

## CAPTAIN THOMAS VICTOR SOMERVILLE DSO OBE MC AND BAR (1896-1904)

<b>Date of Birth</b>	18 March 1887 in Ceylon (now Sri Lanka)
<b>School Information</b>	Brother of David Somerville (1896-1902) and William Somerville (1896-1899) who was killed in WW1. Sub-prefect. Cricket XI 1902, 1903 & 1904. Football XI 1901-02 and 1902-03; captain 1903-04.
<b>Career Information</b>	After leaving the College he went to the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons and got his MRCVS. He then went to the London Hospital and achieved both his MRCS and LRCP.  Full details of his career during WW1 and subsequently is given below.
<b>Date Of Death</b>	23 November 1941
<b>Cause of Death</b>	Reported missing in June 1941, but subsequently reported to have died on this date
<b>Location</b>	Agia Paraskevi Amariou Rethimno, Crete.
<b>Cemetery</b>	Suda Bay War Cemetery, Greece - 13. E. 1.
<b>Rank</b>	Captain
<b>Branch of Service</b>	Royal Army Medical Corps

### DATE

### EVENT

10 August 1914	Commissioned into the Royal Army Medical Corps (RAMC) as Temporary Lieutenant
19 August 1914	France No 6 Casualty Clearing Hospital
?? 1914	32 <sup>nd</sup> Brigade RFA 4 <sup>th</sup> Division
By 15 October 1915	Promoted Temporary Captain
1 January 1916	Mentioned in dispatches in London Gazette for action on 5 October 1915
14 January 1916	Awarded Military Cross "For distinguished service in the field" near Ypres
2 December 1916	Returned to UK, sick
1 February 1917	To France – 13 <sup>th</sup> General Hospital
20 March 1917	2 <sup>nd</sup> Bn Highland Light Infantry, 2 <sup>nd</sup> Division
9 July 1917	Returns to UK
1 November 1917	To France – 129 <sup>th</sup> Field Ambulance
24 November 1917	6 <sup>th</sup> Field Ambulance
26 July 1918	Awarded bar to Military Cross for action on 24 March 1918 "For conspicuous gallantry and devotion to duty. When his battalion was about to withdraw and the wounded could not be brought to his aid post in time, he went up to the firing line and stayed

there attending to the wounded till all the troops had withdrawn. His gallant conduct saved many lives."

August 1918	Wounded in action at Bapaume (south of Arras, France)
1 March 1919	Served in North Russia
12 October 1919	Returned to the UK
28 October 1919	Demobilised
By 11 November 1919	Promoted Acting Major
3 February 1920	Mentioned in dispatches in London Gazette for action on 11 November 1919
3 February 1920	Awarded OBE for services rendered in North Russia

He then became a civilian surgeon in Baghdad, followed by a medical practice in Monkseaton, Northumberland, followed in 1927 with another practice in Bournemouth.

During WW2, the details of his service are as follows :-

<b><u>DATE</u></b>	<b><u>EVENT</u></b>
18 October 1939	Granted emergency commission as Lt RAMC. Army Number 106130
18 October 1939	Joined 3 <sup>rd</sup> Bn The Kings Own Hussars
15 March 1940	Promoted Acting Captain
19 August 1940	Embarked for service in Middle East
Nov 1940 - 1941	Served with 3 <sup>rd</sup> Kings Own Hussars, 7 <sup>th</sup> Armoured Brigade, 7 <sup>th</sup> Armoured Division
9 May 1941	Mentioned in Dispatches
9 May 1941	Awarded DSO for actions on 11 December 1940. The recommendation from his Brigadier was that he be awarded the Victoria Cross, but this was changed by General Wavell to a DSO. The London Gazette states the DSO was awarded "In recognition of gallant and distinguished services in the Middle East", but see below for details of the original recommendation and Wavell's decision.
?? 1941	Posted to Crete
June 1941	Reported missing
23 November 1941	Subsequently reported to have died on this date at Agia Paraskevi Amariou Rethimno, Crete.

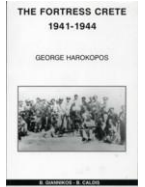
He was also awarded the 1914 Star, 1914-18 War Medal, 1914-18 Victory Medal, 1939-45 Star, Africa Star (8<sup>th</sup> Army clasp) and the 1939-45 War Medal.







For some account of his exploits see "With Pennants Flying. The Immortal Deeds of the Royal Armoured Corps" by David Masters.



Also the book "The Fortress Crete, 1941-44" by George Harokopos includes mention of Somerville and includes a picture of his funeral (see below). This book tells the story of the secret war in Crete, between the Intelligence service and the secret organisations on the side of the Allies and the German counter-espionage on the other side.

I'm indebted to **Peter Gasgoyne-Lockwood (R57-64)** for most of the above detailed information and for providing copies of the following documents supporting the above.

This is a copy of the original recommendation for the Victoria Cross, subsequently changed to a DSO :-

Wt. 42823/128. 300m. 2/40. W.S. Ltd. 51-6138. Forms/W.3121/6. Army Form W. 3121.

7 Armcd Brigade, 7 Armcd Division, W. Desert Corps

Schedule No. (to be left blank) R.A.M.C. attached to 3rd The K.O. Hussars.

Army No. and Rank Captain.

