferred to 245 Squadron and followed the invasion front from Normandy to Arnhem and the Rhine. The Meteor jet fighter went into production in July 1944 and in February 1945 Bill flew one of the first delivery of ten of these jet-engined fighters. His final task was the arrangement of supplies and accommodation for a future RAF base at Lubeck before he was demobbed in April 1946.

It must have been quite an anticlimax to return to the second year of the dental course at Anderson's College in October 1946 and to qualify LDS RFPSt Glasg in 1950. A recommendation from Carl Hebling, Visiting Surgeon, that he apply for a post in the Newport Pagnall branch of the Bletchley practice of J. Marshall proved a useful introduction to NHS dentistry. He then returned to practise in Denny and Grangemouth but was worried about the effects of long chairside hours upon an old back injury. He took a post as a School Dental Officer with Stirling County Council before successfully applying for a post of registrar in the Oral Surgery Department of Dundee Dental Hospital under Professor Hitchin.

He was developing an interest in orthodontics and went first to an orthodontic practice in Bristol under Trevor Johnston and Peter Blyth. This was followed by a period as an assistant orthodontist to Wiltshire County Council. He took a course in orthodontics under Professor Jackson in Leeds before successfully applying for a post as Orthodontic Registrar in Glasgow Dental Hospital in 1960

and being appointed Senior Hospital Dental Officer in Orthodontics in 1962 and Consultant in Orthodontics in 1964.

The Glasgow Orthodontic Department was very active at this time and Bill was given the task of setting up consultant clinics in Campbeltown, Lochgilphead, Islay and Oban. Later came consultant clinics for Lanarkshire in Strathclyde Hospital followed by Monklands and Stobhill Hospitals.

From 1966 to 1979 Bill was organiser of the D.D.O. Examination. He also arranged refresher courses for G.D.P.s in Orthodontics in the Glasgow Dental Hospital and one which was held in Law Hospital. Following the retirement of Dr C. Kerr McNeil, Bill delivered the lectures on speech therapy. Later he served as secretary of the cross-infection committee. In 1974, when the board of management disappeared in a reorganization of the National Health Service, Bill was elected to the advisory committee which replaced it.

Few of their colleagues on the staff of the Glasgow Dental Hospital in the period from 1960 to 1964 realised that the staff of the Orthodontic Department could boast of distinguished fighter pilots from both world wars. Hamish Anderson had served in the 1914–18 conflict and, of course, Bill in the Second World War.

Bill's wife Lorna, daughter of a sea captain and Forth pilot, came from Shetland to live in Grangemouth. She served in the A.T.S. during the war and then as a personal secretary and later finance officer in the Civil Service. It sounds as if Bill has quite a job keeping up with her on the golf course at Glenberrie and at the bridge table when she is not attending a national congress.

Bill retired from his post in 1980 when he was 60 years of age. Now 81, he continues to enjoy an active lifestyle in Falkirk surrounded by souvenirs and memories of many parts of the world where he had always insisted on ploughing his own furrow in the manner which he felt best suited his experience and abilities.