

**A BRIDGE OVER TROUBLED WATER.
Sir Brett Cloutman VC, MC, QC, KBE.**

By Laurence V. Parker.



Fate is an odd beast. Why *The Register of the Victoria Cross*, which lists every single VC winner kept falling open at the same page, is a mystery. But it did and I was drawn to a picture of a bespectacled and moustached gentleman whom, as I would later discover, had an amazing story. It sent me on a path of research where I encountered people one may otherwise never have had occasion to meet, to find out more.

In the dying days of the First World War the unassuming Acting Major Brett M Cloutman secured for himself a place in VC history: For his was the final VC bestowed on the Western Front – a conflict that would leave an indelible mark on world history.

EARLY LIFE

Brett Mackay Cloutman was born on the 7 November 1891 at Marsden House, Colney Hatch Lane, Muswell Hill, North London, the youngest of three brothers.

His father, Alfred Benjamin Cloutman (always known as 'A.B') was born in Bristol in 1860 to William Curtis Cloutman, a Surveyor/Architect from Shorditch, Middlesex who practised in Bristol and died in 1899. The 1881 Census shows that Alfred was one of ten siblings and his upbringing was, out of necessity, frugal. He began his working life as a junior assistant at Maple & Co, the well known London furnishing store of its day in Tottenham Court Road, London.

Little is known of Brett's mother, Clarissa Jane Cloutman and it is certain that he and his elder brothers William and Wolfred Reeve were raised as the stepsons of Alicia Mary Cloutman. All resided at Old Hall, South Grove, in the affluent area of Highgate, North London. At the end of the Nineteenth Century

records show that the Cloutman family had once lived in St Pancreas and Crouch End, North London. Alfred Cloutman, through sheer strength of will and hard toil became Governing Director of Maple & Co (later Life Governor) and as a result, a leading London businessman. He had '...no expensive tastes, lived most simply and was a genuine philanthropist and lover of his kind' Known as a thorough gentleman and a devout Christian who believed in the sacredness of Sunday, A.B Cloutman secured for his wife and sons a comfortable, middle class existence. He instilled in all his sons the motto of 'if a job is worth doing, it is worth doing well' – something that his youngest son, Brett, keenly followed.

The young Brett's schooling was typical of that of the middle classes at the time. He first attended Berkhamstead Preparatory School, Hertfordshire. From there he went to the Stanley School in Margate, Kent, before returning to Hertfordshire and the Bishop Stortford College. The school had always championed swimming as a major sport and this was to make a prophetic contribution to the success of his VC action in 1918. The sixteen year old Brett attended the College between 1907-08. Pictures taken of his time there show that he absorbed himself very much into school life, being a member of the choir and playing clarinet in the orchestra. He received a top award, the Medallion for his swimming skills. On Prize Day, 1908, he was presented, by the Chairman of Governors, with a prize for Modern Languages. The Easter 1919 edition of the College magazine, *The Stortfordian* notes that when the Headmaster heard that one of its 'old boys' had won the coveted Cross, the full citation was read out to the whole assembly to rapturous applause. He also decreed that Monday 3 February 1919 was taken as a holiday in tribute!

At the age of eighteen, Cloutman continued his education at London University between 1909-1912, studying modern languages. This culminated in a BA Degree in 1913. A lifelong linguist, he was fluent in French, German, Italian and Spanish.

THE MARCH TO WAR.

Life at London University was not all academic. Between 1909-1912 the teenage Brett served in the Officer's Training Corps (Royal Engineer's Contingent). The Sappers have origins dating back to May 1900 where the first unit was formed as a Field Company RE at Chatham Kent. As part of 5th Division during World War One, the Company saw action in both France and Italy.

Five weeks after war was declared on the 4 August 1914, Cloutman left his position on the managerial staff at Maple & Co and joined the Army (12th County of London Regiment-The Rangers) on 2 September. Poor eyesight, which had blighted him from an early age, impeded him from gaining a commission at this time. Despite this temporary setback Cloutman did eventually receive his commission six months later on the 3 March 1915 as a Second Lieutenant (No: 122929) in the Kent (Fortress) Royal Engineers based at Gillingham, Kent.

1915 saw two key events in Cloutman's life. First, his strength of leadership, later to prove decisive in

both the First and Second World Wars, was noted and recognised by his appointment as Acting Captain on 2 July 1915.