Name Thomas Victor Somerville, O.B.E., M.C. (Christian names must be stated)

Date recommendation passed forward	
Received	Passed
Brigade -	23.12.40
Division 24.12.40	11.1.41
Corps 10.2.41	13.2.41
Army 18.2.41	

Action for which commended (Date and place of action must be stated)	Recommended by	Honour or Reward	(To be left blank)
<p>at RAS EL SAIDA</p> <p>On Dec 11th 1940, when 'A' Sqdn tanks were bogged within 400 yds. of a strong enemy position and under heavy and accurate fire from more than 20 guns and many machine guns at that range, Capt. Somerville went out among the tanks attending to the wounded regardless of the heavy fire and with no consideration for his personal safety. He continued to attend to and bring in the wounded until all were under cover from the main enemy position, and thereafter he dressed them in a position where they were still unavoidably under fire from snipers. His cool gallantry was an inspiration to others who assisted him, and the means of saving many lives. (I consider that in view of the shattering fire of the enemy Capt. Somerville has earned the highest decoration for valour.)</p>	<p>H. Somerville Brigadier, commanding 7th Armoured Brigade.</p>	<p>DSO</p>	

Award of DSO approved A.P. Wavell  
General 26/2/41 437

This is a copy of the document officially confirming his death on 23 November 1941 :-

CAPT. THOMAS, VICTOR SOMERVILLE  
ROYAL ARMY MEDICAL CORPS.

BORN 1887.

DIED 1941.

DIED AT AGIA PARASKEVI, AMARICOU,  
RETHIMNO CRETE.

SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 23RD, 1941.

*of 1st Corps  
+ Off. Logistics*

*This is to certify that Capt Thomas Victor Somerville  
S.O. Royal Army Medical Corps, Lt. 3rd Bussars,  
died at Agia Paraskevi, Amaricou,  
Rethimno Crete.*

*Sunday, November 23rd, 1941.*

*Signed:  
544011, 24th 7. Mountain  
3rd The S.O. Bussars.*

*Remond at time of death.  
181112 W. P. Pack Sgt.  
3rd Field Regt. A.I.F.*

*John  
44th Park  
Crematorium, PA.*



The following is a letter sent to Somerville's wife at the time of his death and funeral in Crete :-

Dear Mrs. Somerville,

Your husband, Victor Thomas, who was looked after in the house of Zacharias Tzenakis by the Directors of the local branch of the Cretan Revolutionary Organisation, (Consisting of Kyriakos Pattakos, Emmanuel Tzenakis, Michael Pattakos, Idomenas Karakakis and Nikolaos M. Maliaros, who live at Aghia Paraskeve in Amario, Crete), and was treated by Dr. Katsandonis of Ano Meros and Dr. Georgios Papaçaklis of Melambes, died in our village at 2.30 p.m. on Sunday November 23rd. We knew him only a short time, but we greatly respected him. He was a man of splendid character and a man of distinction. You should be proud of him.

We made every effort that lay in our power to avert his death, but nothing could prevail against the will of the Almighty. From the moment he entered our small but hospitable community, we treated him with all the care with which we would treat a brother, in the home at Yerakari of Alexandros Kekonas, the schoolmaster of Ano Meros and Aghia Paraskeve. We tried by every means to lessen the bitterness of his exile and to give him some consolation for being far from you and his children. His thoughts were always turned towards you up to his last moments. All who knew him were deeply moved at the news of his death, and all the priests, Greek officers, men of learning, workmen and farmers of the neighbourhood gathered at Aghia Paraskere. He was given a public funeral, which was attended by all the inhabitants. The funeral service was conducted by His Grace the Bishop and Abbot of Preveli Monastery, Agathangelos Logovardos, by the priest of Ano Meros, Kyriakakis Katsandonis and by the priest of Nithayrea, Athanarios Poulakakis, the son of Stephanos; he was laid out by the Cretan Revolutionary Organisation and carried to the grave by the local Revolutionary Committee of the neighbourhood of Aghia Paraskere. The grave was covered with flowers carried by the girls and women of Crete, who shed tears over the friend of Greece, who died for us. Our gratitude to him, Madam, was expressed in appropriate words by the Bishop, Agathangelos Logovardos, by the lawyer Kyriakakis Leonidis, who lives at Neo Amario, on behalf of the Cretan Revolutionary Organisation, by Elias Kostakos, the Greek Army and by many others. Our gratitude to your late

never die. Their memory will live forever, and we shall preserve our gratitude and love for ever. The splendid conduct of your husband's servant, Frederick Marlow, deserves special praise. He followed him everywhere and treated more lovingly than a mother. Also Helen Tzenakis of Aghia Paraskeve never left his bedside for a one moment during his stay here until his last rest.

Yours respectfully,

The members of the Cretan and Local  
revolutionary organisation,

Logorardos (Bishop)

Katsandonis and Pontakis (Priests).



This is a copy of an article that appeared in "The Services" shortly after Somerville died. The reference to the BBC reporter is fascinating :-

## The Services

A Supplement to the *London Gazette* dated February 24, 1942, announces that the King has approved the appointment of H.M. The Queen to be Colonel-in-Chief of the Royal Army Medical Corps.

### R.N.V.R. OFFICERS' DECORATION

The King has approved the award of the R.N.V.R. Officers' Decoration to Surgeon Commanders Basil William Crowhurst Archer and Albert Stanley Bradlaw, and Acting Surgeon Commander Hugh Mason Willoughby, R.N.V.R.

### ARMY AWARDS

The King has conferred the Efficiency Decoration of the Territorial Army on Colonel A. McK. Reid, M.C., and on Lieut.-Colonel (Acting Colonel) A. MacG. Duff and Lieut.-Colonels A. Bremner, M.C., and W. J. McIntosh, R.A.M.C. (T.A.).

The King has awarded the M.C. to Captains Charles Douglas Anderson, Niels Pedersen, and John Stobo Pritchard, R.A.M.C., and Captain Gerald Francis Adye-Curran, I.M.S., in recognition of gallant and distinguished services in the Middle East.

