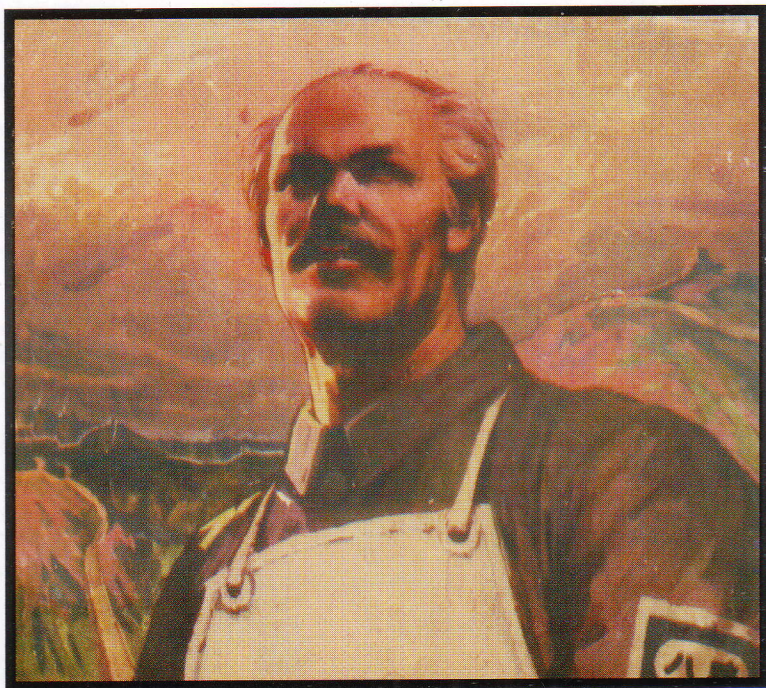


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**LIFE AND DEEDS
OF
NORMAN BETHUNE**

1890 TO 1939

**Edited by
BIMAL CHATTERJEE**

The Spirit of Absolute Selflessness

Dr. Norman Bethune was the third child of Malcolm Nicholson Bethune and Elizabeth Ann Goodwin. He was born in March, 1890 in the Northern Ontario town of Gravenhurst in Canada.

The parents of Norman Bethune became missionaries and they were full of love for mankind, which had great effect in the mind of small Norman from his childhood days.

His early education was spread over a number of schools in different towns, but he finally graduated from a public school at Toronto.

Amongst the ideas young Bethune was absorbed at college, was Darwin's theory of evolution.

When Norman Bethune was studying in a University he earned his pocket money by delivering newspapers to earn his tuition fees. He worked as a waiter in the University canteen, then as a fireman in a steamer.

When he was twenty four, the First World War burst before his dreams and plans. He had one year left to get his M.D., but he joined the armed forces the day Canada declared war. He left for France as a stretcher-boy with the 1st Canadian Division Field Ambulance.

After the war he returned to the University to take his degree. He enlisted himself in the British Navy & worked there till 1918.

After some years he had arrived at London. In London in the early twenties, Bethune worked hard for "Success". There was time for the hospital and time for study too.

In 1923 he went to Edinburgh for his FRCS examination. After this, he married Frances Campbell, the only daughter of a prominent Edinburgh family. Before hand a pattern of frustration, antagonism and misunderstanding was established between them.

In 1924 Dr. & Mrs. Norman Bethune rented a flat in Detroit. That time they were passing through acute financial stringency. Slowly, he was gaining a name and they saw good time coming in, slowly, fortune smiled on them. He had managed to get himself attached to one of the city hospitals performing routine surgery. One day, in the hospital he was introduced to Dr. Grant Martin. Dr. Martin was full of praise for him. At Dr. Martin's house, Dr. Bethune and his wife met eminent doctors. Money now began to pour in.

At the hospital he began to move ahead in surgery applying the skills and techniques he had learned under the masters in Europe.

His wife rarely saw him now. He was always in his office, or out on calls.

Soon he fell sick of tuberculosis due to over work. In this condition, one day, he told his wife, "I am dying. I am finished - your whole life is ahead of you. I want you to divorce me and go your own way". Frances did not agree initially. When Dr. Bethune said "I won't leave for sanatorium until you agree to divorce me". That had defeated her. What a soul he had possessed.

He arrived in Toronto and his parents took him to Gravenhurst. After some time he gained admittance at Saranac Lake Hospital.