Secondly, tragedy struck the family. His brother, Wolfred, who was attached to the 178 Tunnelling Company (Royal Engineers) was killed in action on 21 August 1915. On this day Wolfred was involved in rescuing a sergeant who had fallen forty-five feet down a mineshaft. Carrying him on his shoulders up a ladder, Wolfred was able to return the injured sergeant to safety, but overcome by the fumes from a recently exploded gas bomb, lost his footing and plunged to the base of the mineshaft killing him instantly. Only twenty-five at the time, he is buried near where he fell in the Norfolk Cemetery, Albert.

In the two years since promotion to Acting Captain, Brett Cloutman had not seen any action on the Front. This dramatically altered in 1917. It had been a tough year for the Allies. The Russian armed forces had disintegrated entirely: Kerensky's Liberal Government had collapsed, Tsar Nicholas II had been dethroned, the peasants demanded redistribution of land and the revolutionary Bolsheviks under Lenin had capitalised on the resentment of the War to seize power in the major cities.

Both France and Britain in 1917 had suffered their own setbacks. But the tide was about to turn. On the Western Front, Cloutman was present at one of the year's notable successes – that of the Battle at Vimy Ridge in April/May 1917.

An Anglo-Canadian offensive, the capture of this key position was a major contribution to the success of the War, although it would only be in the closing weeks of the War in 1918 that any serious inroads against the Germans would be made. In November 1917 Cloutman and his section were located in the Ypres Salient. Arguably, the Allied Strategy had worked in the Third Battle of Ypres where the Germans had sustained heavy casualties, allowing the French to lick their battered wounds, reconvene and reflect on what had been a difficult year. Later, Cloutman was to be involved in a battle that has become synonymous with 'mud, death and failure'. This was centred around the small village of Passchendaele. In all, the Third Battle of Ypres cost in the region of 62-66,000 British dead.

As 1917 drew to a close Cloutman saw action in Italy. The Italian Campaign at Corporetto had met with a severe defeat followed by a massive retreat at the River Isonzo. The Royal Engineers had been one of a number of units to assist in shoring up the lines under the C in C Field Marshall Sir Douglas Haig. The presence of the British and French in Italy could be seen as crucial. War torn and battle fatigued, no one wanted Italy to follow in the path of Russia who had recently withdrawn from the War and were on the verge of signing the Treaty of Brest Litovsk.

THE MARCH TO VICTORY

As 1918 broke, Cloutman's Division had returned to France where it took its place alongside The Third Army. The Americans had entered the War and the German Spring Offensive has begun – eventually mounting five major offensives against the Allies

starting with The Battle of Picardy and ending in July with the Second Battle of The Marne. On the 22 May Cloutman was promoted to Acting Major – a rank he would hold until April 1919.

September 1918 had seen the British move ever closer to the German's sacred Hindenburg line and to a series of battles that would seal Germany's fate. The Meuse-Argonne Offensive opened and so began the final Franco-American Offensive of the War.

It was on the 30 September that Brett Cloutman secured the Military Cross for his outstanding conduct in battle. The citation reads:

'For conspicuous gallantry and devotion to duty at Bantreaux on the morning of 30th September 1918. He made a personal reconnaissance under heavy machine gun fire to ascertain the possibility of bridging the Canal de L'escaut' (Located near the old Cambrai battlefield of 1917). He received the MC at an investiture held on the 1 February 1919.

THE BATTLE OF THE SAMBRE

It could be argued that the battles in the opening months of the War in 1914 were only matched in intensity and ferocity to those in the final months of 1918. Over ninety Allied divisions battled eighty German divisions that would result in immense casualties on both sides. The Battle of The Sambre in November 1918 was part of the last major Allied Offensive action of the War and would result in an Allied victory and the award of no less than ten VC's for individual acts of courage.

Whilst the German resistance was ebbing away in October 1918, the British advanced to the Sambre and Scheldt Rivers resulting in the capture of many German prisoners. The British First, Third and Fourth Armies had joined the French First Army in advancing south from the Conde Cabal towards Maubeuge-Mons, south east of Valenciennes. The objective was to hamper German efforts to reform and to create a fortified defence along the Meuse River to the east and threaten Namur.

As dawn approached on Monday, 4 November, seventeen British divisions, including the 32nd headed the attack. Three of the battalions designated to spearhead the offensive were the 16/Lancashire Fusiliers, 2/Royal Sussex and the 2/Manchesters.