### CASUALTIES IN THE MEDICAL SERVICES

**CAPTAIN T. V. SOMERVILLE, O.B.E., D.S.O., M.C.** with Bar Great regret will be felt at the death of Captain Thomas Victor Somerville, R.A.M.C., medical officer of the 3rd Hussars, while on active service in the Middle East. On June 1 last he was reported missing, though believed to be alive and well "in enemy territory"; this report was repeated in September. Now he is stated to have died on November 23. Somerville was 54. He was born of Scottish parents in Ceylon, where his father was a planter. His mother was a sister of the late Sir James Yuill. Somerville was sent home to be educated at Framlingham. Thereafter he trained and qualified M.R.C.V.S. Lond.,



proceeding immediately to study medicine at the London Hospital in order to obtain the double qualification—in medicine as well as in veterinary surgery—to prepare himself the better for future work abroad. He obtained the M.R.C.S., L.R.C.P. in 1914. After taking a course at the London School of Tropical Medicine, Somerville was appointed house-physician and house-surgeon at the Royal Sussex Hospital, Hastings. When there were rumours of war in 1914 he resigned his appointment and joined the Army—the day before the outbreak of war—

proceeding to France with the Expeditionary Force. At first he was attached to the Field Artillery, being transferred later to the 2nd Battalion the Highland Light Infantry. After the armistice Somerville went to Russia with the 1918 Expeditionary Force, returning home with this Force after nine months' service there. In 1916 he was awarded the M.C. for an act of conspicuous gallantry near Ypres, and in 1918 a bar to the M.C. for many acts of courage and bravery while he stayed behind during the March retreat to tend the wounded. In November, 1919, he was awarded the O.B.E. (Military Division). For a year he held the appointment as civil surgeon at Baghdad, then came back to England, settling in general practice at Monkseaton, near Newcastle. About fifteen years ago he came to Bournemouth, continuing in general practice in the Winton area there. Soon after the outbreak of the present war Somerville, although over 50, volunteered again, and saw active service in Libya. On May 6 last he was gazetted as having been mentioned in dispatches for distinguished services in the Middle East. In the same number of the *London Gazette* (dated May 6) was the notification of the award to him of the D.S.O. "in recognition of gallant and distinguished services in the Middle East." In the *Listener* of May 1, 1941, is the record of a broadcast, which many will remember having heard, made by a B.B.C. observer in the

Middle East, in which he described incidents of astounding bravery on the part of Captain Somerville. One of the narrates thus: "After Sidi Barrani, during the advance on Sollum, Somerville was to be seen driving about, under fire, sitting on the top of his 'dingo' with shells bursting round and machine-gun bullets whistling past. Why he killed I don't know. Backwards and forwards he went and tending his wounded men till all had been seen." Thomas Somerville was of a quiet, retiring disposition, strong physically, and of gentle temperament; a man of rather than words; brave as a lion; there was none braver more gallant. Much sympathy will be felt by a large circle of friends with his wife and married daughter, who, after months in dreadful suspense for so many months, have now to mourn his loss.

War Substantive Captain GUTHRIE-MORGAN WADSWORTH included as "Died" in an Army Council Casualty List published on February 21. He was born on December 17, 1889 and was educated at the University of Leeds, graduating with a Ch.B. in 1923, and at University College, London, taking diplomas of M.R.C.S., L.R.C.P. in 1924. He had held the post of first house-physician at the General Infirmary at Leeds, had practised in Durham, Merionethshire, Lincolnshire, Surrey and Kent, and at the outbreak of war was living at Blackheath, London. He entered the R.A.M.C. as temporary lieutenant in September, 1939, and was promoted captain a year later. He had been a member of the British Medical Association for fifteen years.

Lieut. RICHARD HUGH SMITH died at Enniskillen, Ireland, on February 18. He was educated at the University of Cambridge and St. Thomas's Hospital, and qualified M.R.C.S., L.R.C.P. in 1932. He held the post of casualty officer and house-surgeon at the Royal Berkshire Hospital, Reading, before settling in private practice at Aldershot. In 1935 he moved to Poole, where he resided until he joined the R.A.M.C. as temporary lieutenant in December last year.

### DEATHS IN THE SERVICES

#### SURGEON REAR-ADMIRAL F. L. SMITH, O.B.E., R.N.

The sudden death on February 18 at the age of 60 of Surgeon Rear-Admiral Frank Lewis Smith has come as a great shock to his many friends and acquaintances both in and outside the Services. His general disposition and cheery manner endeared him to many, while his extensive knowledge of Service matters and of affairs in general was always at the disposal of those who cared to ask; nothing was too much trouble for him and if he did not know the answer he could always find a way to find it. His organizing ability was of a high order and his energy in carrying out his duties was unremitting. He died on his way to work in "the Department" which he loved is probably what he himself would have wished. Both the Navy and the Medical Branch are the poorer for his loss.

Born in 1881, the son of Ralph Smith of Whitby, he was educated at Dulwich and underwent his medical training at St. Thomas's Hospital. He entered the Royal Navy in November, 1909, and after service in China returned to England before the outbreak of the last war, and served in the Royal Naval Hospital and Dockyard at Pembroke Dock till 1914. Thence he joined H.M.S. *Caroline* in the Grand Fleet, and in 1915 he was appointed to the Royal Naval Hospital, Chatham, where he served as specialist in x rays. After further sea service as senior medical officer of the aircraft-carriers *Hermes* and *Furious*, he came to the Admiralty in 1926 as assistant to the Medical Director-General, and remained until promoted to surgeon captain in 1931. After promotion he went as principal medical officer of the Royal Naval Barracks, Portsmouth, and in 1934-8 was in medical charge of the Royal Marine Infirmary and Depot at Deal. In 1938 he was advanced to the rank of surgeon rear-admiral and placed on the retired list.