One day, he was reading a book titled "The Surgery of Pulmonary Tuberculosis" by Dr. John Alexander. The whole night Bethune read the book. He became very much excited. When dawn came, his bed lamp was still burning. At last he let the book fall away, and it was a long time till he slept.

For the next few days he spent most of his time in the staff library, searching for everything published on surgery for pulmonary tuberculosis. He started pneumothoracic treatment on himself.

Two months after he had received his first artificial pneumothorax he was x-rayed for the last time. He was completely fit.

The cavities in the lung had healed under pneumothorax and a temporary phrenictomy. There was no sign of infection.

In January 1929 Dr. Bethune reached Detroit. He was given a rousing welcome by his friends. At his old hospital he had performed enough surgery & got some ready money. Then he had gone to the Newyork State Tuberculosis hospital at Ray Brook where he had worked for two years. After some time he joined McGill University's teaching staff.

Fortunately, he was re-united with Frances. With Frances back home, he felt that all was renewed. He was the complete man now.

When he was working with Dr. Archibald he redesigned stripper. Not only the stripper his mind turned with new technique, new approaches, designs for new instruments.

Whatever, the results of the experiments shown to his colleagues, in the chronology of Bethune's rapidly developing career, they recognised him with formal confirmation as an innovator. During this time, at the instance of one Mr. Pilling, Bethune prepared rough skeleton of his pnenmothorax apparatus and half a dozen of other instruments.

At this juncture, Bethune's overwhelming sense of dedication towards his profession and invention made his wife Frances very much irritated and upset. She wanted a divorce. He had no other option left, but to agree.

Bethune experimented further along the same lines. He published his findings in the March 1935 in a Canadian Medical Association Journal and the Journal of Thoracic Surgery.

There were the years now to work, growth, achievement and recognition.

In the world at large he noted a disturbing contradiction. Millions were without clothes, and the United States ploughed under its cotton fields. Tens of millions were hungry, but Canada burnt its wheat. On street corners men begged a nickle for a cup of coffee. But Brazil dumped its coffee into the sea. In Montreal's working class districts the children were roaming with their ricketing legs, but oranges from the South were destroyed by carloads. To Bethune it began to appear as if some mass mania had laid hold of the world. Night seemed to be day and day never seemed to come. The process of transformation grew in him rapidly.

In March, 1935 Hitler roared in Berlin. Baldwin talked of collective security at Downing Street, while Chamberlin awaited the summons to destroy it. The peasants, workers and middle class of Spain stirred restlessly. In China civil war pursued its zigzag course. Things were going well at the hospital; Bethune's ideas and techniques were making headway. But, he was very much worried for the thousands of people who were unable to go to the TB clinics because they had no money. He told the doctors that they should rather go to the slums, the districts where the need was surmounting. He became very much concerned about socio-economic issues. One day when he saw

the demonstrators who were shouting for milk for their children, bread for their wives & jobs for them, he became quite disturbed.

The next day he went to the meeting of Montreal Unemployed Association and told them, "I am Dr. Norman Bethune. Any man, woman and child you send to me will get medical treatment free of charge. By next week I hope to have another 10 doctors doing the same" He now went to the patients' houses, accompanied them to meeting where orators spoke movingly of the plight of the jobless, met their leaders, made friends with people who called themselves communists, socialists & liberals. He became completely a changed person. In his own words "They had handed me a new Honorary Degree: I am now a Doctor of medicine, a Fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons and "Comrade Beth". It is an honourable title. I feel I have set my feet on a new road....."

It led him first to the Soviet Union. In 1935 he came to Leningrad to attend an International Physiological Congress. He utilised this opportunity by spending the rest of his time "looking at the people" and investigating on tuberculosis Therapy.

After he came back from Russia and attended a meeting held on 20th Sept. 1935 at Montreal he said that "I went to Russia primarily to look at the Russians and what they were doing about eradication of tuberculosis".

Just at this time, the fascists were moving towards Madrid. He was frustrated when he read the communiques from Spain. A committee to "Aid Spanish Democracy was formed in Toronto". The committee had agreed that the one man in Canada to head the unit would be Dr. Bethune. Bethune said, "The insanity is spreading too quickly". They have begun in Germany, in Japan, now in Spain, they will turn the whole World into a slaughter house".

