

D.P. (Pat) Stephens

A Memoir of the Spanish Civil War

An Armenian-Canadian in the Lincoln Battalion



Edited and with an Introduction by
Rick Rennie

A MEMOIR OF THE
SPANISH CIVIL WAR:

AN ARMENIAN-CANADIAN IN
THE LINCOLN BATTALION

A MEMOIR OF THE
SPANISH CIVIL WAR:

AN ARMENIAN-CANADIAN
IN THE
LINCOLN BATTALION

by D.P. (Pat) Stephens

Edited and with an Introduction by
Rick Rennie

Copyright © 2000 Canadian Committee on Labour History
All rights reserved

Canadian Committee on Labour History
History Department, FM 2005
Memorial University of Newfoundland
St. John's, NF A1C 5S7

ISBN 1-894000-02-1

Manuscript was prepared for press by the staff of the
Canadian Committee on Labour History

Cover designed by Helen Houston

*The front cover shows Pat Stephens (in dark coat on the far right) with comrades at
the Jarama Front, 1937. (Courtesy of Phyllis Stephens)*

Printed and bound in Canada

Canadian Cataloguing in Publication Data

Stephens, D.P. (Douglas Patrick), 1910-1987.

A memoir of the Spanish Civil War

ISBN 1-894000-02-1

1. Stephens, D. P. (Douglas Patrick), 1910-1987. 2. Spain. Ejército Popular de la República. Abraham Lincoln Battalion — Biography.
3. Spain — History — Civil War, 1936-1939 — Personal narrative, Canadian. 4. Spain — History — Civil War, 1936-1939 — Participation, Canadian. I. Rennie, Rick, 1962-. II. Canadian Committee on Labour History. III. Title.

DP269.9.S84 2000

946.081'092

C00-950008-1



LE CONSEIL DES ARTS
DU CANADA
DEPUIS 1957

THE CANADA COUNCIL
FOR THE ARTS
SINCE 1957

We acknowledge the support of the Canada Council for the Arts for our publishing program.

Table of contents

Dedication	6
Introduction	7
Chronology of Events	15
Chapter One: Volunteering and the Voyage Over	17
Chapter Two: Journey to the Front	29
Chapter Three: Baptism by Fire	35
Chapter Four: Love and Loss	57
Chapter Five: The Intendencia	72
Chapter Six: The Security Service	87
Chapter Seven: The Unromantic End	101
Afterword	118

Dedicated to
my son, Douglas, my daughter, Patricia,
and to my beloved wife, Phyllis.

D.P. (Pat) Stephens
November 1986

Introduction

When the Spanish Civil War broke out in the summer of 1936, it was the culmination of a long history of political, economic, religious, and social conflicts within the country. The immediate background to the war can be traced to 1931, when the constitutional monarchy under Alphonso XIII effectively went into exile after republicans captured a large share of the vote in urban municipal elections. The republican provisional government took power in April 1931.

The new government took measures to address some of the problems which had long plagued the country. It introduced labour and land reforms, as well as measures designed to curb the power of the church and the clergy. The initial appearance of unity soon gave way, however, to real divisions. Labour reform, for example, did not satisfy more radical elements such as the *Confederación Nacional de Trabajo* (CNT), an anarcho-syndicalist union which began staging strikes and protests against the government as early as 1932. The government members themselves spanned the political spectrum, from moderate liberals to fiercely anti-clerical socialists. By 1933, radical leftists within government were openly critical of what they perceived to be an overly moderate program. Under these conditions, it is not surprising that the government showed signs of breaking down, and that right-wing elements began to exploit its weaknesses. In the elections of November 1933, the government lost a large share of its support to the *Confederación Española de Derechas Atonómas* (CEDA), an umbrella group of right-wing parties. After just two years in power, the government had made political enemies to its left and right.

The government survived until 1936 as a Popular Front of anti-fascist forces which was formed in 1935. The Popular Front was victorious in the election of February 1936, but more radical leftists continued to block attempts at compromise with centrist or right-wing members. The right, meanwhile, took advantage of the situation to accuse the government of failing to control the escalating chaos which had gripped the country. A crucial point in this deteriorating situation was the assassination on 13 July of José Calvo Sotelo, a leader of the parliamentary monarchists, who was allegedly killed in retaliation for the murder of a member of the leftist

Assault Guard. Among those advocating a military solution to the political turmoil and street rioting was General Francisco Franco. On 18 July a military revolt began in Spain and in Spanish Morocco. On 30 July troops from Morocco began pouring into Spain, and the country was plunged into a bloody civil war.

