

REMINISCENCES OF THE EARLY DAYS OF THE WAR & OF THIRTY DAYS IN THE BLIND SCHOOL HOSPITAL

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Before commencing my story, I must take you a little further back.

After completing a year's course in Hospital Administration in Bedford College for Women (University of London), I started a tour on 15th July 1939 on the Continent, and visited a few hospitals in Brussels and Kaiserswerth and in the Scandinavian countries and Finland.

By way of interest I may mention that I had the great fortune to visit the Deaconess Institution at Kaiserswerth-am-Rhein, in Germany, and had an opportunity to see the great and good work carried out by the Deaconesses, and also the room where our Patroness, Florence Nightingale, lived for three months, during which time she received instruction in Nursing.

I had been a few days in Stockholm, when I received a cable to return to London immediately on account of the international situation. I managed to secure a passage and arrived in London on 29th August to find it very changed in appearance from the hustle and bustle of the usual business life, to a life of uniforms, A.R.P. constructions and balloon barrages. All life seemed to be at a tension and we lived for news on the wireless, hoping and praying for a peaceful settlement to the threat of war.

Having volunteered for service during the crisis of September 1938, I received official orders from the Ministry of Health, allocating me to the Blind School Hospital, Leatherhead, Surrey, immediately a National Emergency arose. At the same time I received a certificate from the Home Office, having passed the examination held for Nurses in Medical Anti-gas Instruction.

On 1st September I decided to help temporarily in a small maternity hospital in London, just to keep me occupied.

On the night of the 2nd, I walked out after duty to see what the "black-out" looked like. I could hardly believe that this was London. No lights showed anywhere, except for the buses, which looked like large moving caterpillars, showing a few pale blue lights, as they moved along on their journey. I then looked up at the sky, and the sight was really magnificent, if such a sight can thus be described. The sky was studded with giant balloons, and the hundreds of searchlights playing and criss-crossing, and showing up the balloon barrage, looked a marvellous sight to me.

The next day was Sunday, 3rd September, and I remember the day so vividly. It was a beautiful warm sunny day, and life seemed too good for misery of any kind. Pending the Prime Minister's speech I said to some of the nurses, "We couldn't possibly have a war on such a beautiful day like this," and then at 11.15 a.m. we collected round the wireless to hear Mr. Chamberlain speak, still feeling that war would be averted.

I think the Prime Minister's speech stirred everyone's heart, as we well know that he of all men desired peace, so what he had to tell us must have cost him sorrow, and as his words fell telling us the truth, I saw tears well up and silently fall from many an eye. What struck me forcibly was his deep heartfelt "God bless you all."

And now, I come nearer to my story. After the speech was over, I told the Matron I must report for duty at Leatherhead. She gave me permission to leave, and on my way to pack my case, we heard our first air raid warning sirens, just fifteen minutes after war had been declared. I promptly took my gas mask and ran to my post beside the patients on the second floor of the Hospital. There being no lift, we proceeded to carry the mothers and babies quietly and calmly to the ground floor as previously arranged.

When the "all clear" signal was given I went back to my room, packed to my case and started out in uniform to my destination.

I had rather an amusing incident. My case being heavy, I hailed what I thought was a taxi, but on its arrival discovered that it was a private car. The owner, seeing distress written on my face, very kindly said, "Sister, I will drop you at the 'bus stop.'" Never was I more thankful that I was in nurse's uniform!

Leaving out minor incidents, I eventually reached Leatherhead, and after telephoning for a taxi, proceeded to the Blind School Hospital. Here, I went to what looked like an enquiry office, and asked for the Matron. I was told to go straight up the corridor and I would find the Matron's Office, but instead found myself in the kitchen, where a kindly maid directed me where to go. Everywhere, people seemed to be moving to and fro, and all looked extremely busy. I had to wait some time for the Matron, whom I soon realized was the busiest person of all.

I learnt that this was a school for blind people, and now had to be transformed into a hospital. Eventually the Matron arrived, with her sleeves tucked up, and apologised for being so long, but I know there was no need for any apology.

She then told a Sister, who happened to be passing, to take me to the Nurses Quarters, but as the Sister was herself busy, she pointed to a building, which used to be an infirmary for the Blind and was being converted into Nurses' Quarters, and asked me to report to the Home Sister.

On the way, I met men, in shirt sleeves, (who I later learnt were medical students from King's College Hospital, London), carrying beds, mattresses and furniture. In the grounds I saw several blind refugees, Austrians and Germans, walking about or sitting on benches and talking. Every one of them carried a gas mask and looked quite happy. I was later told that most of the Blind had been evacuated, and that the remainder would be going in a few days.

When I managed to find the Home Sister, who was busy getting beds ready, she took me to a room with eight beds and eight chests of drawers, said I could have any one of them, and left me.

