

A Canadian lifeline for the Spanish frontline

Dr Norman Bethune saved thousands of Republicans with the first mobile blood-transfusion unit

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Bring the blood to the wounded, not the other way around. With this simple premise the Canadian doctor Norman Bethune introduced a major medical innovation: the first mobile blood-transfusion unit, during the Spanish Civil War.

Seventy years on, Málaga's City Council is paying tribute to Bethune and his compatriots who fought in the International Brigades. Authorities yesterday unveiled a plaque in his honor in the Avenue of the Canadians, a seaside promenade where the municipality will plant a maple tree. The International Brigades, which fought for the Republic in the Spanish Civil War, were made up of combatants from many countries. But the number of Canadians, as a percentage of the country's population, was exceptionally high. Some 1,700 volunteered to fight in Spain; 721 died here.

One of the most noteworthy Canadians was Dr Norman Bethune, who arrived in Madrid in November, 1936. He soon noticed that high death rates among fighters were largely due to blood loss on the way to hospital, and believed that if transfusions could be given at the front, chances of survival would improve. He went to London for supplies and a month later set up the Canadian Blood Transfusion Service, as Brigades veteran William Beeching writes in his book *Canadian Volunteers*.

In the 1920s, Bethune had been one of the most prestigious surgeons in Canada. He was a pioneer of thoracic operations to cure tuberculosis, a disease he himself suffered from, and he designed surgical instruments which are still in use. The Great Depression turned Bethune's attention to politics. In 1935 he visited the Soviet Union on the pretext of attending a physiology convention. He only looked



Dr Norman Bethune having lunch with his colleagues from the Canadian Blood Transfusion Service in the mountains of Guadarrama, near Madrid.

in on the inaugural session, however, and spent his time strolling around Moscow observing the new Soviet society. Bethune was particularly enthusiastic about the public health system, and on his return to Canada he joined the Communist Party.

In 1936, a representative of the Committee for Aid to Spain invited him to Madrid, to head the Republican medical services. Bethune accepted, leaving his post as director of Montreal's Sacré-Coeur hospital. When he arrived,

however, and took stock of the situation, it occurred to him he might be more useful bringing blood to the wounded.

The Canadian Blood Transfusion Service set up shop in an upper-class quarter of Madrid. "No bombs are likely to fall on you here," an officer told him, "Franco is very careful about damaging the property of the rich." But when all the equipment was nearly ready, one key element was still missing: blood. For three days, the radio broadcast calls for donors. When

the doors opened on December 13, 1936, some 2,000 people crowded in to give blood, and the first transfusions started being done at the front. The Canadian team began to show up wherever this might be.

One of these places was Málaga. In February 1937, Franco's troops launched a bloody attack on the southern city, forcing thousands of Republicans to flee. The refugees thronged the road to Almería, often strafed by Franco's planes. Bethune and his team were

overwhelmed by the number of wounded.

"Bethune was an extroverted man," recalls Moisés Broggi, who met him in Madrid. "He constantly complained about the red tape." Convinced that his hands were tied by incompetent officials, he quit and went to China, where another civil war was in progress. There, he took charge of the Red Army's medical service. After cutting himself while performing an operation without gloves, he died of blood poisoning in 1939.