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A Dubliner Goes to War

Oscar Sewall, the Hadfield-Spears Ambulance Unit, and the British-Free French Forces' Syrian Campaign of 1941

by Russell Bastedo

The collection of letters that recently came into possession by the Dublin Archives consists of correspondence received by Oscar Sewall's mother, Josefa Crosby Sewall. Many of the letters come from her son and most of them are still in their original envelopes. Everything in the series was part of the contents of a small trunk, which the Society bought at auction on September 17, 2011. The trunk had been found in a shed at "Little Spur House," which had recently been sold by Oscar's widow, Patricia Andersen.

In the late 1930s, the citizens of Dublin, New Hampshire, like all Americans, were impacted by the growing European crisis. One such Dubliner was Oscar Crosby Sewall and this is the story of how he got into World War II.

Sewall, born in 1901 in Rye, New York, was the adventure-loving son of a wealthy shipbuilding family in Bath, Maine. He had an excellent American education, capped by a year of study at Brasenose College, a part of Oxford University, in England. He was also the cousin of the American "ace" of World War I, Sumner Sewall, governor of Maine during World War II.

He was never an outstanding student, but he was a lifelong fan of the adventure writings of Rudyard Kipling, and following his studies Oscar traveled around the world. He stayed at such hostelrys as the famed Raffles Hotel in Singapore, and hunted wild game in British Somaliland and other parts of East Africa. He had spent parts of 1935 and '36 traveling around British Africa, meeting Haile Selassie, the ruler of Ethiopia, shortly before Benito Mussolini's Italian troops invaded that country.



Oscar Sewall at "Spur House,"
in Dublin, 1940

Oscar's first visit to Dublin came in 1919 with his mother, Josefa Crosby, and stepfather, Grosvenor Hyde Backus, an attorney who practiced law in New York and Washington D.C. The Backuses owned a number of houses, including Beech Hill and Spur House (both sit high above the lake on the cemetery side), the latter acquired in 1919.

After returning from his travels, Oscar came back to the town with his new English wife, the Hon. Barbara Bagot, daughter of William Bagot, 4th Baron of Bagot's Bromley, and Lilian Marie May. The Sewalls also returned to Dublin with an infant son, John (b. 1936).

Sewall had seen firsthand the tumult Europe was experiencing as Hitler's power over the continent grew. He was convinced that all of Europe would fall to the Axis powers, and that Great Britain would not escape a German

invasion once France had fallen. Oscar's sister Louisa lived in London, and Oscar favored a prompt United States declaration of war against Germany. But not even the fall of France to the Nazis in June 1940 could prompt Congress into action.



Military training at Fort Devens, Massachusetts, 1940

Call to Action

In July 1940, on his own initiative, Oscar joined five New Hampshire men who went to Fort Devens, Massachusetts, at their own expense to join a 289-man Businessmen's Battalion, a part of the Citizens' Military Training Corps (established as a result of the peacetime preparation efforts of Dublin's "statesman incognito," Grenville Clark.) Members of the Businessmen's Battalion paid the federal government \$41.25 each for a month of training as soldiers.

The Businessmen's Battalion followed a training regimen promulgated by General Leonard Wood, a hero of the First World War, in 1916. Rifle marksmanship and machine gun proficiency were emphasized, with the goal of developing infantrymen. The workday began at 5 A.M. and ended at 10 P.M., and a newspaper article about the training commented, "A hard day in the field sends the men into camp with their backs aching like a jumping molar and their legs feel[ing] like spaghetti."

In August, Oscar Sewall returned to Dublin and had himself photographed in his uniform on his lawn. Then, on Registration Day, October 16, 1940, he signed up for military service, but he had to wait several months more before anything happened. In mid-December he received a letter from the National Executive Chairman of the American Field Service, Stephen Gallati. The letter read:

Dear Sewall:

We are going ahead with our plans for sending fifteen volunteers to join the Spears Hospital Unit, which will operate with the DeGaulle forces in Africa, and we would like to include you if you wish to go. . . .