However, there was one very large obstacle in the Allies's path: the Sambre and Oise Canal. It was seventy feet wide bank to bank, six feet deep and the bottom was weed ridden and muddy. The XII and IX Corps were the first to lead the attack, but the Germans, repelled the attackers inflicting almost eleven hundred and fifty casualties. Makeshift bridges had not been maintained and under intense fire countless lives were being lost. Seeing his men faltering, A/Lt Col James Neville Marshall of the Irish Guards attached to the 16/Lancashire Fusiliers, attempted to cross the hazardous canal encouraging his men, only to be killed. His efforts resulted in a posthumous VC. 2/Lieutenant James Kirk, attached to the 10/Manchesters, also was killed giving covering fire within 10 yards of the enemy, while a bridging party continued work on a temporary bridge. As a result of his actions two platoons crossed the bridge in

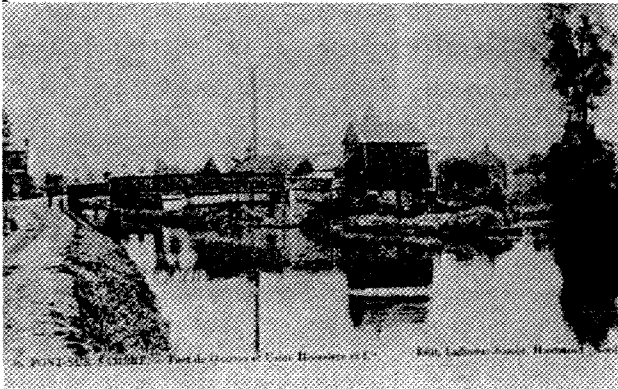
safety. He was also awarded a posthumous VC.

Another fatality was 2/Lieutenant Wilfred E.S. Owen of the 2nd Manchesters. Arguably one of the greatest poets of the First World War, he was 'killed on the towpath on this side of the canal about one kilometre to the North of the Bridge'. He had been leading a raiding party. His gallantry for an earlier action in October 1918 was recognised with a posthumous MC.

VC AWARDED.

Lt (A/Major) Cloutman was in command of the 59th Field Company Royal Engineers and between the 1st and 4 November had been tasked with bringing up bridging and signals equipment to those at the Front.

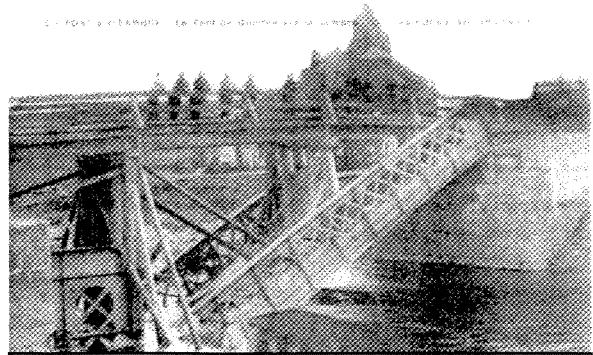
On the 5 November the British 5th Division had been advancing through the Forêt de Mormal, a dense, thick forest that housed many narrow streams and steep banks. The Sambre Oise Canal was laced with numerous villages that were engulfed in orchards and hedged fields – ideal for snipers. Cloutman's Company reached the village of Pont-Sur-Sambre. It had been under German occupation for most of the War and was only taken by the Allies in November 1918. Despite the continuous torrential rain that created mud baths along the canal, patrols were sent down towards the water's edge. The key objective was to capture and maintain bridges so the Allies could cross. Maintaining this objective saw the award of another VC to A/Major Arnold Waters (218th Field Co. RE) for gallantry in supervising the completion of a bridge whilst under point blank fire.



The Quartes Bridge before 1914. Courtesy of Caron Jean-Claude

As dawn broke on Wednesday 6 November, A/Major Cloutman was inspecting the Sambre River crossings and realised that the single span Quartes Bridge, situated near to a cottage and lock had been prepared by the enemy for demolition. The Germans had placed explosive charges at their end of the bridge. A/Major Cloutman's VC citation, gazetted on 31 January 1919 (no. 31155, p1503) recounts the episode: 'For conspicuous bravery on the 6 November 1918 at Pont-Sur-Sambre, Major Cloutman, after reconnoitring the river crossings, found the Quartes Bridge almost intact but prepared for demolition. Leaving his party under cover he went forward alone, swam across the river, and, having cut the 'leads' from the charges, returned the same way, despite the fact that the bridge and all approaches thereto were swept by enemy shells and machine-gun fire at close range. Although the

bridge was blown up later in the day by other means, the abutments remained intact'.