Being the only person from India, you can imagine I was feeling pretty sorry for myself, but I soon pulled myself together realizing this was war!

At 7.30 p.m. I was told to go to the dining room for supper. On my arrival there I saw Trained Nurses' Auxiliaries, V.A.Ds. and medical students all lined up in any order waiting to serve themselves. However, I found a seat and then I heard a nurse say, "Oh, how nice to see another trained nurse!" She had recognised my State Registration Nursing Badge. These words did cheer me up, so I ventured to ask if I could be of assistance after supper.

Off we went to start "blacking out" what was to be a Resuscitation Room, in case we had any casualties during the night. Work was cheering, I can tell you, at a time like this! No black-out precautions had been taken, as we had to get on with that in case of an air raid.

Next morning I offered to help in the operation theatre, so with the aid of the V.A.Ds. and the medical students we scrubbed and cleaned the walls and floors. The room chosen for a theatre used to be a boot repair shop for the Blind, so you can just picture how much washing and cleaning that meant; but I must say that the students and auxiliaries were absolute bricks and were ready to help and to do anything they were asked to.

Everyone worked very hard during those first weeks of the War, and nothing was too irksome. The students fetched and carried beds, furniture etc. and filled all the sandbags and piled them around the operation theatre, for a second one was soon to be equipped.

The large rooms with weaving looms etc., used for occupational therapy for the Blind, had to be converted into wards, and they proved excellent for that purpose. It was a pity that some of the looms had to be broken in order to remove them. I saw thousands of books in Braille letters just stacked up in one room, as the Blind had been evacuated in a hurry. But fortune was on our side and we had no air raids and so were able to make order out of chaos. Gradually, beds were made properly and put into order, wards were equipped, and medicines issued. Meanwhile, in the operation theatre we got instruments ready, sterilised bowls and dressings, and had things ready for an emergency. The hospital is now equipped and can accommodate about seven hundred patients.

On Tuesday, 5th September, mock air raid casualties were brought into the Resuscitation Room, where I received them and carried out the Doctor's instructions, having previously got hot water bottles, oxygen, injections etc. ready.

Students acted as stretcher bearers. This was merely a demonstration of how things should be done when the necessity arose. Meanwhile any of the staff who needed attention or people with cuts and bruises, and once a man who fell from a ladder, were attended to in the Resuscitation Room. The Theatre was cleaned daily and kept ready for an emergency.

On Monday, the 11th, one of our V.A.Ds. got married, so we drank her health in champagne. This same girl came back to

work the next day and carried on as usual. My admiration goes out for these girls who have given up their homes and comfort to come and work in spite of not being trained nurses.

We were shown demonstrations of extinguishing incendiary bombs, and of unloading casualties from 'buses, which had been converted into ambulances, and the method of sending them to the various wards after being received by the physicians and surgeons in the Reception Room.

On Thursday, the 14th, we had one first operation in the Theatre, which happened to be a D and C, which caused much laughter!

On Friday, the 15th, we had our first dance in the Reception Room, to break the monotony of work, and we did enjoy it. We felt we could now work all the better.

On Monday, the 18th, we had three more operations, two being abdominal operations, which went off very well indeed, in our converted boot repair shop! These few patients had been sent in by local doctors. We were still waiting for one first convoy, which was eventually sent from King's College Hospital, London.

I was interested in the Decontamination Station in Leatherhead. This was a swimming pool, which had been boarded up for the purpose. I met many Red Cross nurses and V.A.Ds. busy getting the station ready. It was all surrounded by sandbags, and the inside was screened into various sections. Outside the station were several lorries, belonging to shopkeepers, now converted into ambulances and ready for use. One ambulance was fitted up for operating on casualties in an emergency.

An amusing incident occurred when the trained staff were each issued with the Civil Nursing Reserve uniform, which consisted of one white drill dress and two thick army caps. As there was to be a dance that night in the Reception Room, all the trained nurses dressed up, and some of them looked most grotesque as the cut of the dresses was terrible and some too short and some too long! They paraded the room, carrying a banner with the words, "Come and join the Civil Nursing Reserve, a smart lot"! This caused great merriment amongst the doctors and students.

A chapel is attached to the Blind School, and the choir is composed of blind people, the organist also being blind. Their voices were lovely.

I had an opportunity of seeing some of the work done by the Blind, and it is certainly as good as that done by people with their sight.

As I was due to sail for India on 13th October, I left the Blind School Hospital on the 5th, but the night before I was given a farewell party, and was presented with a blue waste-paper basket made by the Blind.

Although my thirty days experience in the Blind School Hospital was one of hard work, they were some of the happiest days of my life, as the contacts made and the kindred spirit of all made us like one big family, and I left the hospital with some regret.

I must say that in time of need, the English people are ready to help and give up a great deal for their country, and there is never any scarcity of voluntary workers in a good cause.