Considering the political and military situation at the time, it might have appeared that the Franco forces (who called themselves the “nationalists”) would encounter little sustained resistance, especially since almost from the outset the insurgents had military support from both Germany and Italy. That the Republican forces were able to maintain a three-year military effort against Franco was due in large part to an enormous international volunteer effort. By July 1937, one year after the outbreak of war, 24 battalions of international volunteers had been formed, and over the course of the war some 40,000 volunteers from Germany, France, Russia, Great Britain, Poland, Hungary, Yugoslavia, Italy, the Balkans, Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria, Albania, the United States, Canada, and elsewhere, poured into Spain to fight on the side of the republicans.

The main organizational force behind this effort was the Communist International in Moscow, which undertook a major recruitment and transportation campaign. For committed communists, the war was an opportunity to put their political principles into action. For others, the Communist Party seemed to be the only major international force prepared to confront Franco, and the Party’s recruitment campaign provided the means for participation. To many, regardless of their political beliefs, stopping Franco in Spain appeared crucial when one considered the implications of a fascist victory for the rest of Europe and the world, especially with the Hitler and Mussolini regimes increasing in both influence and aggression.

Communist Party of Canada (CPC) leader Tim Buck visited Spain during August-September 1936 and saw the situation firsthand. At the time, Buck said he thought that about 250 volunteers could be found in Canada.¹ By 1 July 1937, about 500 Canadians had volunteered to serve in Spain, and an official Canadian battalion, the Mackenzie-Papineau Battalion of the 15th International Brigade, had been formed. An association known as the Friends of the Mackenzie-Papineau Battalion had also been established, and many Canadian cities had Spanish Aid Committees in place. Estimates vary, but some 1,400 Canadians are believed to have volunteered for duty in Spain.²

¹*Yours in the Struggle: Reminiscences of Tim Buck*. William Beeching and Phyllis Clarke, eds. (Toronto 1977), 265-6.

²In *The Mackenzie Papineau-Battalion: The Canadian Contingent in the Spanish Civil War* (Ottawa 1986), 12, Victor Howard claims that about 1,200 Canadians went to Spain. William C. Beeching, in the Dedication of *Canadian Volunteers: Spain*,

There are several reasons why it is difficult to arrive at an exact number of international volunteers, Canadian or otherwise. Some Canadians (such as Pat Stephens) served in battalions other than the Mackenzie-Papineau and are therefore difficult to track using records and informants from that unit. Also, because the International Brigades were not composed of professional military forces, record-keeping was simply more difficult and less stringent. In some cases, for example, people may have volunteered for Spain, but not actually have got there.

In addition, much of the recruitment and volunteering process took place illegally and therefore secretly. At the outbreak of the civil war many countries attempted to isolate the conflict and adopted a policy of non-intervention. By September 1936, an official Non-Intervention Committee had been formed with representation from Great Britain, Czechoslovakia, France, Italy, Germany, Sweden, Russia, and Belgium. (Russia dropped its non-interventionist policy when Germany and Italy began supplying military aid to the fascists in September 1936.) The Canadian government followed the lead of Britain, and introduced measures designed to prevent Canadians from volunteering in Spain. On 31 July 1937, the government extended the Foreign Enlistment Act so that it applied to the Spanish war. This made it illegal for Canadians to volunteer for either combatant in Spain, and imposed a \$2,000 fine or 2 years in prison for violators.

The Canadian state's attempt to prevent CPC recruitment and to stem the flow of volunteers was not confined to legislative changes. The RCMP, in conjunction with the Department of External Affairs, also conducted surveillance operations designed to identify and intercept volunteers.³ On 23 June 1937, for example, the Office of the Commissioner, RCMP, informed External Affairs that the CPC was successfully recruiting volunteers, and that as many as 20 individuals a week were being secretly processed through Montreal on the way to Spain. Others, the correspondence stated, were passing through Winnipeg and Toronto, and many were going to Spain by way of the United States. The RCMP warned External Affairs that the CPC

1936-1939 (Regina 1989), puts the number at 1,448. According to Mark Zuehlk's *The Gallant Cause: Canadians in the Spanish Civil War, 1936-1939* (Vancouver 1996), xi, the memorial monument to the Canadian volunteers in Toronto's Queen's Park claims that 1,500 Canadians served. Another list, compiled by Mackenzie-Papineau veteran Lee Burke, has 1,438 names. This list is referred to in Myron Momryk's "Hungarian Volunteers from Canada in the Spanish Civil War, 1936-1939." *Hungarian Studies Review* XXIV, 1-2 (1997), 3-13.