Sewall responded to the American Field Service's call to action, signing on as a volunteer ambulance driver with the Spears Field Hospital unit. He left his English wife and son in Dublin (leading to a divorce that was granted

in 1945) and was one of eight Americans who flew from Miami, Florida, to Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. The group then sailed by steamship from Rio to Capetown, South Africa. The circuitous route was necessitated by the German U-boats' control of Atlantic shipping routes.

Once at Capetown, the volunteers awaited orders from the British War Office. They hoped to be sent with their equipment to Libya, Ethiopia, or some other part of the theatre of war, once their heavy lorries and equipment arrived by ship from England.

On April 19, 1941, a secret cable arrived specifying that 13 ambulances, 9 trucks, 5 "saloon" cars, and 6 water trucks belonging to the Hadfield-Spears Ambulance Unit would arrive shortly at Suez. Lt. Oscar Sewall, now a member of her Majesty's Forces, 15th Scottish General Hospital, was one of those sent to help drive the shipment from Suez to Cairo. There the equipment was to be a part of a Camp Reception Hospital for Free French Forces, the French Foreign Legion forces at St. Lunaire.

From Cairo the Hadfield-Spears Ambulance Unit traveled with Free French Forces and the 5th Indian Brigade through Egypt and Palestine, on their way to Syria with the goal of capturing Damascus. At the time, Damascus was in the hands of a Vichy (pro-German) French government; the goal of the British-Free French attack was to occupy Syria and Lebanon so that the Germans could not establish a military presence there that would threaten British bases in Palestine and the eastern Mediterranean. German aircraft had already flown from Syrian airfields during April 1941, in support of a revolt against the British administration in Iraq. According to a new military plan, parts of Australia's Seventh Division would operate with Allied Forces' troops to defeat the German presence in both Syria and Lebanon. The plan, developed by British General Henry Maitland Wilson, called for the 21st Australian Brigade to advance north from Palestine along the Mediterranean coast to capture Beirut. The 25th Australian Brigade would head for Rayak, site of a large airbase, by an inland route. And further to the east, the 5th Indian Brigade and a Free French force were to march on Damascus. Oscar Sewall's ambulance unit was with these forces.

The dates set for the Syrian Campaign were June 7-July 11, 1941. After capture of Beirut, Rayak, and Damascus, Allied troops were to advance on Tripoli, Homs, and Palmyra, all targets much further north. The RAAF 3 Squadron would offer air support while naval vessels stationed in the Mediterranean would provide offshore shell fire. So Allied forces would be moving fast, and Oscar Sewall and other American Field Service members of what was originally the Spears Hospital Unit were sure to be treating many casualties of what was expected to be fierce fighting.

The advance billing was not in error. There was fierce fighting beginning on June 9th that tied up and delayed the 21st and 25th Australian Brigades, and precipitous terrain made rapid advance doubtful for these units. "The most rapid progress was made by the 5th Indian Brigade and Free French toward Damascus."* But on June 14 Vichy French forces counterattacked, breaking communications between the 25th Australian Brigade and the 5th Indian-Free French force that was now outside Damascus. Damascus fell on June 21, after fierce fighting. "On that day a mixed force of British troops, including those of the Arab Legion, entered Syria from Iraq and advanced on Palmyra. The British attacked Palmyra on 25 June, but the Vichy forces kept the British at bay for nine days before surrendering."*

