Some Experiences of a Medical Student at Belsen
By
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Early in April, 1945, the Dean of the Medical College posted a notice asking for twelve student volunteers, who were to go to Holland for four weeks to give medical treatment to cases of starvation. The response was naturally enormous: a ballot was taken, and I was very surprised to find my name among the twelve lucky ones. During the next week we were issued with our kit, full infantry equipment. With the expense of much time and bad language, I managed to stow away into the kit-bag and pack all the official kit, plus a text book and a few instruments. Little did I realise then how valuable these instruments were to be later on.

We waited anxiously for two more weeks, and then we were told to be at 24 hours call. The following day we left for the Red Cross H.Q., and there we met the C.O. of our unit and eighty-four students from the other London teaching hospitals. Passports and numerous permits were issued to us, and comic relief from waiting was provided by a bunch of reporters and photographers to whom we told many tall stories, none of which, unfortunately, were believed. Then we were subjected to a pep-talk, into which was quietly insinuated the news that we were going, not to Holland, but to Belsen. To say the least of it, we were surprised, and a little later it was a rather thoughtful and subdued Medical Student Unit which entrained for Cirencester. From there we were taken by road through a blizzard to a transit camp. We got to know this camp very well, too well, in fact, because we were kept there for four days, living off stew and baked beans, with their gusty results, and the battered remnants of our original enthusiasm. Each morning we were pulled out of bed at 4am. Driven down to Down-Ampney airfield, and then sent back again because snow had cancelled flying.

At last, on the fifth day, we left. This time we went to another aerodrome, and having quickly loaded ourselves and our kit into six Dakotas we were soon leaving England behind us. Passing over the French coast east of Dunkirk we noticed some V1 sites. These we could just distinguish sitting among ample proof of the efficiency of Bomber Command. We saw similar massive devastation when we crossed the Rhine. From then onwards for about two hours we could see little more than pine forests. I was jerked out of a doze when our plane abruptly circled a large clearing, and came into land on a series of bomb-craters disguised as a runway. This was Celle, at that time our most forward transport airfield. From there we were taken by lorries to Belsen, about fifteen miles away. Our first view of the camp was of a break in the forest, a guarded gate, and a large yellow notice saying: "Dust spreads Typhus – you may not live here. WE DO." We drove on for another

mile, and turned into a huge Panzer Corps camp which was planned like a garden city, with palatial buildings and broad roads, and complete with an ornamental lake. We were billeted here in one of the barrack houses, two in a room, each room fully furnished and with running water. Our mess was attractively built in the style of a Swiss chalet and faced the lake. Such were the luxurious quarters of the soldiers of the Master Race!

The next morning after an introductory talk by our Medical C.O. we were driven to Belsen itself. Here I must digress to give a very brief picture of the camp as it was on our arrival.

The whole camp measured about a mile long by 300 yards wide. It was divided into an S.S administration section, a prison compound, and a large burial ground. The prison section was roughly the size of the two School fields, and into this were packed about sixty large ramshackle huts, in which existed some 40,000 internees. A few huts had bunks, but most of the poor wretches slept on the rotting floor-boards, lying in two to three inches of their own excreta. There were no latrines. Over 4,000 were on the verge of dying, and 26,000 required urgent hospital treatment. Three hundred were dying each day. Nearly all had an agonising and fulminating diarrhoea, about three-quarters had had or were having typhus, and roughly a quarter had active T.B. In addition, there were most of the commoner diseases and surgical conditions, all present in a grossly exaggerated form. Remnants of the original 13,000 unburied dead still littered the camp. Pervading the whole camp and noticeable a mile away (this is hard fact and not poetic licence) was the putrid "Belsen" smell, which I am quite unable to describe. Only about 3,000 internees were as yet in hospital, because most R.A.M.C. units were at the front. A Light A.A. Unit, Field Hygiene Sections, and British Red Cross and American Army Ambulance Units were daily performing miracles in military and civil administration, and the evacuation of the "fit." The accepted test of physical fitness was ability to climb three steps into an ambulance without collapsing.

It therefore fell to us hundred students to give medical treatment to some 30,000 internees, and to supervise their feeding, until they could be removed to improvised

hospitals. There they would be cared for by R.A.M.C. units returning from the front line. We worked under the directions and with the valuable advice of those Herculean R.A.M.C. personnel present.

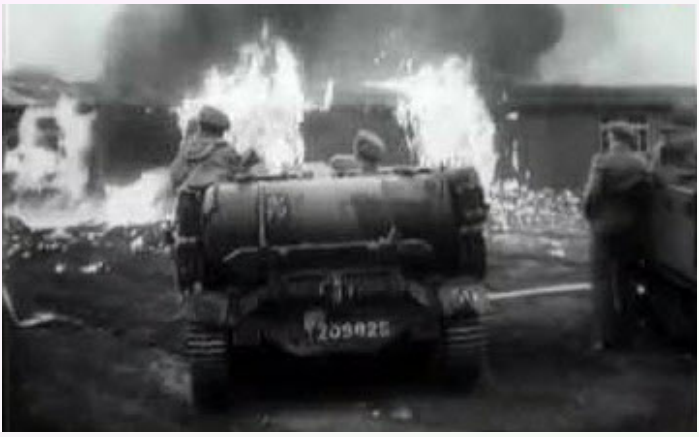
On first arriving at the camp we were thoroughly dusted with D.D.T. This slightly indecorous procedure, repeated every other day, was our sole protection against typhus-carrying lice. We worked together in pairs, and my friend Francis, and I were allotted six huts containing some six hundred women. Only about one hundred and fifty of these were very ill, and on our first day one hut was evacuated. Accordingly, while Francis was obtaining a nominal role of the sick and giving urgently needed treatment, I set three of our Hungarian orderlies to clean, repair and disinfect the evacuated hut. In addition, remembering "The Specialist" I drew up plans for and had built a unique system of drains, which became famous. Meanwhile, with two more orderlies, I borrowed a lorry, and by devious means "acquired" from the neighbourhood some beds, bedding and clothes. Feeding bowls, mugs, dressings, a thermometer (built to fit s horse) and drugs were found at the S.S. stores. There were large supplies of aspirin, opium and Sulpha compounds, but other drugs were difficult to come by. Later, a dispensary was set up and run by two students.