The Quartes Bridge after being destroyed during the War. Courtesy of Caron Jean-Claude

C.S.Lewis once wrote 'Courage is not simply one of the virtues but the form of every virtue at the testing point'. Few could argue that A/Major Cloutman lacked courage at his testing time. His was a cool, calculated valour and the VC citation does not really capture the gravity of the perilous circumstances in which the act was carried out. Cloutman had noticed that the bridge was in rural surroundings and the nearby cottage was packed with machine gunners and a good number of soldiers were concealed along the canal's edge in undergrowth. Feeling that he had a better chance of success by going solo to cut the charges he went out alone after finding sufficient cover and safety for his men. The risks were high, but the rewards for the British, infinite. Ever the serene gentleman, he never let his composure slip. Machine gunners at the cottage windows spotted him and immediately rained concentrated heavy machine gun fire on him and the bridge. He made it to the bridge end, cut the wires and started back the way he had come. The Germans, knowing there was only one way back, waited to ensnare him. Miraculously he managed to dodge the enemy as he crawled along the bank to the water's edge. On reaching the opposite side of the canal he again had to climb onto the bank and make for the safety of his Company's position. All this time murderous machine gun fire was again pointed in his direction but he avoided being hit and escaped with not one injury. The bridge may have been blown up later in the day by the Germans, but the abutments remained solid and of use to the British. Gliddon (2000) comments that '...the building which gave shelter to the German snipers still exists, and the original stone abutments can also be seen today'.

The River is calm tranquillity nowadays, a world away from the mind blowing ferocity of ninety years ago. An odd juxtaposition indeed. In his later years Brett Cloutman did visit France, but never to re visit his war time exploits. Like many holders of the VC he rarely spoke of his endeavours or indeed his experiences in the World Wars. Whether he felt lucky not to have been hit on that fateful day in November 1918 is a moot point.

But as a devout Christian, one feels that his strong faith in God may have given him all the protection he needed.

A/Major Cloutman's was the 634th of the 634 VC's awarded – an act on a day that saw the German Armistice delegates leave Berlin for the Western Front, the formation of the Polish Republic and Germany finally collapse. The War officially ended on Monday 11 November 1918, after 1,568 days.

On the 13 February 1919 A/Major Cloutman MC was invested with the insignia of VC by King George V at Buckingham Palace.

BACK TO CIVVY STREET.

Following demobilisation in 1919 A/Major Cloutman settled into both civilian and married life. During the War he had met and later married Margaret Hunter (known as Peggy) on the 17 February 1916 at Chiswick, West London. Margaret was the daughter of Walter Hunter of Bedford Park, West London. The marriage produced two daughters, Mary and Jill. Jill later married her cousin, John Drew Smythe.

On returning to his previous role in Maple & Co, Brett Cloutman was presented with a writing table by his appreciative colleagues – as a mark of recognition for his courage and tenacity at Pont-Sur-Sambre months earlier. He remained on the Territorial Reserve of Officers.

Although working in the department dealing with hotel, shipping and theatre furnishing contracts offered a respectable commercial future and security, Cloutman had always had a secret passion for the Law. The Bar was a gamble, but one that he was willing to take. Being possessed of a studious temperament it was no surprise amongst his closest colleagues when he decided to forsake the corporate world to follow his dream. He had, to this point been serving as President of Maple & Co in Buenos Aires, South America. He was admitted to Gray's Inn on 2 April 1924 to study Law. In the published results of the Bar Finals, he was well placed in the top echelons of high achievers. Before he was called to the Bar in Trinity Term 1926, to practice as a barrister, he wrote to the Treasurer of the Inn asking him to not to mention his decorations at the Call Ceremony – such was his desire not to be treated any differently to everyone else. Incidentally, Gray's Inn boasts another VC winner – Arthur Fleming-Sandes (France, 1915) who was Judge Advocate General of the Sudan Defence Forces 1942-44).