³The response of the Canadian government, the Canadian public, and the RCMP is well documented in Martin Lobigs, "Canadian Responses to the Mackenzie-Papineau Battalion, 1936 to 1939." Unpublished MA Thesis, University of New Brunswick, May 1992.

intended to recruit 500 volunteers, and that 500 were already in Spain.⁴ On 30 July, the day before the Foreign Enlistment Act was extended, the RCMP requested from External Affairs a list of passports which had been issued between 1933 and 1937, which they hoped to use to identify and intercept volunteers.⁵

With the government and the police joining forces to outlaw and prevent their participation, and with little idea of what to expect in going off to fight with an unconventional army in a distant country, why did so many Canadians go to Spain? It is important first of all, as historian Martin Lobigs has pointed out, to distinguish between the official response of the state and the response of the general public. Lobigs has shown that the attitude of the general public, and even of some Liberal politicians, toward the volunteers differed in many instances from the official policy of the government. Many supported and encouraged the volunteers throughout and after the civil war.⁶ To many, despite the dangers and the opposition, their duty must have seemed clear — to fight Franco and quash fascism in Spain. In many cases, only they know, and their reasons were no doubt various and complex. It is important to bear in mind, when considering their motivations, the political and economic climate in Canada at the time. The Great Depression had created mass unemployment across the country, and shattered many people's faith in the liberal capitalist state. The government of R.B. Bennett, especially, did little to reassure them with its repressive social welfare policies.⁷ Experiences of the work camps and of mass protests such as the On-to-Ottawa Trek had created a highly politicized population.⁸

Many Canadian volunteers were immigrants. One source estimates that of 1,043 volunteers for which we have ethnic origins, 810 (or about 75%)

⁴NAC MG 30 E173 Vol. 5, File #6.

⁵NAC MG 30 E173 Vol.5, File#6. Beeching claims that the RCMP and the government were fearful not so much of involvement in the Spanish war as such, but of the implications of the CPC's activities and the war experience for the domestic scene: *Canadian Volunteers*, 12-13. For an account of the growth and activities of the RCMP and the Canadian state surveillance system in this period, see, Gregory S. Kealey and Reg Whitaker, eds., *R.C.M.P. Security Bulletins: The Depression Years*, vols. 1-4 (St. John's 1993-1998). Lobigs makes extensive use of RCMP and other state documents in "Canadian Responses."

⁶Lobigs, "Canadian Responses," 133-84; 219-76.

⁷Victor Howard, for example, claims that the Depression and the Canadian government's policy's toward the unemployed left many Canadians feeling bitter and marginalized, and this contributed to the Canadian involvement in the Spanish war: *The Mackenzie-Papineau Battalion*, 27.

⁸See Lorne Brown, *When Freedom was Lost: The Unemployed, the Agitator and the State* (Montreal 1987); and James Struthers, *No Fault of their Own: Unemployment and the Canadian Welfare State, 1914-1941* (Toronto 1985).

were Western European, Scandinavian, or Eastern European.⁹ Many of them brought experiences of European war and politics with them to Canada, and were especially aware of the implications of the Spanish situation. Nor was Canada itself immune to the influence of far-right politics. The 1930s was a period of alarming growth in right-wing movements across the country, and this brought the fascist threat home in a very tangible way.¹⁰ In short, the general climate in the country at the time likely encouraged volunteers to act on their personal and political convictions.

One person who did so early in the war was Douglas Patrick (Pat) Stephens. Stephens was born in Armenia on 22 November 1910. His given name was Badrig der Stepanian, and he was the fourth of five boys born to Esther Bedrossian and Solomon der Stephanian. Solomon, a pharmacist and a landowner, was married twice so Stephens also had two stepbrothers and two stepsisters. Stephens' experience with war and politics began early in life. During World War I, in which Turkey sided with the Axis, the Armenian minority was subjected to extreme persecution at the hands of the Turks. Stephens' father and his uncle, Mugerditch, were active in local politics, and early in the war Mugerditch was taken away and executed. Stephens' father narrowly escaped the same fate, but died shortly after. Stephens' family experienced other, similar tragedies during the war, which he relates in this memoir.

