



Assignment in Northern Ireland, 1972 – ‘Captain Benćini reporting for duty, Sir’

A DOCTOR’S LIFE IN THE ARMY

For this issue, MARIKA AZZOPARDI meets up with COLONEL CHEVALIER DR RAYMOND BENĆINI to talk about his long and rewarding career in the British Army. The first time she met him was in 2002 when she reviewed his book “Hitler’s Deputy was One of my Patients - A Maltese Doctor in the British Army.” This time round, Dr Benćini speaks candidly about his personal experiences as a military doctor.

TS: HOW LONG HAVE YOU BEEN ASSOCIATED WITH THE BRITISH ARMY AND HOW DID THIS ASSOCIATION COME ABOUT?

I served as a uniformed medical officer for 27 years, of which I spent over 20 years acting as a GP Trainer. However, my association as a doctor in the army so far spans 46 years. Even

though I retired on pension as a full Colonel in 1998, I am still active and have since travelled as far as Brunei to perform GP locums. As a young man, I was interested in taking up languages at university. My father had other plans for me. He had been unable to complete his medical course at university due to the onset of WWII in 1939. Being the male son in line, I was expected to step in his shoes. I do not for one moment regret it. After completing my university studies and working at St Luke’s Hospital for four years, I applied to join the British Army as a GP. Consequently, I became a Captain in the Royal Army Medical Corps in 1971.

TS: WHERE WERE YOU BASED OVER THE YEARS?

In so many countries ranging from Germany to Hong Kong and many places in between. Consequently this did allow me to practise languages which I so enjoyed. I had a baptism of fire with one of my first postings. While serving in Germany, I was sent to Belfast in Northern Ireland in 1972, just after the Bloody Sunday Massacre. I was doctor for the 1st Regiment Royal Horse Artillery, an elite regiment. My unit was based at Long Kesh Detention Centre, later known as The Maze, a barracks which housed mainly IRA and a few Loyalist internees. My worst experience was suturing an internee’s calf wound, after a prison riot. He had to be held down by strong military policemen. Listening to continual screaming and verbal abuse was not the ideal scenario to perform a good suturing job. I was posted to Cyprus after my



Dr Benćini [left] with an American dentist in an Anglo-American rapid deployment exercise in the Mojave desert, California, mid-eighties



Off to a mess night at Bergen-Belsen Hohne

Sporting an Italian Bersagliere headwear, lent by Italian friends

time in Germany and Northern Ireland. A holiday posting one might have thought! How wrong could one be! The coup d'état and Turkish invasion happened just one month after I set foot on the island. Other countries I worked in while serving in the RAMC were UK, Belgium, Hong Kong USA and Italy ... I also worked at the British Military Hospital in Berlin from 1976-1979.

TS: WAS THAT WHERE YOU MET RUDOLPH HESS?

Yes indeed. One fine day, I was called by my Commanding Officer. Would I be happy to look after Hitler's Deputy at the Allied Prison in Spandau? I was already a Major then and I thought it would be a pretty interesting experience. This was how I acquainted myself with a man who was very well mannered and who, upon discovering I was Maltese, became very friendly towards me.

TS: WHAT WAS YOUR MOST EXOTIC STATION?

Definitely Hong Kong where I spent three years. During that period my family and I had the opportunity of travelling all over Asia. I spent one year in a British Military Hospital there and two years as the Commanding Officer of the New Territories Group Practice in Sek Kong. I was assigned to take care of the British soldiers, the Nepalese soldiers in the British Army known as the famous Gurkhas, and Chinese personnel.

New Territories in Hong Kong. Since they spoke Cantonese, I always required the intervention of a translator who was generally my secretary. I was always impressed by the lack of emotional expression of the Chinese - for them emotional reactions were considered a weakness. I also saw a number of cases of Tuberculosis among them. Contact tracing was a nightmare!

TS: WHAT IMPRESSED YOU MOST OF THE FAMILIES OF SOLDIERS?

Since I not only looked after the health of the soldiers but also of their families, my main interest was family medicine. I found that a large percentage of family members suffered a considerable number of health issues mostly due to separation anxiety. This happened when the fathers or mothers were on exercises or stationed in war zones. A case in point was the Gulf War in 1991. I was the senior doctor in Munster, Germany at the time, with a team of some seven doctors under my supervision. All my doctors were sent to Iraq, apart from myself since I was senior doctor. They were replaced by Reservist doctors, i.e doctors who had previously served in the RAMC. There was a great deal of concern about chemical weapons, which we now know was unfounded. This caused extreme worry to family members. At the time, the West was convinced Saddam Hussein had anthrax as a weapon, and so our soldiers were vaccinated against anthrax. Sadly many of them had nasty reactions to the vaccines.



Dr Bencini with his family in a visit to Tai O, the sea village on stilts in Lantau, Hong Kong

TS: CAN YOU IDENTIFY YOUR UNIQUE EXPERIENCES AS A DOCTOR IN THE FAR EAST?

Examining Chinese civilians who worked in our barracks in the

TS: HOW HAS THE BRITISH ARMY CHANGED OVER THE YEARS?

Considerably! During my 27 years serving in the British Army, the vast majority of serving soldiers were proper professionals - they signed a 22-year contract to serve. Now to start with, the number of such soldiers has been dramatically reduced. Furthermore, the British Army now relies very much on part-time soldiers and former soldiers or reservists, just like myself. Finally, from a medical perspective I now see substantial difference in discipline and less submission to authority than previously. 🇬🇧



At work as Lieutenant colonel, mid-eighties



As commanding officer, Dr.Bencini (middle front row) sits with his training wing's staff, and the last regimental medical assistants course participants - NTGP Hong Kong

I READ THE SYNAPSE BECAUSE...
It keeps me updated about medicine.