On the outbreak of war he was recalled to the Medical Department to take up his war appointment as principal medical transport officer for the Navy, a post for which his previous experience and organizing ability made him eminently suited and which he filled with such success that his place will be hard to fill. His liaison with the other fighting Services, as well as the Ministry of Health and various Admiralty Departments was invaluable. He also acted as the link between the Departments of the Navies of this country and the U.S.



The following piece is taken from the book "The Fortress Crete, 1941-44" by George Harokopos. Note the inaccuracy re his rank and name :-



*An authentic photograph taken during the funeral of the British surgeon-colonel R. Somerville in the village of Agia Paraskevi, during the occupation. He died of his wounds and hardship in November 1941. From the left: The notary of Amari Stavros Pattakos, the heroic priest of Nithavri Athanassios Poulakakis, J. Papoutsoyiannis, the abbot Ag. Lagouvardos and lieutenant Costakos from Peloponnese. On the right: First is Mich. Pattakos and the priest of Ano-Meros, the heroic Kyriakos Katsantonis (slightly visible) and others surrounding the coffin. They were all leading members of the Resistance.*

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FACING PAGE 81. CHAPTER 3. SECRET MISSION TO CRETE.

THE FORTRESS CRETE. 1941-1944.

GEORGE HAROKOPOS. © B. CIANNIKOS & Co. 1993  
11 KIRIAS STREET, 10678 ATHENS.

ISBN - 960-7296-35-4.

ESPIONAGE AND COUNTER-ESPIONAGE IN OCCUPIED CRETE.

DEDICATED TO THE 2,329 MEN WHO, ACCORDING TO THE OFFICIAL FIGURES  
- OF THE MIDDLE EAST ALLIED HEADQUARTERS, PARTICIPATED IN THE RESISTANCE

In 2009 I was contacted by Patrick Donnelly who has written a small booklet featuring Captain Somerville and his batman Fred Marlow. It is titled "Three Good Great Men" and he has been good enough to allow up to publish this on our website – click this link to read his account, which is based partly on an interview with Fred Marlow

[http://www.oldframlinghamian.com/gallery2/main.php?g2\\_view=core.DownloadItem&g2\\_itemId=6526&g2\\_GALLERYSID=6307112867f371526a54c9f563f03933](http://www.oldframlinghamian.com/gallery2/main.php?g2_view=core.DownloadItem&g2_itemId=6526&g2_GALLERYSID=6307112867f371526a54c9f563f03933)

A copy of the original unabridged CD of the Fred Marlow interview is available. Please get in touch with Patrick if you are interested on e-mail address [Thepdonnelys@aol.com](mailto:Thepdonnelys@aol.com)

At the end of 2018 James Ruddock Broyd was in touch with the following message "I have recently been in touch with Paul Watkins as he has just published the biography of Dr Bill Frankland whom I was introduced to 3 years ago. Bill was in Changi and a FEPOW for 3-4 year and is now 106 and resident in The Charterhouse. Paul discovered I was at Fram and has sent me an 8 page paper on Somerville (following) as Paul specialises in history of military medics.

You will see the following was produced in 2016 a bit after your two papers so former may be of interest. It certainly is a good and detailed read of what TS did in the 2 World Wars. And Fram is mentioned start and finish."



## A white horse in the desert: The life of

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## Dr Thomas Somerville (1887–1941)

jmb.sagepub.com

DOI: 10.1177/0967772015619305



### PE Watkins

#### Abstract

This article details the remarkable life of Dr Thomas Somerville, who qualified both as a veterinary surgeon and medical practitioner, served in two world wars and was recommended for the nation's highest award for gallantry. In doing so, it records the life of a man whose repeated gallantry on the battlefield has been overlooked.

#### Keywords

Somerville, battlefield surgery, veterinary, partisans

clearly demonstrated that he was a man of actions, rather than words.

#### Early years

Thomas Victor Somerville was born on 18 March 1887 in Ceylon, the third son of William and Elizabeth Somerville. His father, born in 1842 in Carnworth Scotland, was schooled at Edinburgh Academy. In 1858, he sailed to Ceylon and established a thriving business in the coffee and tea trades. He was noted to be 'a Christian gentleman, always meticulously dressed' and a man who 'demanded high standards from all'.<sup>2</sup> In 1880 William married Elizabeth Yule, described as 'charming, witty and liked by everyone'. They were to have a family of six children, namely Margaret (1881), William (1883), David (1885), Thomas (1887), Andrew (1889) and Elizabeth (1891) (Figure 1).