After the war, the family began selling off their property, and on 9 July 1921, they left Armenia. They made their way through Turkey and from there to Syria, where they stayed until 1926. They hoped eventually to join relatives in America, but immigration laws made that difficult, so they chose Canada instead. They went to Beirut, boarded a ship called *Canada*, and arrived in Quebec City in July 1926, when Pat Stephens was sixteen.

The family settled in Windsor, Ontario, partly to be close to the US border in case of opportunity to emigrate there. Stephens enrolled in Walkerville Windsor High School to take a Commercial Course, but his great love was history, at which he excelled. In August, 1928, however, he began work as an accountant with General Motors. His mother was eventually granted a visa to go to the US, and she settled in Detroit, where she died in 1929. Not long after this personal loss, Stephens was dealt another blow when he became a victim of the Great Depression. In the fall of 1929, he was laid off from General Motors. In January 1930 he arrived in Toronto, where he took a number of low-paying restaurant jobs before heading back to Windsor to try his hand at selling refrigerators. When that did not work out he went to back to Toronto to try selling electric signs. Throughout this

⁹Momryk, "Hungarian Volunteers," 11.

¹⁰See Lita-Rose Betcherman, *The Swastika and the Maple Leaf: Fascist Movements in Canada in the Thirties* (Toronto 1975).

period, he kept company primarily with other Armenians, and in 1930 he began working as a houseman for a Mr. Babayan in Toronto.¹¹

Stephens' civil war memoir picks up in Toronto in 1936, when he was 26 years old, and some of the details about his life during the years 1930-36 are mentioned in the early pages of the memoir. One of the things he must have done during these years was become associated with the CPC: he volunteered for Spain through his connections in the Young Communist League (YCL) in Toronto. Stephens volunteered in December 1936 and travelled to Spain via New York and then Paris (with a brief side-trip to Boston). According to his official service file, he arrived in Spain on 14 February 1937.¹² As such, he was one of those approximately 500 Canadians who went to Spain before the promulgation of the Foreign Enlistment Act in July 1937. He served in the Abraham Lincoln Battalion of the 15th Brigade (to which the Mackenzie-Papineau Battalion also belonged). Though it is often considered the American battalion, the Lincoln contained soldiers from other countries, including Canada, just as the Mackenzie-Papineau contained non-Canadians.¹³ Stephens began duty as a Machine Gunner, but also served as a Chief of Intendencia (a supply post), and later as military investigator.

Stephens' account of his civil war experience is especially revealing because of his background and his range of experiences. His Armenian heritage, the fact that he was a Canadian serving in a primarily American battalion, and the variety of posts he held in Spain, combine to give him a special insight into the war and the international brigades.

While Stephens' manuscript has been left mostly intact, I have deleted some material which was clearly superfluous. I have made corrections in some cases where Stephens was factually wrong about something (he wrote the memoir nearly fifty years after the events). I have also pointed out on occasion that there exist alternative accounts of a given incident. The chapter breaks and chapter titles are also mine. In some instances, Stephens related potentially embarrassing or defamatory anecdotes about certain individuals — ordinary volunteers like himself. In such cases I have related the story as Stephens told it, but omitted the name. It is important to include such stories: they show us what people do in very trying and unusual

¹¹This summary of Stephens' early life is taken from an unpublished memoir entitled "An Armenian Childhood," in the possession of the Canadian Committee on Labour History.

