

He received an A-1 rating

Bill had become a lieutenant in the COTC and, naturally enough, decided that he could best serve his country in the army. He breezed through his medical examination with an A-1 rating—an important fact to remember in this story.

But then the powers-that-be took note of his outstanding scholastic record and the fact that he was a master of science with honors in chemistry. No army for this young man, they ruled, for we need men of his calibre in defence research and development.

And so, on July 1, 1943, Bill Maynard found himself behind a desk in the offices of the National Research Council (NRC) in Ottawa.

He was 23 at the time—more importantly, he was a “healthy, robust” 23, his wife recalls.

Evelyn joined Bill in Ottawa when he found a place in which to live, and she soon found a job in a drug store.

“I spent most of my time in Ottawa with the NRC reading extensively,” Bill says. “It was literature pertaining to high explosives. Also, I helped to draw up plans for a small experimental plant to be set up in Valcartier, Que., by NRC. On Sept. 25 I was transferred, or seconded, to the plant which was, in fact, an artillery proving establishment designed to test high explosives for use in the war.”

Because Bill had no luck finding a place for both of them to live, Evelyn returned to stay with her parents at their home near Godfrey.

Bill remembers going to Quebec, but he remembers nothing of his few weeks there.

He does, however, remember this much: “I know that when I left for Valcartier, I was in good physical condition. A month before my transfer from Ottawa I had a medical and again was classified as A-1.

“And I also remember that on the Sunday before I left, Ev and I went for a walk of about four or five miles. I must have been in good shape to have walked that far.

“After that, I’m afraid, I have to rely on what

people have told me, on files and on Ev’s excellent memory.”

What Bill cannot remember is an explosion of some sort which occurred as he worked in the laboratory on either Oct. 14 or 15. No one is sure of the exact date.

Evelyn picks up the story at this point:

“I had only been back home with mother and father for about two or three weeks and they had gone on a holiday to visit my sister in Arnprior.

“On a Monday morning Bill phoned me. He sounded strange. He said he felt very sick. A couple of days later, when I found out that he had been admitted to Jeffery Hale Hospital in Quebec City, I caught a train for there as soon as I could.”

Bill, today, only vaguely remembers something about an index finger becoming stiff and the skin beginning to peel from his hands. Beyond that—nothing.

He wrote letter after accident

In point of fact, shortly after the mysterious accident he wrote a brief letter to his parents in Orillia. It was a garbled, rambling sort of letter in which he wrote of not feeling well. To this day he has no recollection of ever writing it.

He didn’t realize it at the time, but he was very ill indeed.

Evelyn recalls knowing, just as soon as she first saw him in the hospital, that her husband was extremely ill.

“Bill, as sick as he was,” she says, “told me there had been a small explosion in the lab. But he said he didn’t think it had been serious enough to report the fact to his superiors.”

That, as it turned out, was a grave error of judgment on the part of the young scientist. Later, officials were to go so far as to deny that there had ever been any explosion involving Bill Maynard.

In the next two weeks Bill’s condition worsened. But that’s a gross understatement, because during that period, the “healthy, robust” young man became blind, paralysed, irrational and suffered loss of speech.

Doctors at Jeffery Hale Hospital could not diagnose the illness of their young patient. When his condition continued to deteriorate, he was transferred to Montreal Neurological Institute on Oct. 29.

Dr. Francis L. McNaughton, one of Bill’s attending physicians there, was to write later, in a 1949 report:

“The history we received was that the patient was in his usual good health at the end of September. Shortly after going to Valcartier he did not feel quite right, complaining of indigestion. About Oct. 15 he felt weak and tired, and staggered when he walked. On Oct. 19, when his wife saw him, his face was drawn and grey and he looked tired, but his only complaint was weakness. His gait was unsteady and he lifted his feet higher than normally in walking. He had difficulty in focusing his eyes.

Weakness gradually increased

“About Oct. 27 he became drowsy and his speech was indistinct. Three days earlier he had complained of being unable to move his right foot, and the weakness gradually increased to involve the entire right leg and arm. Irritability was also noted.”

Here Dr. McNaughton touched on an area which was to become a subject of controversy and the source of suffering and privation for the Maynards for the next 35 years:

“According to the reports received, there was a possible exposure to a number of toxic agents in the laboratory in Valcartier, including methyl alcohol, carbon monoxide and sulphur dioxide.”