On November 20, 1941, Colonel A. Austin Eagger was posted to the Airborne Division and proceeded to organize a very efficient medical service, an organization which stood the test of time and proved itself worthy of the Airborne Forces in peace and war.

In the summer of 1942 Colonel Eagger founded the Airborne Medical Society and threw the membership open to all officers serving in the Airborne Medical Services so that the meetings of the society were attended by both medical and dental officers.

As Assistant Director of Medical Services of the First British Airborne Division he held it to be essential that his medical officers should not merely be good soldiers but that they should be good doctors too. Therefore, at this time clinical meetings were held for the purpose of maintaining a high standard of professional performance in the field and of keeping in touch with current events in medicine and surgery.

In this respect the founder was so very wise because medical officers of all grades in the Army tended to feel shut off from their normal work and usual contacts.

In touch

But by attending these meetings they were able to meet their colleagues, to discuss the common problems and to hear of the recent advances in medicine and surgery from renowned specialists, which was all the more important because under the stimulus of war, events were moving rapidly and new discoveries came crowding in thick and fast.

At the express wish of Colonel Eagger there was no formality at these meetings: for a brief but refreshing hour “rank” was disregarded and the most junior officer could argue, discuss and disagree with his seniors in a most friendly atmosphere.

The meetings of the Airborne Medical Society were always well attended and were generally followed by a social hour—or several hours—in which everyone relaxed and forgot the war. To these parties came the transport officers and the quartermasters and even the chaplains, all of whom were very much part of the Airborne Medical Services.

Among the distinguished visitors who addressed the society in 1942 was the late Sir Harold Gillies, and after his address the members were privileged to watch him operating upon a facial scar in the theatre at Park Prewett Hospital, Basingstoke.

Another distinguished visitor, the late Lord Florey, then Dr. Howard Florey, addressed the members of the Airborne Medical Society in an olive grove near Sousse in North Africa sometime in the spring of 1943.

Since 1948 it has been the custom to hold the annual general meeting followed by the annual dinner on the night of the Calcutta Cup Match, and these functions are held alternately in London and Edinburgh.

Originally members of the society comprised those who had served in First or Sixth British Airborne Divisions or in the Special Air Services during the war or immediately afterwards. But following the reconstitution of the Territorial Army in 1947 and the formation of 16th Airborne Division T.A. the society welcomed the entry of younger medical and dental officers and encouraged the non-medical officers and transport officers to become full members.
This pattern has remained to this day despite the cutting of the T.A. Airborne Division down to one Brigade (44 Independent Para. Bde. Gp. T.A.) and then the even further reduction to one airborne section of a field ambulance under the latest scaling down of the Reserve Army, but fortunately the Regular Army Parachute Field Ambulance remains active: thus from all these sources the society draws its members which at present number about 220.

The Airborne Medical Society has taken upon itself the publication of a history of the Airborne Medical Services 1940-1960 (On Wings of Healing, by Lt.-Col. H. N. Cole, Blackwood & Sons Ltd. Edinburgh. Price 30s.).

This gives a full account of the formation of the Airborne Medical Services under Colonel A. A. Eagger and tells the story from the very early days: Bruneval, North Africa, Sicily, the invasion of Italy and the South of France, the D-day landings in Normandy and the holding of the eastern flank of the Allied armies until the advance to the Seine; then the ill fortune of all arms at Arnhem and the inspired manner in which the Airborne Medical Services coped with many of the sick and wounded of First Airborne Division after the main body had withdrawn.

Following an account of the swift advances to the Baltic coast after the Rhine crossing, the author concludes by giving an account of the campaigns in Palestine and of the T.A. Parachute Fd. Amb. as it was in 1962.

History has dated "the history" a little, because there is no mention of Cyprus, Suez, the Radfan and Aden. Nevertheless, as the junior members meet the oldest members at the annual dinner these gaps and omissions are filled in, and who knows? there may well be a second volume of "the history" in the years to come.

Membership costs 5s per year and further details can be obtained from the Secretary, Dr. J. S. Binning, Medical Department, Eastern Region, Marylebone Station, London, N.W.1.

(Originally published 25 October 1968 and reproduced by kind permission of the Editor, Medical News).