After a childhood in Ceylon, Thomas lived in Winchmore Hill, North London and then, like his elder brothers, attended Framlingham College in

#### Introduction

A recent editorial in the Journal of Medical Biography highlighted that 11 doctors received the nation's highest award for gallantry, the Victoria Cross (VC), in the First World War.<sup>1</sup> By contrast, none received this award during the Second World War, despite many performing remarkable acts of gallantry. One of the earliest to be nominated was a medical practitioner from Bournemouth who had qualified as both a veterinary surgeon and a doctor, and who had previously served with distinction in the First World War. Dr Thomas Somerville was a quiet man, of a retiring disposition, but who was noted both for his physical strength and gentle temperament. His service during two world wars



Figure 1. The Somerville brothers. From Left, Thomas, David, William, with Andrew seated in front.  
Source: reproduced with permission from Private publication, 2009.<sup>3</sup>

Suffolk. Here, he developed ambitions to become a veterinary surgeon, and entered the Royal Veterinary College, London, in 1904, graduating as a member of the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons (MRCVS) in December 1908. Whilst at college, he was a keen sportsman and was reported as ‘playing splendidly’ in the college hockey team’s 14-0 defeat of Redhill in November 1906.<sup>4</sup>

Whilst a veterinary student, he decided that he wanted to work abroad and felt his prospects would be enhanced by gaining a medical qualification. Graduating MRCVS, he entered the London Hospital Medical College and gained MRCS, LRCP in the summer of 1914. After a short course at the London School of Tropical Medicine, he was appointed houseman at the Royal Sussex Hospital, Hastings. With the outbreak of war, he immediately resigned his position and joined the army, being

commissioned into the Royal Army Medical Corps (RAMC) on 10 August 1914.

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### **In Flanders Fields**

Within a week of being commissioned, Somerville was sent to a Casualty Clearing Hospital in France. Here, he was never far from the front, tending the wounded, knowing that their best chances of survival lay with them receiving immediate medical attention. Later, he learnt that his eldest brother, William, had died on 23 April 1915, aged 32, whilst serving at Ypres, killed during the first gas attack of the war. Somerville’s own service was soon recognised; he was

mentioned in despatches in October 1915, and awarded the Military Cross (MC) in January 1916 for 'conspicuous gallantry in the field' near Ypres.<sup>5,6</sup>

In April 1917, Somerville was serving as Medical Officer to 2nd Battalion Highland Light Infantry at Arras, and his experiences are likely to have influenced his later actions. On 26 April, the battalion headquarters were established in an enemy gun-pit, filled with shells and cordite charges. They came under fire and many men were trapped at the bottom; help was needed urgently if they were not to be burnt alive. Captain RAF Whistler, aged 21, went forward; Somerville tried to dissuade him, pointing out that it meant almost certain death. Whistler replied that it was his duty. He was gravely wounded, dying the next day. Somerville later stated that 'it was the bravest action he had either seen or heard of'. The actions of Captain Whistler would most certainly have earned him a posthumous Victoria Cross, had it not been that all the eye witnesses were either killed, wounded or scattered in subsequent actions.<sup>7</sup>

In 1918, Somerville was awarded a bar to the Military Cross for his actions at Bapaume. The citation read:

For conspicuous gallantry and devotion to duty. When his battalion was about to withdraw and the wounded could not be brought to his aid post in time, he went up to the firing line and stayed there attending to the wounded till all the troops had withdrawn. His gallant conduct saved many lives.<sup>8</sup>

### War in the North

After the armistice, Somerville was sent to Murmansk in Northern Russia in March 1919, where he served



Figure 2. Captain TV Somerville in uniform of RAMC; First World War.

Source: reproduced with permission from Private publication, 2009.<sup>3</sup>

with the British forces supporting the 'White' Russians in their fight against the Bolsheviks. Somerville acted as medical superintendent of ambulance trains transporting the sick, both military and civilian, to and from Murmansk. In doing so, he had to endure extremes of climate, with up to 70 of frost being recorded.<sup>9</sup> After seven months in Russia, he returned home, his service being recognised by the award of the OBE (Military) in 1920<sup>10</sup> (Figure 2).

### The inter-war years

In October 1919, 1 week after returning from Russia, Somerville was demobilised from military service. Now a husband and a father – he had married Dorothy (nee Lethbridge) in 1915, who



gave birth to a daughter, Elizabeth, in 1916 – he opted for a career in medicine, rather than veterinary medicine.<sup>11</sup> Initially, he worked as civilian surgeon in Baghdad for about a year, before returning home to England. He entered general practice in Monkseaton, near Whitley Bay but in 1928 moved to Bournemouth. Somerville established a practice with Dr JWF Sandison, MC, OBE, who had also served with the RAMC in France<sup>12</sup> and Russia.<sup>9</sup> The practice was based in Norton Road, Winton, and Somerville established a family home in nearby Talbot Avenue. He became a well-liked and well-respected member of the community, and was held in high regard by his patients. Noted to be a charming man, with a gentle manner, he could also be most determined in getting what he wanted.<sup>13</sup> Aside from his work as a doctor, he was an accomplished sportsman, captaining Bournemouth Cricket Club.

### **A return to the colours**

When war was declared in September 1939 Somerville, now aged 52, immediately volunteered for military service, believing that his skills and experience would be in demand. Although initially perceived to be too old, he persisted and was commissioned in October 1939, in the rank of lieutenant and posted as Medical Officer to the 3rd (The King's Own) Hussars. This was a recently mechanised cavalry regiment, equipped with Mark VI light tanks. These were fast and mobile, but only lightly armoured and were nicknamed 'the armoured perambulator'. On October 19, Lieutenant Somerville joined the regiment at Tidworth.<sup>14</sup> In early 1940, he was promoted to Temporary Captain and in April orders were received that he was to be Commanding Officer of the military section of Horton Mental Hospital, Epsom.<sup>15</sup> This was not what he had envisaged when joining the RAMC, and he ensured that he avoided this posting. In the summer of 1940, the regiment received notice of deployment abroad. On 19 August, they embarked at Liverpool in SS Duchess of Bedfordshire and sailed; destination unknown.<sup>16</sup>

They journeyed south, via Freetown and Cape Town before heading north, past East Africa. They learnt that Italian troops had invaded Egypt but sailed unhindered past the Italian-controlled Horn of Africa; some on board felt this gave a first indication that the Italians might prove 'easy meat'.<sup>16</sup> The regiment disembarked at Port Said, subsequently moving to Almaza, just outside Cairo. They were to serve with 7th Armoured Division, later to be known as the Desert Rats.