Cloutman's first position was at 1, Garden Court, Temple where he practised on the Common Law side. Possessed of a quick wit, innate modesty and an unquenchable optimism, he was known to be a formidable opponent in the courtroom. Close friends found him a wise, charming and imposing figure, whose humour smoothed the path of many a discussion that became heated. He was always ready to stand up against anyone adopting a bullying nature. Numerous high profile clients came his way and in April 1932 he gave a spirited defence of the popular US vaudeville star Sophie Tucker (known as the 'Red Hot Mama') who was being prosecuted by HM Customs over silk underwear!

A RECALL TO ARMS.

1940 must have seemed liked a classic case of *déjà vu* for the A/Major because at the age of 48 he was

recalled for service on the 11 March 1940 and commissioned into the Royal Corps of Engineers (Emergency Commission). Reporting to the RE Mess at Aldershot he encountered a situation that was to test his powers of leadership and optimism that had served him so well during the Great War. A group of Sapper officers who had endured harrowing episodes of carnage and unbelievable suffering during the evacuation of Dunkirk had been brought back to Britain physically and emotionally depressed. His response goes some way to uncovering the persona of Brett Cloutman. The RE Journal (1971) comments 'Cloutman's remarkable serene composure and unshakeable optimism was an inspiration to those whose morale was at the time rather shaken'. He restored their faith in humanity, enough for them to fight on for another day.

In 1941 he became Second in Command of 26 Field Company at Dumfries, Scotland. On the 26 February 1943 he was made T/Lt Colonel (later Hon Lt Colonel after April 1946) and was posted to the Middle East where he was Mentioned in Despatches on the 6 January 1944. He saw service in Syria and Egypt where he headed the RE Training & Reinforcement Depot. Never one to shy away from a challenge, his next appointment certainly needed his endless optimism. He became CRE Levant Engineer Battalion RE of a multi-racial unit in Italy tasked with road construction. The mixture of Arabic speaking Syrian/Lebanese, Greek Cypriots, British Officers and NCO's conjures up an image of Lee Marvin making a fighting force in "The Dirty Dozen". A motley crew became, in Cloutman's words, 'a well behaved body of men'. The group's efforts were acknowledged in the 1950 RE Journal – thanks in no small part to the strength of Cloutman's influence and leadership.

THE POLITICAL CONSCIENCE

The end of the War saw Brett Cloutman return to the legal profession. After twenty years of practice he finally took Silk and on the 12 April 1946 became a King's Counsel (KC), later QC, as well as a Divorce Commissioner. Throughout his life, the common themes of faith and civic justice is ever present. A self styled 'Christian Socialist', he was an active member of the Labour Party from 1945 up until 1948 on his appointment as Official Referee of the Supreme Court of Judicature. In 1945 he was appointed to the executive committee of the Finchley Labour Party and stood, unsuccessfully at the Finchley West Ward in the same year. His leadership of the Finchley Group was known to be dynamic and far seeing. In June of 1946 he participated in the London Victory Parade.

ARISE, SIR BRETT.

In 1947 Cloutman accepted an appointment as Senior Chairman, War Pensions (Special Review) Tribunal. The following year he also became Official Referee (A Specialist Judge in the area of Construction Law) – a post he held until 1963. From 1954-1963 he was also Senior Official Referee in the Supreme Court of Judicature.

On the 100th Anniversary of the VC, he attended the Hyde Park celebrations on the 26 June 1956. Together with three hundred other holders of the Cross,

he paraded under the direction of General Freyberg in the presence of HM Queen Elizabeth II. Brett Cloutman's contribution to the Law and Civic Life was recognised in the summer of 1957 with his appointment of Imperial Order of Knight Bachelor (KBE). In 1958 he was present at the first meeting of the Victoria and George Cross Association in London. Housed at Horse Guards, Whitehall, the Association still provides a lasting memorial to the bravest of the brave.

COMMUNITY SPIRIT.

Although his legal appointments were high profile and consumed much of his time, Sir Brett held numerous interests and was co-opted onto various committees in and around North London. He was twice Master of The Worshipful Company of Glass Sellers (1939-40 and 1965-66) and was honoured with the Jewel of a Past Master on his retirement from the post.

He became President of the Metropolitan Union of the YMCA and was held in extremely high regard by all who worked with him.