He left for Spain and reached Madrid on Nov. 3, 1936. The enemy's shelling was going off and on. Madrid was under curfew. For thirty seven days the city had been fighting for its life. Then the idea of defence was as natural and automatic in the lives of people as eating and sleeping.

Bethune made a swift tour of the city's military hospitals where the tensions and uncertainties were such that he could get few definite answers to the questions he asked about the medical situations at the front. He worked with army surgeons at several base hospitals. There he studied the types of wounds the soldiers suffered and kept note on the percentage of fatalities and the recoveries after surgery.

When he had become certain of what was missing in the army's medical services he went back to Dr. Kisch, one of the Chief Medical officers of the International Brigade, to outline his project that had taken shape in his mind. The main difficulty was storing blood. The problem was to provide transfusion directly at the front, as close to the battlefield as possible. Bethune was convinced that it was feasible, and could result in a sharp decrease in deaths among the wounded.

He was proposing the organisation a mobile blood transfusion unit that would gather blood from volunteers in the cities, store it, make it available to casualty stations and field hospitals and above all, provide transfusions at the front while fighting was in progress. Indeed Dr. Bethune made a medical history.

Dr. Bethune sent a cable to the Spanish Aid Committee in Toronto. He outlined the situation and appealed for immediate action. His appeal was granted with fund. A history was created in blood transfusion technology. Dr. Bethune would be counted as the first to offer his life for every life he salvaged from the terror that was engulfing Spain and the world.

On Dec. 6, 1936, Dr. Bethune returned to Madrid and set up one blood transfusion unit with the help of Spanish authorities. On December 23rd, the first transfusion from the stored blood delivered by the mobile Spanish – Canadian blood unit was given to University City.

In November and December of 1936 France had made Madrid the hub of the war. Bethune now thought of extending his work of the Institute. It was a war of blood and iron, and blood had to follow the fighting. On 4th February 1937 he left the Institute and set out for Malaga. Malaga was a dangerous spot. They followed the coastline, feeling the tension growing in every town along their route. On Feb 10th they reached Almeria and heard the worst, Malaga had fallen. Bethune's journey did not stop. They were 169 kms away from the Fascists from the front.

While passing they saw many refugees moving to save themselves from the enemy stations at Malaga. Hundreds and thousands of young, old and children with their bewildered faces were running away.

As the coast fell and their truck drove between fields of sugarcane, Bethune then unloaded everything from the truck and took the children to Almaria and they are the begun to more the whole families. The condition was so horrible that Dr. Bethune and his company could not take rest. France was killing the hundreds and thousand of people who left Malaga.

Dr. Bethune began to treat the wounded people with the materials whatever was left out.

In the memory of Almeria, he vowed, he would have to change himself, to crush all weaknesses and vanities, to live as the soldiers live, to make himself a man of steel- as only man of steel would be able to defend the world struggling to be born.

On his return to Madrid he pushed the work of the blood unit with increased energy.

Between regular trips to the front he brooded over an idea that had haunted him since Malaga- the thousands of children, orphaned by the war needed help. The hardpressed government had taken some measures to cope with the situation, but Bethune decided that a special project was needed that would draw support from the outside world. With the help from Spanish Aid Committee in Toronto he set up first two villages in Barcelona for the children.

Back in Madrid once more Bethune extended the work of the unit to cover the whole of the Central Front.

On 6th June, 1937 he left for home, with a cheeriest memory of the success of blood transfusion methods he had introduced at the fronts by which fatalities among the wounded had been drastically reduced, in some sectors as much as 75 percent.

He was going home , with the memory of all he had seen and been and done in Spain, “ to rouse the sleepers....”

On 18th June, 1937 Bethune arrived in Montril. He was given a grand reception outside the station.

At the reception he said ,”I am a doctor, a surgeon, my job is to sustain human life, in all its beauty and vigour, I am not a politician. But I went to Spain because the politicians betrayed Spain and tried to drag the rest of us into their betrayal.....”.

In one of his speeches he declared, “In Spain, fascism has attacked 2 crores 40 lakhs people, with the US, Britain and France embargoing the loyalists. Now, in China, the attack has spread against nearly one quarter of the total population of the earth. If the same treacherous policy of the blockading the victims and making arrangements with the aggression is continued, we may well wonder whether any man, woman or child is safe any where in the world”.



He now had several meetings to address in Canada so as to wind up of his tour. Passing through Toronto he joined the Communist Party.

