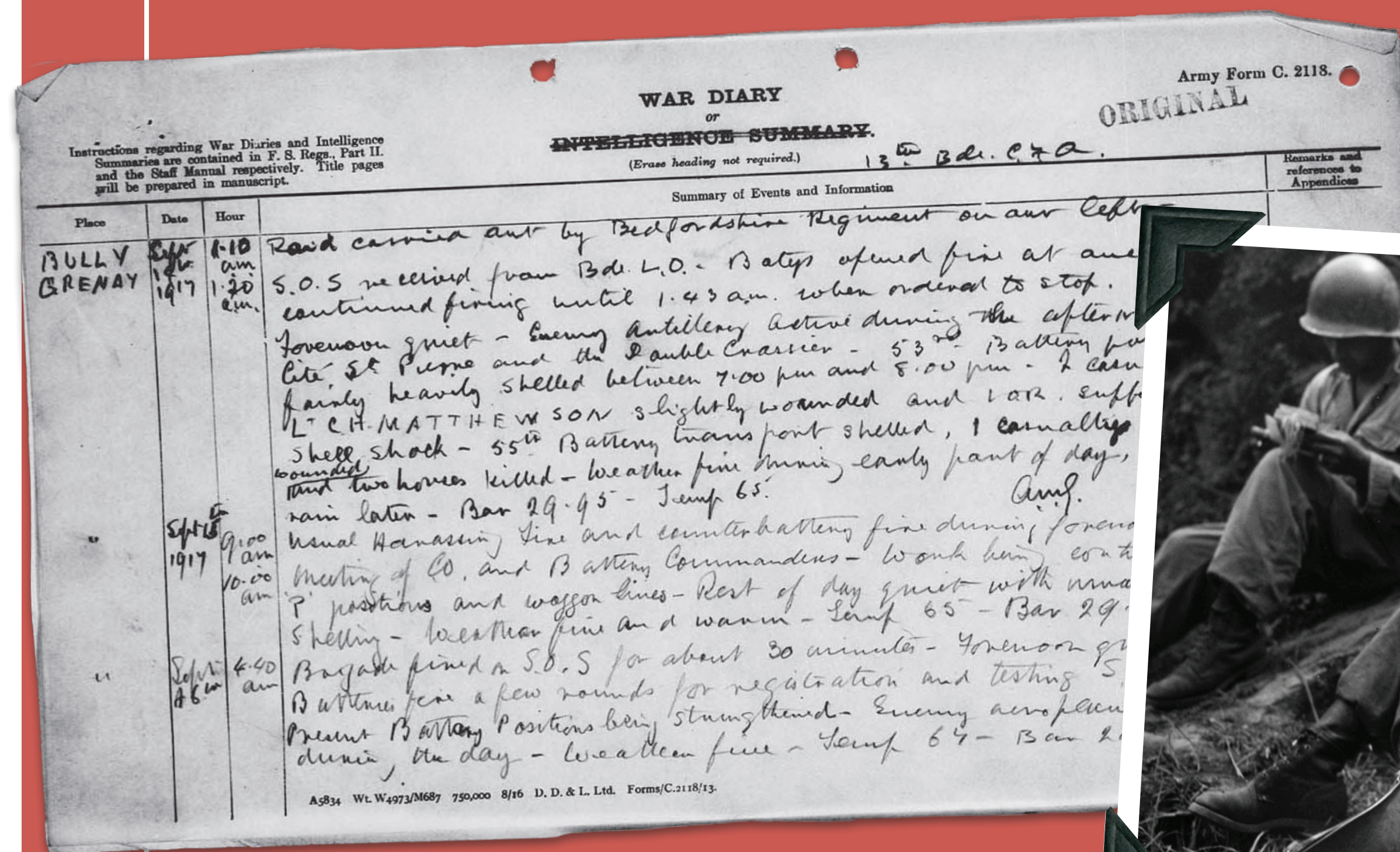


COBOURG'S ONTARIO MILITARY CONVALESCENT HOSPITAL



As the First World War raged on in Europe, more and more soldiers returned with a poorly understood condition. Now known as post traumatic stress disorder, doctors diagnosed nearly 10,000 Canadians with shell shock during the First World War.

While the conflict began in 1914, Cobourg's role in helping the war wounded didn't start until two years later. In 1916 the Ontario government announced the Cobourg Insane Asylum, formerly Victoria College, on University Street would become a military hospital.

The government had purchased the college property in 1897, but with the conversion of the asylum to a military convalescent hospital major alterations were required. First the asylum patients were transferred to Whitby. Then a large wing designed by W.L Symons was added to the north end of the building and an even larger "H-shaped" wing added to the east end. While the north wing remains, the H-shaped wing was demolished in 1987.

The Ontario Military Convalescent Hospital served as a central military psychiatric hospital during the latter stages of the war for the more serious chronic care shell shock cases. As a result there were some suicides and disappearances from the hospital particularly from 1918 to 1919. In July of 1919, during Peace Day ceremonies in Cobourg, a shell shocked patient from the hospital shoved a hat pin into his chest. Medical treatment ranged from the gentle to the cruel. Freudian techniques of talk and physical therapy helped many victims, while more extreme methods involved electric shock therapy.

Sources: Canadian War Museum, historian John Gilinsky, Canadian Historic Places, Victoria Retirement Home, Cobourg and Toronto newspaper articles.

According to Douglas C. McMurtrie in *The Disabled Soldier* (1919):

Various occupations have been introduced into the hospitals and convalescent homes of our allies as a means of refitting nervously shattered men for the business of life. At the Central Hospital for Nervous Diseases at Cobourg, Ontario, to which are sent the severer shock cases among the Canadian returned soldiers, patients are started at some simple occupational work such as basketry or clay modeling; as they become capable of greater effort, they are directed to carpentry, pottery, or gardening.

In January 1918, the unusual and apparently successful treatment of one patient at the hospital involved encouraging him to play golf—a sport he was interested in before the war.

The Ontario Military Convalescent Hospital served as one of the birthplaces of psychiatric nursing in Canada as psychiatrists needed to train both male and female nurses in this specialization.

In 1921 the hospital became the Ontario Hospital Cobourg and served as an institution for the developmentally handicapped. The building now houses Victoria Retirement Living.