In three days' time the 25 beds of our new "hospital" hut were filled. We had selected the cases on the following grounds: Firstly, those acutely ill with conditions curable by our limited means. This, for example, obviously excluded cases of T.B. Secondly, those below thirty years of age. Over thirty there was little hope for them, treated or untreated. These rules were naturally subject to much variation. Our selection sounds rather cruel, and in many case was painful to us, but we were compelled to be practical. As soon as possible those who were recovered were discharged to their old huts, and the vacated beds filled with fresh cases. Thus the numbers of those acutely ill in the other huts were gradually reduced. The pitiful last days of those clearly beyond treatment were alleviated by the judicious use of opium tablets. We trained three fit and trustworthy girls in the rudiments of nursing,

and in addition delegated to them the feeding. Accordingly, by the end of the first week, Francis and I could do a medical round of our six huts during the morning, leave instructions for the "nurses," and then spend the rest of the day working in another part of the camp.

The other hut, where we helped another student, was one of the worst, and contained about four hundred women. The death rate was between five and ten each day. Each afternoon began with identifying the dead, so that a German working party could carry them to the burial pits. As many of the women were so advanced in disease and extreme emaciation as to exactly resemble death, this identification was laborious and difficult.

Our work soon became more manageable, and at the end of a fortnight our treatment was showing heartening results. Gradually, returning R.A.M.C. units sets up improvised hospitals in the Panzer Camp, and gradually the internees were evacuated. Their vacated huts were burned to the ground by tank flame-throwers. Three weeks after our arrival the death rate had fallen from three hundred to about ten per day. Work grew lighter when we followed our patients to the hospital. There, Francis and I had a ward with eighty patients, and had working to our directions an R.A.M.C. orderly, who could do nothing wrong, and two trained German nurses. Treatment was easier and more effective, and it was possible to perform minor operations quite safely. After some ten days' work in the hospitals a Belgian student arrived to replace us, and our medical work at Belsen ended.



To give a connected impression, this story has of necessity been made rather prosaic. Had I written of details, the result would have read like a mixture of the "Inferno" and a music hall script. Belsen was a blend of exaggeration, obscene horror and filth, and humour. I saw surgical conditions such as Cancrum Oris which has been extinct in England for half a century. I would dance at a party one night, and discover a patient using a dead body as a pillow the next morning. I would have to break off work and discuss with a comic opera Russian liaison officer the advisability of holding "democratic elections for Block-leader" in a politically quarrelsome hut of Polish and Russian women. The language problem was a never filing source of amusement. Except in bartering, where the cigarette spoke all languages, I carried out conversation with those indispensable remnants for French

and German which remain with me since school days. I would like to record my thanks to Messrs. Sutton and Ismay for all the difficulties which their teaching saved me.

Throughout our stay, great attention was paid by the authorities to our recreation. Our day at the camp finished by 6 pm, and we were encouraged to forget our work by visiting the Panzer Camp cinema and by organising parties and dances in the mess. These were made memorable by the consumption of some delightful, recaptured French wines; accordingly my memories of the V.E. night party are rather hazy, but I am told that we all certainly enjoyed ourselves. Diversions which in England are tedious, became to us luxuries, because of the ever-present atmosphere of extreme contrast. Such was my visit to the Protestant Church at Celle. It was to this delightful mediaeval town that Bach had tramped, and he had played at the organ at this very church. The interior was beautifully decorated, principally with wood carvings and intricate inlays, and scriptural illustrations in oils. A German boy of eighteen was at the organ, and after a few words from me he played some Bach. Wandering slowly down from the gallery in the coloured half-light, I experienced a wonderful sensation of relaxation and serenity which I shall never feel again.

The last morning was spent in packing and saying goodbye to my patients, a rather sad business. In the afternoon, our kits overflowing with souvenirs, we left Celle by plane for England. I spent the next day at the Hospital answering questions, and then escaped home, only to return two days later feeling more than a little groggy. That was the beginning of typhus, which kept me in hospital for six weeks, and convalescing at home for three dreary months of inactivity.

I am often asked which things I remember now most clearly. My memory which usually corrupts the past truth so happily, this time has played me false, and I can say without hesitation that two nightmare impressions will always be with me: the sight of the distorted and jumbled bodies in an open burial pit, and the sound of that agonized and perpetual cry of "Doktor! Doktor!"