

In Search of My Brother the Communist

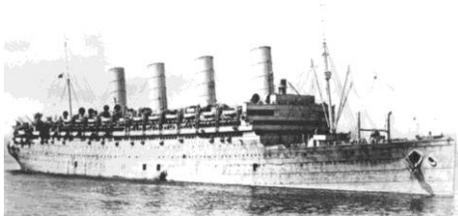
by Howard W. Henry

I wrote this for inclusion in my family tree history in trying to set forth some introduction for my brother Donald's section. It may help explain what was going on with Americans' involvement in the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939). Many people today don't know about the almost forty thousand men and women from fifty-two countries, including 2,800 Americans who volunteered to travel to Spain and join the International Brigades to help fight fascism.

My brother **Donald Eugene Henry** was born 29 November 1917 in Dodge City, Ford County, Kansas, and was shot and killed 3 September 1937, in Belchite, Spain, at the age of 19.

Donald graduated from Dodge City High School and went to Kansas University to study psychiatry. Probably because he was raised in the Depression he was drawn to liberal causes. He became involved with the YMCA, the Young Communist League, and other youth groups at the university and became a leader in them. His first meeting was May 18, 1936, at the University. His K-book, or record book of activities, reflects his attending a recruiting session on March 12, 1937, and it is supposed this was the meeting where he was recruited to join the red forces in Spain. He also joined the American Student Union and served as President of the Kansas University group.

Thus my brother was one of 2,800 North Americans who volunteered to defend the Republic of Spain during the Spanish Civil War. These were volunteer soldiers, drawn to Spain by a noble cause. Germany belonged to Hitler, and Italy to Mussolini, but there was still a chance that the Spanish Republic—governed by an unstable coalition of liberals, socialists, and anarchists—could fight off a cabal of right-wing generals who called themselves Nationalists. The previous year, the Nationalists had tried to take over the country, touching off a civil war. Leftist volunteers from around the world flocked to the Republican side, seeing the war as a struggle between tyranny and freedom that transcended national boundaries. The fight felt almost holy—“like the feeling you expected to have and did not have when you made your first communion,” Ernest Hemingway wrote, in “*For Whom the Bell Tolls*.” The Americans had been brought to Spain by Comintern, the worldwide Communist organization, but, to disguise their allegiance, the troops had been given an irreproachably non-Communist name: the Abraham Lincoln Battalion.



RMS Acquitania

In the summer of 1937 my brother Donald, and Kenneth Graeber, a close friend, went to New York where they embarked on the *RMS Acquitania*, the ticket and \$5 spending money being furnished by the Party. While in New York he was not permitted to call his family lest their mission be disclosed (or perhaps he chose that option). A letter written at sea revealed an uneventful, but very interesting crossing.

Landing in Cherbourg, France, they went to Paris. There the Communist Party took possession of his passport and issued identification with the alias of Donald Eugene Scott,



Donald E. Howard, c. Spring 1937

Code Number Q-207. Enlisting in a foreign service was prohibited by law, and, therefore passports were held with the intention to return them as they returned from the Spanish army service.

He received more funds and passage to the Spanish border which they crossed on foot. That experience was told by Ken Graeber: ". . .the biggest thrill of my time there. It was the crossing of the Pyrenees to get into Spain. The trip was made at night and took hours, going up nearly every step of the way. Close watch was kept for border guards, and it was necessary to ford many mountain streams. I think it was the most thrilling of my experiences, because it was a romantic sort of thing. It was the kind of stuff I had read in books..."

There Donald first wrote home his true mission, the trip to Spain and life in an army camp. He was supposed to be on a mercy mission of first-aid with the Red Cross, but upon arriving he was placed in infantry, later transferring to the machine gun service. But he and Kenneth Graeber took many hours of first-aid training. Donald had worked on the ambulance service in Dodge City and he was

qualified for ambulance service. He had his pack stowed in the ambulance when he was ordered out of the vehicle because, being but 19 years of age, he was not a qualified driver.

One source, a transmittal report to the Dies Committee (the House Committee on Un-American Activities) by a Special Committee by the Kansas House of Representatives, recites that he was moved into the front lines and after coming through the offensive against Quinto was killed during a drive against Belchite in the Aragon District. A bullet entered his chest and pierced a lung and he died the following day, September 3, 1937, in a temporary hospital near La Azaila. The grave was not marked and its location is unknown, but it is supposedly near the hospital.

Ken Graeber, though, reported Donald's death during an interview recorded as follows: "On arrival in Spain, guards took the English-speaking personnel to a training camp. Some were kept there three months but Graeber was assigned to ambulance duty in less than a month. He passed the test and then he suggested that Henry be given a chance. Don passed, too, and he had his clothes all packed in the car ready to leave, but for some reason the officials decided not to let him. Perhaps they thought he was too young. But they gave him a dangerous job as first aid man with the medical corps. He had to go out on the battlefields and bandage the wounded and summon the stretcher bearers." It was in the attack on Belchite in the Aragon province that Don was wounded. Graeber said, "His death came after he had been in actual warfare only two months. He was shot in the chest with a rifle bullet, and buried near a hospital at Azaila."

