

"Before now I have never achieved better than second rate," said Bethune before leaving for China. This was his chance.

He was appalled at primitive medical conditions there. He made inspection tours of the whole area, stopping to operate wherever he went. He designed and had built a permanent teaching and operating hospital and saw it destroyed in three weeks by enemy action. He saw that he had to take to the field again. In an area of 13 million people, he was the only qualified doctor. He wrote that he had carried out 110 operations in 25 days. Once, in the space of 69 hours he performed 115 operations without stopping, even under heavy fire. He travelled more than 3,000 miles, 400 on foot. He streamlined operating equipment so that he could carry supplies for 500 operations on two mules. He taught people to be doctors in a year, nurses in six months. He organized classes, wrote and illustrated instruction manuals, adapted surgical instruments to Chinese conditions.

From Hero to Legend

He touched many, and his name, rendered into Chinese as Pai Ch'iu-en, became legendary.

"It is true that I am tired," he wrote to a friend in Canada, "but I don't think I have been so happy for a long time... I am needed."

On November 11, 1939, he wrote:

"I am fatally ill, I am going to die. My only regret is that I shall be unable to do more...".

Bethune, the outcast, the adventurer, the healer of thousands, died. He had cut himself while operating on a wounded soldier — there were no rubber gloves — and infection set in, a virulent form of blood poisoning.