### **With the Desert Rats**

The organisation of the Army Medical Services in 1940 had changed little from that which Somerville had encountered in the First World War. Recent conflicts, including the Fall of France, highlighted that field units were cumbersome, non-mobile and that poor communications and transport within them contributed to delays in casualty treatment. It was precisely these issues, which led to the formation of the Hartgill Committee in October 1941 to review the nature and deployment of medical field units.<sup>17</sup>

On arrival in Egypt, Somerville commenced developments which would, later, through the Hartgill Committee, find deployment in many operational theatres. He predicted that once fighting started, he would need to be mobile to treat the injured swiftly and recognised the importance of a rapid, and reliable mobile operating facility. Over the coming weeks, he developed a vehicle in which surgical procedures could be undertaken close to the fighting. Somerville acquired a captured Italian ambulance, and with the help of the Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers workshops converted it into a Medical Assistance Vehicle (MAV), a mobile surgical unit, allowing him to treat casualties on the battlefield.

For the MAV to work, he needed a driver capable of navigating the battlefield, servicing the vehicle and nursing casualties; experience and maturity were a must. Somerville was recommended an

ambulance driver, Corporal Frederick Marlow who had joined the army in 1925 and had served in Egypt and India. At interview, he explained about the role, and Marlow, whilst listening, remembered catching sight of Somerville's row of medal ribbons, spotting a Military Cross and bar. 'The man was obviously a hero, but probably someone who would have little concern for his own safety; bloody lunatic,' Marlow concluded. Having told Marlow about his plan, Somerville asked 'So, Corporal Marlow, what do you think?' Marlow was straightforward in his response, 'the whole idea sounds crazy, Sir', but still he volunteered. Somerville shook Marlow's hand and said, 'Good man corporal. Training starts 07.00 tomorrow'.<sup>18</sup>

The MAV was lightly armoured and armed, it could not display a Red Cross, instead a white 'Horse of Hanover' was painted on its side.<sup>19</sup> They trained hard for several weeks alongside a number of men described as 'strange and scruffy'. These were members of the fledgling Long Range Desert Group, forerunners to the Special Air Service. After several weeks, Somerville felt that it was time to put theory into practice and deploy the MAV to the battlefield.

In the middle of September 1940, Italian forces advanced east, along the northern coast of Egypt, to establish a base at Sidi Barrani. The allied response came in December 1940, through 'Operation Compass', the first offensive action by the British of the war. In preparation, the 3rd Hussars moved to the desert in October. Although there were minor skirmishes with the enemy Somerville was not overstretched by either casualties or routine regimental work and, being fluent in Arabic, started treating local Senussi nomads. They had little medical care or knowledge and would treat wounds with camel dung, often with lethal outcomes. News of his skills travelled widely and soon Arabs arrived from all around to seek his care. Being so well regarded, he was allowed to treat the Arab women. He was remembered by Lieutenant Heseltine at the time as a man who was superbly professional and ultra-brave, 'the most bellicose

noncombatant of all time'. He would often discuss the day's events with Heseltine and finished by saying, 'These Wops are a piece of cake; just wait until you get the Boche, and then you'll know what it's all about'.<sup>16</sup>

'Operation Compass' commenced on 8 December with an attack on Italian forces at Sidi Barrani by the 7th Armoured Division. Initially, the 3rd Hussars were held in reserve but, following the Italian withdrawal, were detailed to intercept them, and prevent arrival of reinforcements. The coastal town of Ras El Saida lies to the west of Sidi Barrani, and it was here that Somerville distinguished himself under fire. In the morning of 11 December, the regiment advanced towards the town. Having made good progress, a number of tanks headed north, attempting to pass over a salt lake, covered with a surface crust. Before long several tanks became stuck and a ferocious Italian artillery barrage opened up, hitting many of the beleaguered vehicles.<sup>20</sup>

Quickly Somerville moved into action, providing frontline medical support to the wounded. He set off in his 'Dingo' scout car, with Marlow following in the MAV. As they joined the rest of the regiment, Marlow described how 'all hell broke loose'. Somerville instructed him to lay up the MAV nearby and get ready for casualties. As the artillery barrage continued, Somerville drove forward in his Dingo amongst the tanks. Driving alongside one tank commander, about 300 yards from the enemy, Somerville was heard to say quite casually, that it was 'as good a barrage as he had seen at anytime in the last war'. Trapped in the sand, 10 out of 12 tanks were hit. Somerville drove amongst them, with no protection from the shells that were flying around him.<sup>21</sup> A tank commander later recalled:

Ours was the first tank he came to. I was wounded in the right arm and the gunner was unconscious, but the driver was all right. We went on until the tracks came off. The driver and I crawled out and Captain Somerville spotted us and brought his Dingo right

alongside. He was sitting on top with shells bursting all around and machine gun bullets whistling past. Why he wasn't killed I don't know. He took four of us into the Dingo although it was only made for two and took us to a bit of dead ground, 300 yards back, which he had made into the regimental aid post. After he dressed our wounds he said, 'I'm off now to look at the other tanks'.<sup>21</sup>

Marlow remembered how Somerville brought in casualties and said, 'Fix them up Fred' and was off again. Tank drivers argued with Somerville, saying they would go out and bring in the wounded, but he was non-receptive to their offers and continued to drive alone in his Dingo. He went back and forth, ignoring the heavy fire, one man commenting that 'he seemed to have a charmed life'.<sup>21</sup>

One of the many treated by Somerville described how:

