

Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine

The World War II Veterinarian Who Survived Anthrax

By Dr. Donald F. Smith

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As described in a story published here earlier this week, October 16, 2013,¹ Drs. Kenneth Gumaer and Marshall Waple were veterinary officers in charge of the pack mules of the legendary Merrill's Marauders. They were engaged in one of most treacherous assignments of World War II.

Each of their ships was torpedoed on the way from the US to India in late 1943—Dr. Waple's ship sank and his cargo of 350 mules perished—and both were subject to severe disease, danger, and unimaginable hardship. As they traversed jungle and mountains in Burma, they both saw their campaign come to a successful conclusion with the retaking of the strategic airfield of Myitkyina in May 1944.

Both men were hospitalized following the campaign, and Dr. Waple (his medical challenges severe) was returned to the US where his treatment continued.²

Dr. Gumaer's work in Indochina, however, was not over. He was assigned as a liaison officer with the Chinese animal transport under the jurisdiction of General Chiang Kai-shek to accompany the Chinese soldiers and they made their way over the old Burma Road back into China.

During my 2007 interview with Dr. Gumaer, he described the trails as being very treacherous, *"more or less along the top of the peaks."*³ In the local villages along the way the Chinese soldiers, particularly the officers, would bivouac in the villages, and put their horses and mounts in native barns for food and protection.

One morning, the Chinese soldiers requested Gumaer's help because an officer's horse had died during the night. There being no gloves for a proper necropsy, Gumaer began the postmortem examination barehanded. As soon as he made the initial skin incision, he feared anthrax. The blood had not clotted and the horse had typical edema of the spleen and celiac area. He made a blood smear and found it to be *"loaded with sporulated rods."*⁴

They had me go immediately—as fast as I could—to a hospital. There was no way to get an airplane, so we drove on a jeep. We got into the general hospital

at Karmee that night where they supposedly had treatment for anthrax. (The treatment at that time was anti-anthrax antiserum of equine origin.) But they only had one dose of the serum and they said there was no use in giving me that because it takes several treatments to be effective.⁵

Gumaer was isolated in a unit which he described as being separated from the morgue by only a bamboo curtain. *“They figured I would be going there anyway,”* he said.⁶

But Ken escaped what would have seemed to have been the inevitable as the hospital had some aqueous penicillin. *“That,”* he told me, *“was before penicillin had been used therapeutically for anthrax.”* He was given an injection every four hours and treated topically with moist packs and peroxide *“or something like that.”⁷*

He developed the epidermal form of anthrax, boils that had big black scabs that were *“hard and kept discharging. They didn’t heal and I kept putting moist packs around my wrist.”⁸*

Fortunately the lesions finally regressed. But in the two weeks before he was discharged, he was considered to be *“an interesting specimen”* as the hospital personnel kept going to isolation to look at his lesions.⁹



Dr. Kenneth Gumaer '43 (L) and his close friend, Dr. Richard Drumm '51
(Photo by the author 2007)

Returning home after the war, Dr. Gumaer began a veterinary practice in his home town of Rhinebeck, New York. Farm animals were the dominant patients in the late 1940s and 1950s,

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Dr. Donald F. Smith, Dean Emeritus of the Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine, had a passion for the value of the history of veterinary medicine as a gateway for understanding the present and the future of the profession.

Throughout his many professional roles from professor of surgery, to Department Chair of Clinical Sciences, Associate Dean of Education and of Academic Programs and Dean, he spearheaded changes in curriculum, clinical services, diagnostic services and more. He was a diplomat of the American College of Veterinary Surgeons and a member of the National Academy of Practices. Most recently he played a major role in increasing the role of women in veterinary leadership.

Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine is one of his projects where he was able to share his vast knowledge of the profession.