The YMCA had featured in Sir Brett's life from childhood. His father, Alfred wanted to create, from a Christian point of view, a recreational centre for ex-service personnel and other young men at the start of their careers. This impetus to develop this centre stemmed from the death of Brett's elder brother Wolfred in 1915, Alfred never forgetting the pain of losing a child to War. He re-established Hornsey YMCA in 1929 and held the Presidency of the organisation until his death, aged seventy three in 1933. Sir Brett succeeded as President in 1951 (the War having hampered any long term commitments). In 1959 he helped to develop the Hornsey Carnival into a format that is still used today. In the same year he was instrumental in securing funds for a building on the bomb damaged site next to the YMCA building. A further floor was added to the annexe and was named "The Sir Brett Cloutman Wing" on its completion, and dedicated in his memory by the then Bishop of London on March 22 1974. By all accounts he was extremely popular with the staff and membership of the organisation. Sadly the day after his death the General Secretary of the Hornsey Branch received a letter bestowing on Sir Brett the YMCA's highest honour, The Golden Order of the Red Triangle.

Eltham College in South East London boasted Sir Brett as a Governor in 1965 until ill health forced him to step down in 1966, the year he celebrated his Golden Wedding anniversary. For relaxation, Sir Brett often frequented his Gentleman's Club, The Athenaeum on Pall Mall. In addition he was Chairman of the Brotherhood of the Ferme Park Baptist Church. Bishop's Stortford College is a Congregational Foundation and Eltham College was (and in theory still is) a school for the sons of non-conformist missionaries. Most of the attendees were Congregationalists or Baptists, hence the possible link with Eltham College.

They say that you can take the man out of the army but not the army out of the man. This is certainly true of Sir Brett for he never lost his affiliation with the Sappers. He was a member of the elite 'Blythe

Sappers' (1) and often attended reunions with the 59th Field Squadron which was renamed the 59 Independent Commando Squadron RE on 1 April 1971.

In 1969 Sir Brett created a Trust to allow for The Cloutman Award. Presented annually to the most promising Lance Corporal of the Squadron irrespective of cap or badge, the engraved pewter tankard is awarded on the 6 November – the anniversary of Sir Brett's VC action.

In November 1970, a year before his death, Sir Brett gifted to the Royal Engineers his collection of medals. These included: VC, BWM, Victory, 1939-45 Star, Africa Star, Italy Star, Defence Medal, Coronation Medals 1937 & 1953. In addition, he bequeathed his Badge of Knight Bachelor and Past Master Jewel (from The Worshipful Company of Glass Sellers).

On Sunday 15 August 1971 Sir Brett returned home to his flat, 2 Old Hall, Highgate, North London following his weekly meeting with the Secretary of the YMCA. Whilst resting in an armchair he quietly passed away in his sleep some three months short of his eightieth birthday; a tranquil end to a life that had seen so much action. Two days later on the 17 August he was given a YMCA funeral and cremated at the West Chapel, Golders Green Crematorium, North London. Lady Margaret Cloutman succeeded her husband as Hornsey YMCA President and remained active, especially with the Women's Auxiliary until her death on the 20 December 1976.

Some fifty-six years after the death of his brother, both were reunited when, in accordance with Sir Brett's wishes, his ashes were scattered on Wolfred's grave (Plot 1, Row A, Grave 14) in Norfolk Cemetery, Albert, France.

The name of Sir Brett Cloutman lives on. The Cloutman Award is supported by a Troop of the RE that still bears his name, as does a barrack block at HQ E-in-C (A), Gibraltar Barracks at Minley. All 634 World War One winners of the VC displayed the best qualities of courage, optimism and duty. With Sir Brett, he continued the best till last.

Footnote

(1) The Blythe Sappers were formed in 1945, its membership is limited and by invitation only. It is named after Ormonde A Blyth, President of the London *Devonshire Club* from 1941-46 in recognition of his kindness and consideration given to its members. Entry is by commissioned service in any past or constituent part of the Royal Engineers. Its purpose is to '*foster good comradeship amongst Sappers, serving or retired*'. In its early days it helped fellow Sappers secure employment on demobilisation. Still active today, donations are raised and given to various associations that have links with the Royal Engineers.

SOURCES AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS:

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M Caron Jean-Claude.
Louis Lewis, Director, & Bill Leyland, Hornsey YMCA.
Archivists at The Royal Engineers Museum, Chatham Kent (for supplying the Sir Brett Cloutman obituary, RE Journal 1971)
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