He had been hoping to return to Spain as a surgeon, but events in the Far East were focusing attention on the battle of the Chinese people against invasion. He had no intention of ever again joining in private practice. Spain needed help, but some help was being given. In China doctors were needed even more urgently than in Spain. In New York, China Aid Control had been set up headed by Madam Sun Yet-Sen, widow of the First President of Chinese Republic. The Council's programme was sending of medical aid to the guerrillas fighting the Japanese in Northern China. Bethune had volunteered to take a medical unit to northern China to work with the guerrillas. On 2nd January, 1938 he left for Vancouver on the Empress of Japan for Hongkong, taking with him enough equipment and supplies to outfit a few surgery unit.

On the verge of his going to China, he wrote a letter to his wife Frances, where he said "Spain and China are part of the same battle, I am going to China because I feel that is where the need is greatest, that is where I can be more useful".

On 20th January 1938 Bethune reached Hongkong. Three days later in Hongkong, he set with the National Government headed by Chiang-Kai-Shek.

During this time civil war started in China because of Chiang-Kai-Shek's policy for destruction of the working class, peasants and physical extermination of the Communist Party. The first stage of the people's united effort to achieve a democratic, independent China was over betrayed by the Koomintang in an unparallal blood bath.

Taking advantage of the civil war Japan jumped with the gun on her .

However, Mao-Tse-Tung United the Communist armies and people and called for a more flexible strategy of mobile warfare.

Atleast, the civil war come to an end to join all the focus of the Chinese people in resistance to Japanese aggression.

On 28th Feb 1938 Bethune was required to travel 300 miles westward on foot and by mule Cart to get to Yen-an through the dropping of Japanese bombs off and on.

Bethune did not waste a single minute time. He started dressing the wounded soldiers and civilians in the coldest night with two inches of snow on the ground.

Bethune and his team reached Yen-an at last. He was given a warm reception. On the evening of the second day he was invited to a conference with Mao-Tse-Tung, leader of Chinese Communist Party. They discussed about Bethune's experience in Spain and Mao told him about China. The strategy of Bethune to take the mobile unit to the front was approved by Mao.

As Mao escorted him to the door he assured Bethune of the fullest cooperation of the military command.

Bethune spent three weeks in Yen-an. On April 24, 1938 Bethune and his team set out for a tour of the hospitals at the front 200 miles north of Yen-an. Where road came to an end they had to continue on foot.

In June, Bethune had arrived in Chin-Cha-Chi. He wrote, "I am in the centre of the war, now I can truly taste the strange exalted flavour of this stupendous struggle".

At this time he required fund, wrote to New York, China Aid Council, he mentioned in a letter, "I did eight operations to-day. I am tired but enormously content".

Now, Bethune was made the medical chief of the 8th Route Army in Chin-Cha-Chi and as medical advisor to the Chin-Cha-Chi Government.

His first act in his new role was to draft plans for the re-organisation of one of the primitive base hospital as a model hospital for the Chin-Cha-Chi district.

One day, a group of 56 wounded was brought across the mountains from the north. Supervising their admittance Bethune found that most of them, though seriously injured, could be expected to do well after surgery. He felt that a volunteer corps of blood donors required to be formed. With the villages the first volunteer Blood Donor Corps was organised in China.

The Model Hospital was set up in Chin-Cha-Chi Military District. In the hospital he brought a sense of discipline among the doctors, nurses and other staff. He told them, **"Talk is no substitute for action. Words were invented by man to describe action. Use them for their original purpose"**.

Following the above principles it was possible to fulfill the five-weeks plan for making the Model Hospital within the scheduled time.

A legend began to grow. He was a man, it was said, who never grew weary. He would travel to the highest mountain peak to tend casualties. He

would leave no man's side till there was nothing more to do. He could do the work of many men without rest. He slept only when there was no work to be done in the open, in village huts, in caves. His anger, when he was delayed, or when he was irritated by inefficiency, could shake those around him like thunderclap.

But his eyes shown with love for the soldiers he treated, and for all the wounded his first words in Chinese were: "My son...."

When word of fresh fighting reached him, Bethune was averaging ten operations a day, preparing the equipment for new medical teams and giving them special daily lectures. He used to say to the doctors, **"Doctors go to the wounded. Don't wait for the wounded to come to you"**.