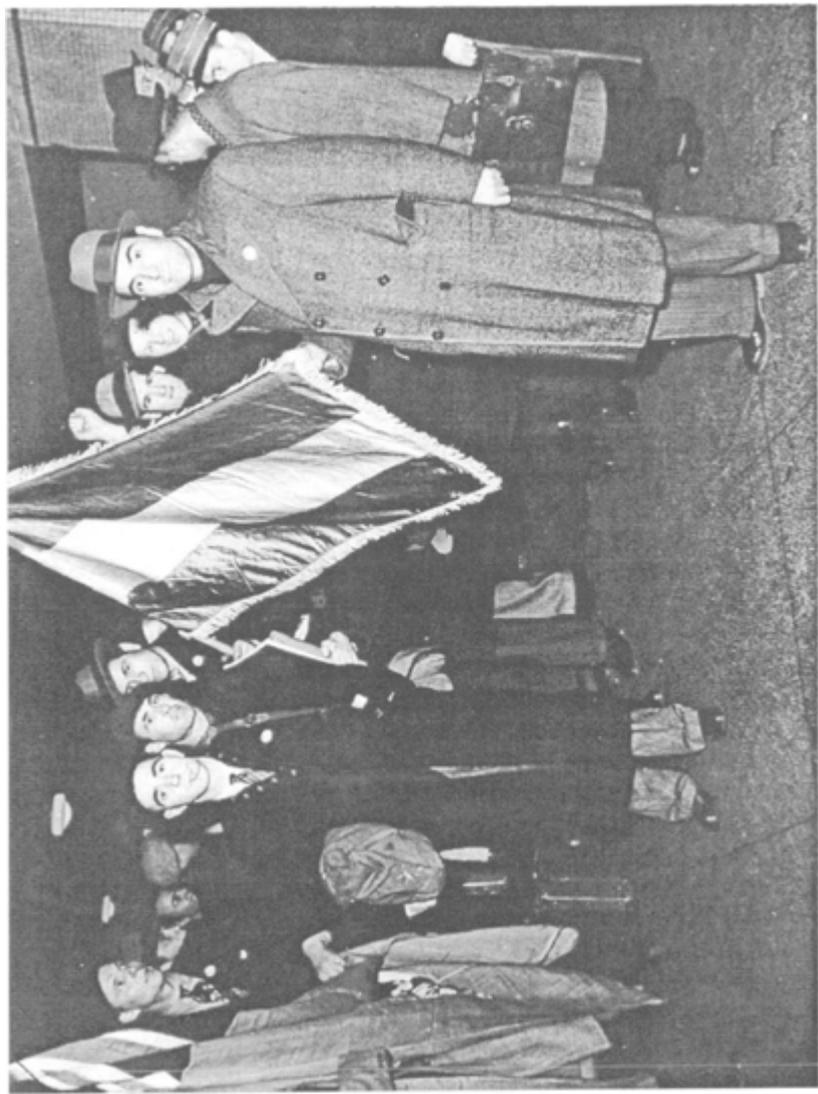
¹²NAC Reel K265. These microfilm reels contain the personal, military, and political assessment reports conducted by the War Commissariat of the International Brigades in Barcelona at the conclusion of the war.

¹³The 15th Battalion is often referred to as the "Lincoln Battalion" or even the "Lincoln Brigade." Stephens, for example, uses the terms interchangeably.

circumstances, and tell us a lot about the nature of discipline in the brigades. Removing the names, however, does not detract from the story or its intent, and I felt there was little to be gained at this stage by naming names. This is not a history of the Spanish Civil War, but of one man's experience and interpretation of the war. For the purpose of orientation, however, I have provided a chronology of events and a list of the Lincoln Battalion's major engagements. I have also provided footnote references intended to explain various things in the text, or direct the reader to other sources.

The civil war manuscript, as well as the "Armenian Childhood" manuscript just cited, came to the Canadian Committee on Labour History by way of Dr. Gabrielle Scardellato and the Multicultural History Society of Ontario, to whom I am grateful. Thanks also to Gregory S. Kealey, Irene Whitfield, and Josephine Thompson of Memorial University, to Myron Momryk of the National Archives of Canada, to Ingrid Botting, and to Doug Stephens. Special thanks to Phyllis Stephens for providing so much practical assistance and valuable information.

Rick Rennie
Memorial University of Newfoundland
2000



Canadian volunteers with flag of Spain. Montreal, Québec. (NAC C-067461)

Chronology of Events

- 1931 April - Second Republic proclaimed.
 October - Manuel Azaña becomes prime minister.
- 1934 August - Hitler becomes Fuhrer of Germany.
 October - Worker's uprising in Asturias crushed by Army of Africa units under Franco.
- 1935 October - Fascist Italy invades Ethiopia.
- 1936 February - Popular Front coalition wins elections.
 July 17-20 - Military revolts in Spain and Spanish Morocco
 July 30 - Army of Africa begins moving into Spain.
 November - Spanish people, aided by international volunteers, defend Madrid.
 German and Italian forces begin supplying military assistance to Franco's "nationalists".
 December - First American volunteers leave for Spain.
- 1937 February - Battle of Jarama.
 July - Battle of Brunete.
 August - Republican offensive at Belchite.
 December - Republican offensive at Teruel begins.
- 1938 February - Nationalists victorious at Tereul.
 March - Nationalist offensive at Aragon.

July - Republican offensive on Ebro River.

October - Battle of Ebro ends, International Brigades begin withdrawal from Spain.

December - Nationalist offensive in Catalonia.

