Reflections of Forty Years Ago – Belsen 1945

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Having taken part in the evacuation of casualties in the assault of the crossing of the Rhine, the 11th British Light Field Ambulance crossed the Rhine with the 6th Guards Armoured Brigade and proceeded, like many other units, to move across Germany at a fairly rapid rate. All four sections of the Field Ambulance, which had previously been separated, and the Headquarters came together at Neustadt on the 13th April 1945. After a few days rumours were beginning to circulate that we were being assigned a special job by Brigadier Glyn Hughes, DSO and bar, the Chief Medical Officer of the British Second Army; something about a concentration camp infected with typhus.

At 0015 hours on the 17th April 1945 orders were received to close down the Unit and be ready to move in 12 hours. Anxiety amongst the men began to show, the main reason being that they had been together since the invasion of Normandy and the subsequent campaigns and had virtually come through without a scratch, then just as it looked as though the war was ending they were going into a typhus infected area. At the end of it all they might get typhus and not survive.

The journey from Neustadt to Belsen was really delightful. The scenery was beautiful, there were plenty of trees in many places and small forests through which we had to pass. We followed the course of the River Leine from Neustadt until we reached the town of Schwanstedt, and after that turned eastwards towards Celle following the River Aller. We reached the village of Winsen, crossed the river and plunged into forest land. In the midst of all this grandeur we were brought back to grim reality by a notice which said "Typhus – end of infected area". Just prior to seeing this notice we had passed a line of German tanks complete with their crews, some of which I seem to remember had markings on their helmets of the Death's Head Panzer Division. We were, in fact, entering a five mile square neutral area which had been agreed between the British High Command and the German Army High Command. We were to take in a regiment of British troops and the enemy would provide troops, many of whom were Hungarians, who would remain guarding the camp until it became British Territory in a week or so.

Editor's Note: This account by the 2 i/c of one of the first medical units to tackle the appalling task of cleaning Belsen was prompted by Colonel Vella's edition of the diary of a pathologist at Belsen in the February 1984 issue of the Journal, which also inspired a BBC Television programme on the same theme 1st May 1985 which focussed exclusively on the role of medical students from London Hospitals.

The reason for this was that an orderly evacuation of the camp was necessary so that typhus and other diseases, did not spread throughout north-east Germany.

The camp itself was very closely camouflaged with wooded areas. We eventually passed by it but could see very little except a collection of huts with clusters of people moving around them. We could vaguely see barbed wire fencing with the odd raised guard hut with what appeared to be fully armed guards. These were Hungarians complete with a white armband.

At Belsen we immediately joined 32 C.C.S. under the command of Lt Col. J. A. D. Johnston, MC, who was Senior Medical Officer at Belsen Camp.

The 11th British Light Field Ambulance and 32 C.C.S. were, therefore, two of the initial units to start the assault on the evacuation of Belsen concentration camp, although later they were joined by 163 Field Ambulance, 9th British General Hospital, 35 C.C.S. and later the 29th British General Hospital. In addition to that there were several members of the British Red Cross Society and of course, the London medical students, about whom we have heard so much recently¹. We also had the assistance of 567 Coy American Field Service Unit and more particularly a U.S. Army Captain, Joe Davis, who was expert in dealing with typhus outbreaks. He had apparently dealt with one in Italy during the Italian campaign. There were a vast number of people involved at Belsen and if I have omitted to mention any of them, I apologise.

The scene which met us as we entered the camp was one of utter chaos with dead and dying everywhere and an estimated 6–10 thousand people dead on site. The fitter ones seemed to be wandering about – a lot of them aimlessly – in the blue and white prison pyjamas which offered very little protection from the elements. Some of these could hardly shuffle and the odd one or two collapsed and died just as they lay on the ground. The scene within the huts inside the camp was equally appalling. Some of the huts, without bunks, had several hundred people crammed together with virtually no clothing at all. In the huts, presumed to be dormitories, there were wooden bunk-type beds without mattresses and there were two, and sometimes three, together in a bunk. As often as not one of them might be dead and the others not strong enough to remove that person from the bed. The vast majority of the inmates suffered from diarrhoea, whatever the cause, and of course typhus and tuberculosis was rife. There was no question of the decencies of life. If you had the strength to get to the door, that was all right; if not, you relieved yourself where you were. All that was left of most of these people

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was just a human skeleton. As one can imagine there was death and human excreta everywhere.

Belsen itself was not an extermination camp. Although neglect and brutality existed it was really an internment and labour camp where the younger and fitter people who had survived Auschwitz and Buchenwald were sent; they could readily be recognised by the initial letter and figures tattooed on their left forearm. In addition to the Jewish content there were many political internees. It had got completely out of hand with disease in the few weeks prior to our entry. The only evidence of a crematorium that I saw at Belsen was one single-chamber affair. With a very limited number of personnel, decisions had to be made how to tackle the problem.