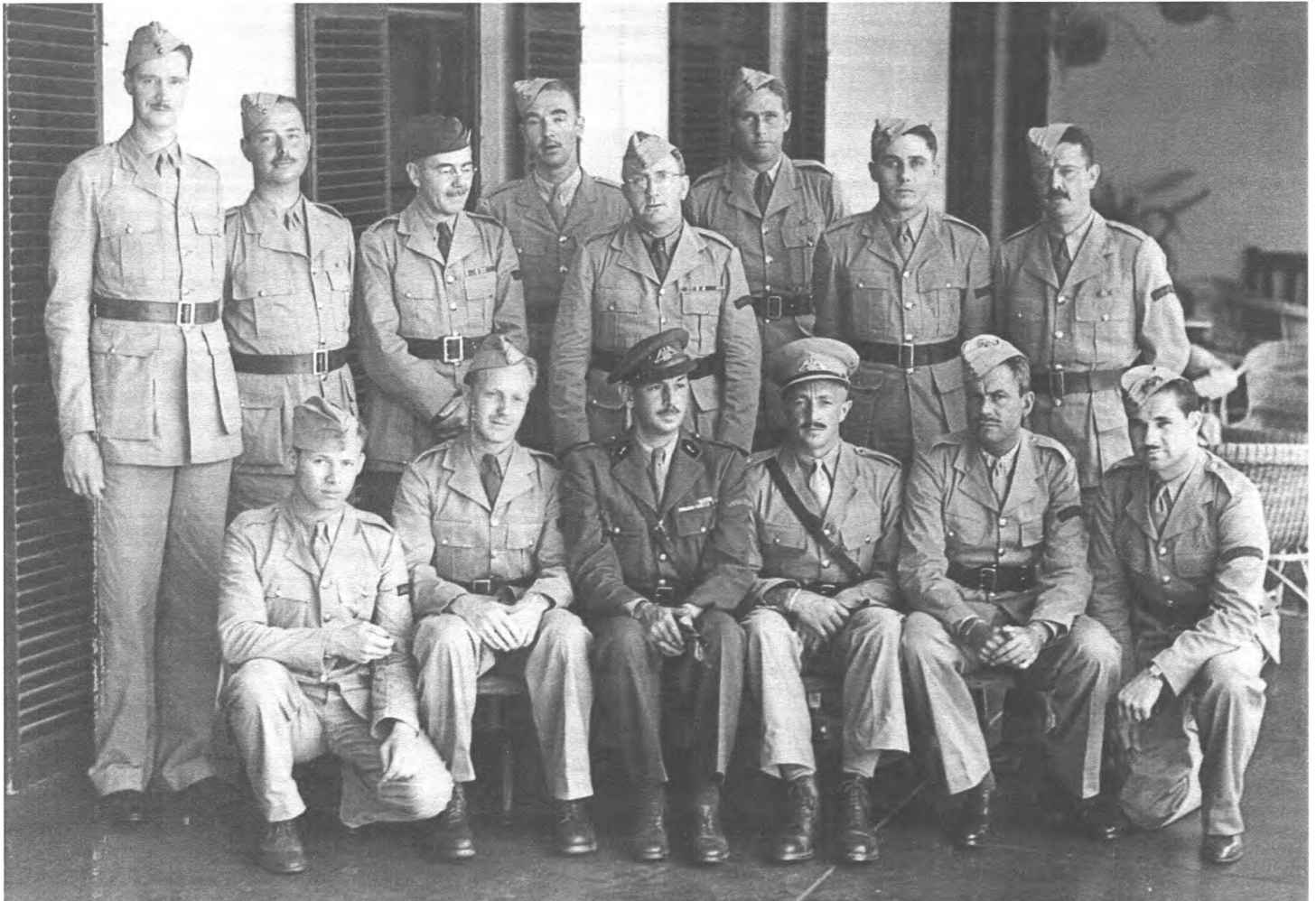
On July 10, 1941, the Vichy French commander, General Henry Denz, sought an armistice, and a ceasefire began at one minute after midnight on July 12, 1941. An armistice was signed two days later. The Australians had suffered 416 killed and 1,136 wounded during the fighting in Lebanon and Syria, and the Vichy French forces had approximately 1,000 killed and 5,000 injured.

The Lebanon-Syria Campaign of June-July 1941 is little known to students of World War II, because Germany had suspended eastern Mediterranean operations in order to prepare for the ill-fated Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union. But Oscar Sewall and his American volunteer comrades, who had by their own estimate traveled more than 20,000 miles by air, sea, and land in order to get to a theatre of war, had had more than a brush with death after months of inaction. With the battle's conclusion the ambulance unit's six months' tour of duty ended.