His friend Graeber continues:

"Don was known as the crack first-aid man on the Lincoln battalion and I can say sincerely that he was respected and liked by all his comrades, for many of them went out of their way to tell me so. I was not with him when he was wounded, but I do know this: he was aiding his wounded comrades when under heavy fire he was hit. It was a position of great danger, but Don considered it his duty to be there."

Many of the papers and letters he wrote were taken as evidence by the Dies Committee in an investigation instituted by my father. As a result of the investigation the Chancellor of Kansas University was implicated and hearings were held concerning the incident. [The concern was allowing young KU students to be recruited on campus for this foreign war.] There were many column inches of newspaper space devoted to the on-going investigation and several formal reports prepared as well as articles, copies of letters, and memorials.

Donald never married. I remember well a "suitcase" that Don had for sending dirty clothing home from college every week or two and our mother would wash and iron them. Then by reversing a cardboard insert in the lid, it could be returned to him with the fresh, clean clothing.

As I remember seeing him, he was of slight build, perhaps 5'8", 150 lbs. Our sister, Georgia, remembers him being blond headed and close to six-foot tall.

Let me set forth a poem written by our mother on a piece of scratch paper with pencil, and found among the materials on file at the Abraham Lincoln Brigade Archives, located at Brandeis University.

"My darling

"They laid him in a homely grave across the ocean wide, we know not where

"No sacred hymn was sung for him

"No man of god was there to offer prayer; those who loved him, mother,
father were not there.

"God was there. His angels carried his dear soul to that home
beyond the sky, that home not made with hands, three long years have
passed yet we mourn we greive [sic] we can not understand

"Some bright day when that veil is lifted, ah yes we'll understand.

- *Mother*

In 1998 I had occasion to take an Elderhostel trip to Spain. I contacted the Abraham Lincoln Brigade organization in New York to see if they had any information about finding the grave site. They referred me to an American citizen living in Madrid who had been making quite a study of the war and might possibly know of the area. I contacted him and made arrangements to have him as a guide to take me there. It took a few days to drive to Belchite, the area where Don was shot. We found the city, which is now a national memorial with a sign at the outskirts that indicated to me that they were warning the citizenry of what could happen to them if they defied the government. The town was all adobe and plaster buildings with thousands of pock-marks or bullet holes in the walls and quite a destroyed city.

We left there and went about 20 miles to a very small town named Azalia, arriving about 12:30. It was a very small village. All doors were shut and windows closed, as I recall. It looked almost deserted but we found one small door in a group of store fronts where the door was open. We went in and found no one in this one room "club-type" building. There were several tables with chairs around and a small bar with stools. We sat down at the bar, my friend saying that it was siesta time still so we would just wait and see what happened. In a half-hour or so, a couple of men came in, looked us over, and went to a table and sat down. My friend said that he thought we were probably in some type of club room. It was apparent that the tables around were for card playing, etc.



Abraham Lincoln Brigade, c. 1937

After about 30 minutes one of the group of men that had arrived came over to the bar to get himself a cerveza and spoke to us, opening up the way for conversation. My friend spoke Spanish very well and we started talking about the area, stores, citizens, etc. Finally we got around to the reason we were really there. Our new friend was a rather elderly type and said that he was a boy at the time of the war and didn't know too much about it, but had some knowledge from all the stories that had been told about the war years. He must have been about my age – ten years old at the time of the war. He knew very little about all that went on, but did remember about the war and that some of the foreigners that had been treated in a little store down on one of the corners and those that had been killed were buried right away in mass graves at the edge of town. Those that lived a while were usually buried in a little cemetery about a mile up the hill.

Since Donald was supposed to have lived for a while, possibly a day or two, he was no doubt buried in a little cemetery about a mile out of town on a little hill.

We went to the cemetery, a small area with a large wall about six feet high around it. It contained many graves and some with headstones, some without. I am convinced in my mind that I found his resting place. I didn't violate the privacy of the occasion by climbing over the wall and going into the grounds. I didn't see many headstones and his name was probably not on a headstone since he was there under a false identity. But I am convinced in my mind that I did find his resting place.

For further background on the Spanish Civil War:

- * <http://www.alba-valb.org/>; Abraham Lincoln Brigade Archives
- * Adam Hochschild, *Spain in Our Hearts: Americans in the Spanish Civil War, 1936-39*
- * Peter N. Carroll and Fraser Ottanelli, editors, *Letters from the Spanish Civil War*
- * Peter N. Carroll, *The Odyssey of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade: Americans in the Spanish Civil War*
- * Richard Rhodes, *Hell and Good Company*; Simon Schuster, Feb 2015
- * Ernest Hemingway, *For Whom the Bell Tolls*; Charles Scribner's sons, Oct 1940.