We were in the leading group of tanks and cut around the side to get to their flank but the ground wouldn't take the weight of the tanks and we got stuck. We were in a mess, no mistake. As soon as the Ities [sic] tanks realized we couldn't get out they let us have it. Our tank took a hit into the tracks and I saw a couple of the lads get out the side. I was trying to get out of the turret when we got hit again. The tank was on fire. I couldn't get out 'cause my foot or leg was caught up. I thought I was going to die there. Suddenly this officer appeared from nowhere. I didn't know who he was. He tried to pull me out but he couldn't. High explosive shells were coming in at a terrific rate. I told him to get away before we got hit again but he just dived into the turret head first, just his legs sticking out. He came out and pulled at me again. This time I popped out and he dragged me down the side of the tank onto the ground. I was nearly passing out but he sat me up and told me I was going to lose my leg but I could make it if I could hang on. I didn't know much about it but I learned after that he was Captain Somerville and he took my leg off in that vehicle and saved my life.<sup>18</sup>

By the end of the battle 9 men had been killed and Somerville had treated 16 casualties, whose injuries ranged from burns and chest wounds to broken limbs and head injuries.<sup>20</sup> He operated on several men in the MAV and, once finished, ensured 'continuity of care', commandeering an Italian lorry and taking all the wounded to a

captured Italian field hospital. Here, he worked throughout the night, tending to the wounded and arranging their transfer to the railhead and onwards to the base hospital.<sup>21</sup>

Somerville's remarkable actions were recognised by his Commanding Officer, in a citation:

On Dec 11th 1940, at Ras El Saida, when A Sqn tanks were bogged within 400 yards of a strong enemy position and under heavy and accurate fire from more than 20 guns and many machine guns at that range, Capt. Somerville went out among the tanks attending to the wounded regardless of his personal safety. He continued to attend to and bring in the wounded until all were under cover from the main enemy position, and thereafter he dressed them in a position where they were still unavoidably under fire from snipers. His cool gallantry was an inspiration to others who assisted him, and the means of saving many lives. I consider that in view of the shattering fire of the enemy Capt. Somerville has earned the highest decoration for valour.<sup>15</sup>

Somerville was recommended for the Victoria Cross and this was confirmed at Brigade, Divisional and Corps level. The recommendation was received by General Wavell, Commander-in-Chief who, on 26 February 1941, annotated the citation, crossing through the recommendation for the Victoria Cross, replacing it with 'Award of DSO approved'.<sup>15</sup>

The Italian forces were soon in full retreat, and tried to deprive allied forces of the use of water wells by pouring salt or fuel into them. Water was soon in short supply, men of the 3rd Hussars were not allowed to shave or drink before midday. A radio message was received indicating a clean well had been found, men started to make their way towards it. No sooner had they set off than a second message was received, 'Cancel last message, donkey down well'. At this point, Somerville intervened and, perhaps using some of his veterinary knowledge, advised that if the water level was over a certain depth the donkey would not putrefy and the water should be potable. He went to the well and, never doubting a good doctor, the men filled up with water, there



being enough even for washing. No harm came to anyone.<sup>16</sup>

On 8 March 1941, gallantry awards following the battle at Ras El Saida were announced; Somerville was awarded the Distinguished Service Order (DSO).<sup>22,23</sup> On the same day, he left the regiment on sick leave. However, it was not until May that Somerville's award was reported in the British press.<sup>24</sup> Under the headline 'Rode into Battle in Baby Car, DSO for Bournemouth Doctor', it was reported how Somerville had achieved worldwide fame for a particularly gallant act, and how he drove 'into the thick of the battle in his baby two-seater car, sitting on the top regardless of his personal safety and carried four wounded men back to a safer position after which he returned for more casualties. Beside a tank he amputated a man's leg and then took him back to safety'.<sup>24</sup>

By March 1941, the allied forces were forced to retreat from the Western Desert, the campaign having changed with the arrival of German forces, commanded by Rommel. At the end of March, the 3rd Hussars passed through Msus, some 60 miles southeast of Benghazi. Here, they came under attack by German aircraft, with several tanks being hit. Just when the first casualties were being taken, Somerville arrived back from sick leave driving a captured Italian ambulance, with the 'Horse of Hanover' on its side. His arrival was described as the 'best fillip to morale' for the men.<sup>25</sup> Back with his regiment, Somerville made his way east to the coastal town of Derna, where they came under heavy attack. On 6 April, Somerville's ambulance was moving across an airfield at night when it received a direct hit from two shells; those watching thought he had been killed. Both Somerville and Marlow escaped unharmed, walking out of the wreckage and took refuge in a wadi for 3 days. They found an officer with a pick-up truck and were then joined by a number of other soldiers. Somerville led them through the encircling Germans, escaping from a number of tanks, before continuing east. They arrived at Sollum where they met other elements

of the 3rd Hussars, who described how they 'found their great-hearted medical officer waiting for them. His presence among them was a tonic in those unhappy days'.<sup>25</sup>

### **The battle for Crete**

Having made his way back to the comparative safety of Cairo, Somerville soon found himself deployed to another theatre of operation. Following the shortlived allied defence of Greece in early 1941, the focus soon turned to the reinforcement of Crete. By May, C Squadron 3rd Hussars, with Somerville attached, was at Alexandria, preparing to sail to Crete. They arrived at Suda Bay on 14 May.<sup>23</sup>