Oscar's time with his American volunteer comrades had started with guarded optimism. Writing to his mother from a Union-Castle Line ship on February 16, 1941, Oscar dismissed his fellow Americans with a few words:

... There are quite a few Oxford men aboard & others who know people I know. It is like getting back with my own kind again. Especially after the sloppy time & sloppy people that I have been with since Miami. ...

We don't know yet exactly where we, as a unit, are bound, whether to the scenes of my first trip East [Somaliland] or to the land of Joe Smith's labours [Egypt].



Captain Oscar Sewall (seated, third from right,) in Army Air Corps, 1942

*Australian War Memorial-Syrian Campaign (<http://www.awm.gov.au>)

By the way things are going it may all be over before we arrive. But, in any case, the further we go now, the nearer do we approach the enemy[,] whether of the dark variety or those of fairer skin. . . .

Oscar's time with his American Field Service comrades was more fully summarized in a letter to his mother dated June 30, 1941:

The whole thing has been a waste of time. . . . There has been a complete lack of organization and the men chosen to go are, for the most part, bums, drunks & problem children. . . . I couldn't be more disgusted with the American Field Service. . . .

. . . I am looking into the possibility of getting into the British Army but I rather think that it won't be practicable. For one thing I am not as young as I used to be & for another I have not much to offer in the way of previous military training & experience[,] nor any technical knowledge. So it looks as if I shall start home on the 1st Aug[ust]. It is rather difficult to get back now & I don't know how many months it will take.

By December 1941 Oscar had been back in Dublin for some time. Writing to his mother on December 8, Oscar mentioned Pearl Harbor only in his third paragraph:

. . . I have been made air raid warden of Dublin but I don't yet know what my duties are.

I shall see the naval intelligence in Boston soon. I should like to get fitted in somewhere, if I can be of any use. Now that we are fighting with the British I should like a liaison job.

The [Japanese] seem to have got the jump on us. It looks as if the navy had been asleep.

I am glad we are fighting at last, though, it clears the air.

Oscar did return to the war. As a headline in an unidentified news article dated March 27, 1942, reported, "Sewall Enlists as Private, Gets Captain's Appointment," and the Manchester Union Leader of March 30, 1942, reported:

"The recent announcement that Oscar Sewall...had been made a captain in the Army Air Corps, was just another stepping stone in the adventure-filled career of one of Dublin's most interesting and prominent residents."

Oscar served as a member of a bomber crew in the Army Air Corps and enjoyed a distinguished military career, attaining the rank of major, and always maintaining a faithful correspondence with his mother as she moved between homes in Maine and Dublin.

Some remember Oscar as a charming, generous and good humored man who spoke with a slight British accent. Others, such as the late Marion Latti of Dublin, a devoted



Oscar and Patricia crossing the Atlantic aboard the RMS Empress of Canada, c. 1969

employee, described how difficult he could be [recorded interview now preserved in the Dublin Archives].

It is clear from reading Oscar's many letters to his mother that he deeply loved her. He clearly loved Dublin, too. He responded to a question posed by his mother shortly before the end of the war regarding the possibility of her selling both their houses on Beech Hill. Oscar gave his full support to do as she wished and stated that he would find another house. Then he added, "you see, my home is in Dublin."

IN MEMORIUM

The Society records with great sorrow the recent loss of the following members: **Peter Shonk, Michael James, Elizabeth Pool, Patricia Andersen** (pictured above), **Ned Whitney, H.A. Crosby Forbes, Joseph Cavanaugh, and Edith Huey.**

We extend our condolences to each of their family members.

We also note that both Elizabeth and then Peter held the Boston Post Cane this past year, recognizing them as Dublin's oldest citizen.

Please save the date!

Our Annual Meeting will be held on August 23, 2013.