Now the Japanese had gone, and in a few days the town people would be back again. rebuilding their homes, taking up where they had left off, ready to retreat once more should the Japanese break through.

In the middle of November Bethune's medical unit travelled to Wu Tai Shan to confer with general Nieh.

Bethune was moving with his caravan from one place to another. During this time Bethune worked for 24 hours, operating the wounded soldiers.

Once, Bethune said slowly in Chinese, "I am making my first speech in Chinese. I am proud to be able to help and take care of our wounded. In Canada, and in the United States, there are many people who support your struggle against imperialism. I am honoured to work and fight with you. I shall work and fight with you for the rest of my life". To Chinese people, he became "Pai Chu En".

Now the Japanese began their long waited offensive. Japanese began to bombard the villages again. Bethune and his team were operating the wounded one after another.

On the progress of war he spoke with confidence, "In my opinion the Japanese can never conquer. I think it is a physical impossibility. The country is too big, the people too numerous, the filling among the people too intense".

This time Bethune's fingers got infected. It was badly swollen. His colleagues suggested to stop operating until it healed. He did not accept their suggestion. Rather, wanted to move on to the next station in the next morning. His eyes were dull. He was running high temperature. His hand was about to burst. Still he was ready to leave for the next destination.

They rode towards the front. Bethune lay quietly, sometimes sleeping, sometimes with his eyes open. He no longer tried to hide the pain. His temperature rose above 40 deg. Centigrade.

Even at this condition, he insisted on taking his place in the operating theatre, but his colleagues forcibly refrained him from doing so. The next day his condition became worse again, now the spreading infection had engulfed the elbow.

On Nov. 9, 1939 Bethune's condition got worse. On Nov. 10, he arrived at Yellowstone village. The doctors took all the emergency measures to save the precious life.

In his death bed Bethune uttered his last words in a firm voice. "Fight on! Continue along the great road and carry the cause forward."

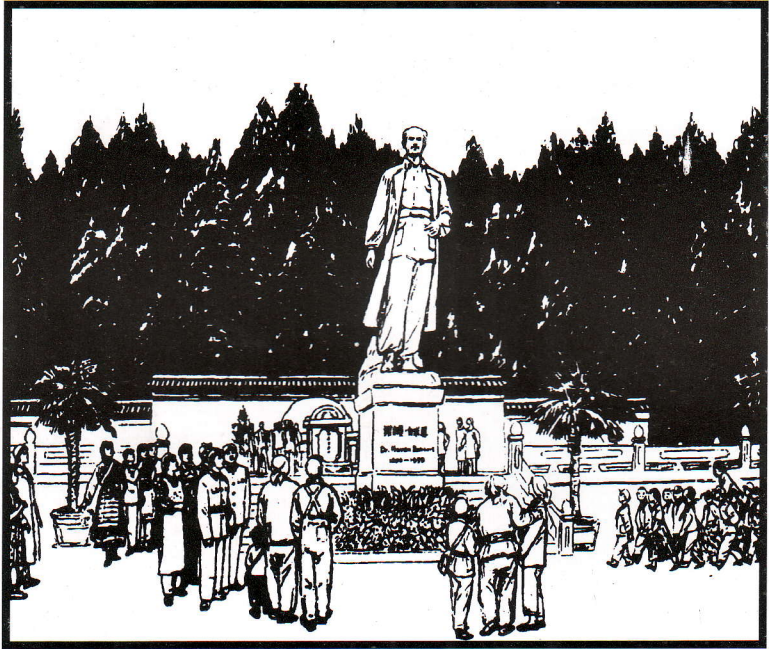
In the early morning of Nov. 13, 1939 Bethune, the great Internationalist and fighter laid down his precious life while working for the cause of mankind.

On December 21, 1939 Chairman Mao wrote the brilliant essay "In memory of Norman Bethune" calling on the Chinese people to learn from him.

In 1952, the remains of Bethune were moved to North China Martyrs' Cemetery in Sia-Chia-Chung City, Hopei. Bethune, the great Internationalist fighter, will live forever in the hearts of the millions upon millions of the whole world.

Based on :

1. The Scalpel - The Sword by Ted Allan and Sydney Gordon
2. Norman Bethune in China - Adapted by Chung Chin-Chang



My conscience discerned such a great man in
Com. Bethune whose every step in life revealed
the noblest aspects of human life.

— *Bimal Chatterjee*

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