Once ashore Somerville was attached to a force sent west to Canea to provide support at Maleme airfield. They arrived early on Monday 19 and proceeded to 'dig in' in an area of olive trees. Somerville established his regimental aid post (RAP) in the local YMCA building. It was just after 8.00 on the following morning that the German invasion started. Men of 3rd Hussars were woken by the sound of aircraft attacking the area and German parachutists descending. Before long the Germans had captured both a general hospital and a field ambulance. Somerville was kept busy throughout the morning treating casualties, and in the afternoon, most of the squadron was ordered to retreat. Somerville was ordered to remain in position, the regimental diary recording that he was 'doing very valuable work in his RAP not only with our own men but also with any wounded we could find'.<sup>23</sup>

Two days later, the 3rd Hussars supported a counterattack by New Zealand troops to recapture Maleme airfield. Somerville established his RAP in an olive grove just off the main road leading towards the airfield. Aided by Marlow, he was kept busy throughout the day, since most of the New Zealand battalions had lost their medical officers. Again, it was recorded that he did 'invaluable work'.<sup>23</sup> However, the counterattack

proved fruitless and the Germans maintained control of the airfield.

On 25 May, an attempt was made to retake the village of Galatos. Lieutenant Farran of the 3rd Hussars led an attack, which came under heavy fire; he was hit twice in the legs, his gunner in the abdomen and his driver in the shoulder. Farran managed to help the two men out of the tank before struggling out himself. All three were rescued and taken to the RAP. Farran described how 'Tom Somerville our doctor, gave us each a shot of morphia and conducted us up to the dressing station'. The dressing station was sited in a stable in what was effectively 'no man's land', between allied and German forces. During the day, casualties from both sides were treated there until in the afternoon the Germans issued an ultimatum; either surrender or they would bomb the building.<sup>26</sup> At this stage, Somerville, along with Marlow and those men who could walk, made their way south.

The aim was to travel south, to the port of Sfakia. By late on Thursday 29 May, Somerville was close to the beachhead and organising the embarkation of men.<sup>23</sup> Embarkation did not take place until early on Saturday 31 May, when HMAS Napier entered the harbour. She departed just after midnight, arriving at Alexandria later that day. However, Somerville and Marlow were not on board.

### **The Cretan Runner**

Somerville made the decision to stay and set up a first aid post near Sfakia to treat the injured. After the evacuation was complete, Somerville and Marlow moved up into the hills. Before long they were met by Johnny, a Greek man riding a donkey who said 'Good morning boys' in very clear English and led the pair to the village of Imbros, where they were fed. As it was not safe to stay, Johnny led them further up into the hills to his own house, where they remained for several days. Typical of

Somerville, he provided medical care for a number of the local residents using his rather limited medical supplies.<sup>18</sup>

In August, they were approached by a Greek lawyer who asked if there was anything he could do for them. Somerville replied, 'Look, I want to get a boat away from here'. He offered Somerville a place, to which he replied, 'No, I am not going without my batman,' and despite some discussion, his mind was made up. Soon after this, Somerville's health took a turn for the worse, and it was necessary to move him to another village.<sup>18</sup>

The German invasion of Crete had led to the establishment of a large partisan network; men and women determined that the enemy be repelled from their island as quickly as possible. Amongst the youngest recruits was 21-year-old, George Psychoundakis, whose earliest role was as a runner for resistance members, but later worked with a number of high profile allied agents, including Patrick Leigh Fermor.<sup>27</sup> The partisans played a critical role in the war on Crete; one allied soldier later wrote how 'everything depended on their magnificent loyalty, without their help not a single one of us would have lasted more than 24 hours'. In October, Psychoundakis was asked to help move Somerville to Yerakari, a mountain village in the east. By this time, Somerville was very ill, having developed pneumonia, and was moved dressed as an old woman, sitting on a donkey; Psychoundakis later wrote how Somerville 'really looked like an old woman'. Somerville could not take any food, and was only able to drink milk; he shuddered all over as they made their way, and could only speak a few words, 'Cold, I'm cold'. They arrived safely at the village and Somerville was entrusted to the care of the local schoolmaster. A few days later, they moved again, this time to the village of Ayia Paraskevi, where Somerville was nursed by a partisan and his family for almost 6 weeks.<sup>27</sup>

At 2.30pm on Sunday 23 November 1941, Thomas Somerville died in Ayia Paraskevi, aged 54. The Bishop of Crete later wrote to his widow describing him as ‘a man of splendid character and distinction’ who had talked only of her and their daughter during his last days.<sup>15</sup> A public funeral was held in the village by the partisans, and he was buried nearby at Melambes.<sup>28</sup>

Just a few days before he died, Somerville penned the following lines, describing his feelings towards those who had looked after him:

With smiling faces and gracious manner they offer their simple gifts.

Warm welcome shines in their eyes while their whole expression gives an illuminating insight into the character of these people, and shows the innate goodness of their hearts. For they are deeply religious carrying the precepts of their religion into their daily lives. Maybe living simple, almost primitive lives, they touch depths of nature which others miss, and live nearer God.<sup>3</sup>

Marlow was later captured by the Germans, and held prisoner in Poland, being released in April 1945. Soon after he was able to give Somerville’s watch, pipe and tobacco pouch, along with a letter, his widow. She had the watch repaired and gave it to Marlow, the trusted batman of a most gallant doctor and veterinary surgeon.<sup>18</sup>

Somerville’s body was re-interred at the Commonwealth War Graves Cemetery at Suda Bay, Crete on 12 October 1945.<sup>28</sup> His headstone bears the motto of the RAMC; *In Arduis Fidelis*; ‘Faithful in Adversity’. He is commemorated on a number of war memorials including Framlingham College, The London Hospital, Bournemouth Cricket Club and the Royal College of Surgeons of England’s Roll of Honour; he has yet to be recognised by any veterinary institution.

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