1939 March 27 - Nationalists enter Madrid.

Major Engagements for the 15th Brigade

February 1937	Jarama
July 1937	Brunete
August 1937	Quinto
September 1937	Belchite
October 1937	Ebro
December 1937	Teruel
February 1938	Belchite
March 1938	Caspe
March 1938	Gandesa
April 1938	Mora la Neuva
July 1938	Corbera
August 1938	Sierra Pandolls/Sierra Caballs

Chapter One

Volunteering and the Voyage Over

The Spanish Civil War had started, and the newspapers were full of reports of the heroic Spanish people's struggle against the Fascist military forces of Franco. A column of Moorish forces¹ led by Franco was advancing on Madrid. Saragossa and Badajoz were in the hands of the rebels. Barcelona and its Catalan people were fighting the insurgents on the streets. The Spanish people raised the slogan "*No Pasaran*" ("They shall not pass"), and the people rushed to the barricades to defend Madrid. In August 1936 the first groups of international volunteers, consisting mostly of French, German, and Polish anti-Fascists arrived in Madrid. The accounts of how these international volunteers were helping the people fight the Fascists at the very gates of Madrid created a heady euphoria in the minds of the leftist intellectuals that wanted to join in the struggle.

I heard that some of my friends had volunteered for the International Brigades. Larry Ryan and Tom Beckett were already on their way to Spain.² Canadians were volunteering through their communist connections for the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, which was being organized in New York. I decided to join and after some discreet inquiries I contacted Roy Davis, a well-known communist and Chief Organizer of the Young Communist League (YCL) in Toronto. I had been on very friendly terms with Roy through my connections in the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation (CCF). I had cooperated with him and the YCL on a few joint projects, such

¹That is, the army of North Africa, where Franco began the military revolt.

²Ryan and Beckett were among the first five Canadians to be dispatched. The group also included Henry Scott Beatty, Clifford Budgeon, and Frederick Lackey. Like Stephens, these first volunteers were members of the Abraham Lincoln Battalion. See Victor Howard (with Mac Reynolds), *The Mackenzie-Papineau Battalion: The Canadian Contingent in the Spanish Civil War* (Ottawa 1986), 71-2. First published Toronto 1969, under the name Victor Hoar (with Mac Reynolds) and with the subtitle *Canadian Participation in the Spanish Civil War*.

as strikes, street demonstrations, educational seminars, and socialist propaganda. In early December 1936 I met Roy for lunch at Bowles (in Toronto) and he promised to see what he could do for me. A few days later he phoned me and asked me to meet him at 48 Wellington Street. When I arrived, Roy was there with Stanley Buchanan, a well-known communist who had been to Moscow and trained at the Marx-Engels Institute.

Buchanan said, "You know, Pat, it is no picnic there. You could well get killed."

I said, "Comrade Buchanan, I am well aware of the implications. It is high time to take positive action in support of my ideals. If death is a part of it, so be it. We have to take a stand, and there is no place like Spain to test one's dedication."

After some more leftist dissertations and pleasantries, I was asked to write a short autobiography, stating my background, my relatives' social position in life, my father's name, his position or profession, and my financial and political situation. This was to be presented to Roy Davis as soon as possible. The next day I gave the résumé to Roy and he said he would give it to the recruiting committee and let me know. He said he wanted the whole thing to be absolutely secret. I was not to discuss this meeting with anybody. On my promise, we parted.

Two days later I received a phone call from Stanley Buchanan, who asked me to meet him in the same place, 48 Wellington, Room 214, at 8:30 that night. By now I was feeling quite tense. Would I be accepted or not? I arrived and was met by Roy Davis, Stanley Buchanan and another person whom I did not know. I was introduced to this gentleman. His name was given as Comrade John and he informed me that he was from the Recruiting Committee. He spoke English with an indistinguishable foreign accent. He asked about my health, and whether I had any military training. I replied yes, that I had been in a High School Cadet Corps. He smiled, took notes, shook my hand, and said my application had been accepted and I would make an excellent volunteer. Roy poured four drinks of rye whiskey, and we drank a toast to Spain and to victory.

When Comrade John left, Comrade Buchanan started giving me instructions. I was to present myself at White Star Shipping Line the next day and ask for Mr. Murray Stein, who would arrange for my passport. They would inform me when it arrived. I was asked to take four passport photos and my Canadian citizenship papers. In a few days my passport arrived, and I was asked to go to White Star and pick it up. The day after I got my passport, Roy Davis phoned and told me to get ready to go. He said I should travel light: a couple of changes of socks and underwear, shaving kit, and a good supply of razor blades. I was asked not to reveal my date of departure, to arrange my affairs and then go see him at Wellington Street.