The first thing was to attempt to give food and clothing and possibly some food in a sort of Bengal famine mixture, and to attempt to increase the morale of the inmates in any way possible. This we attempted to do by encouraging the fitter ones to make their own little fires in the open and possibly cook any little bit of food provided for them. The Bengal famine mixture was not an outstanding success. Our Sgt Major, RSM Marno, distributed about four or five thousand meals twice daily, but despite the fact that they needed some food I think the ghastly smell of the mixture was too much for them and a lot of them even declined this mixture.

It was decided that everyone would have to be evacuated and the camp completely destroyed.

Burying the dead could only be done with the aid of bulldozers which dug enormous pits sufficient for about five thousand bodies. The bodies were then bulldozed into these pits which were finally marked with R.E. minefield tape. However, the S.S. who ran the camp were made to do a token burial of the dead by loading the deceased onto lorries, taking them to the pits and throwing them in. There were, of course, Jewish Rabbis on site and they spent all their days conducting funerals for the inmates of the camp who recognised a relative or a friend. These were carried out at the distant perimeter of the camp in private. We were very fortunate in having a large purpose built cavalry barracks within two or three miles of the camp and this made an ideal area for hospitalisation of the inmates of the camp. At the entrance to these barracks was a first-class building which had obviously been used for stabling horses in the past. This was cleaned out and used for what we termed "the human laundry". The men of our unit, clad in anti-typhus suits and liberally dusted with DDT powder, led by Captain Douglas Peterkin (who later wrote an MD thesis on Typhus) and Captain Paddy O'Donnell, went into the camp with part of our ambulance forces termed "contaminated ambulances" and proceeded to evacuate the ill of the inmates – mainly those suffering from typhus. All clothing was removed and they were wrapped in Army blankets and transported to the "human laundry" where we had obtained the services of the captured German army nurses (the equivalent of our

Q.As). At first they were somewhat truculent at being made to work for the British Army, but when they saw the first ambulance loads of victims they were clearly very shocked and worked with a will for the rest of the time.

The "human laundry" was a somewhat primitive affair with wooden tables with Valor Perfection paraffin stoves providing the heat underneath. These nurses bathed, de-loused and powdered the unfortunate victims who were then put into clean blankets, put on clean stretchers and then into what were termed "cleaned ambulances". They were then transported into makeshift hospital wards in the barrack area. The maximum number that we could evacuate at this rate was between 650 and 750 per day with the limited resources that were initially available, this being virtually a 12 hour day without much respite.

Once they were hospitalised there was the need to look after them and provide medicines. When we crossed the Rhine our unit was given map references which were the locations of German medical supplies. These had been centralised in village halls etc., away from the larger centres of population. Our Medical Officers had been asked to go to these places if it happened to be near them and make a rough estimate of the drugs and equipment present. So at least we had some information as to the whereabouts of a considerable quantity of drugs and equipment. Armed with this knowledge I was given the task of creating and being in charge of a dispensary for a hospital for several thousand patients. I was fortunate to have the services of a captured German army pharmacist and also an inmate of the camp who was very well preserved, and certainly had not been starved, who spoke five or six languages and never questioned her too closely as to how she was so fit and never found out.

We were a handful of officers who had to take charge of administrative duties, and, if I remember rightly Major Max Griffin, who was a pathologist and a member of 32 C.C.S., was in charge of the "human laundry". Another member of 32 C.C.S. who was an anaesthetist was a Major Winterbottom, the inmates soon regained their sense of humour and referred to him as "Major Frosty". The hospital area was created with what could be scrounged or commandeered locally and staffed by any local or continental doctors and nurses who were available.

We were encamped in a field equidistant from the concentration camp and the barrack area and this was the only occasion during the war when we exhibited our large Red Cross ground identification, as we were supposedly in a neutral area. But early one morning whilst I was shaving I noticed a Focke Wolfe aircraft flying low over our field and thought that he knew why we were there and was observing the neutrality of the area, when the plane suddenly circled around and came across the field – first in one direction and then another – strafing us with cannon fire. One of our men was fatally

wounded in the attack and two others were injured, but there could well have been more had we not been well spread out around a very large field. I was asked to give a description of this to the Army's J.A.G. department because it was thought that there would be so few German airfields in action at that time that the culprit could be traced. Whether or not he was I never knew.

On another occasion I sent my RAMC orderly off with a message and his return was considerably delayed. On questioning him on his return he gave the reason for his delay was because he had seen Marlene Dietrich! I did not believe him, but I discovered later in the day that she had been at the camp thinking that one of her relatives may have been there.

A theatre company, who had arrived to perform in Hamburg, came one afternoon to give us a performance of Bernard Shaw's "Arms and the Man". They brought their costumes with them but only used what props they could get hold of in and around the barrack area. In the cast were Ralph Richardson, Laurence Olivier and Margaret Readman. A friend of mine recently visited a London theatre to see a revival of "Arms and the Man" with Richard Briers in the cast, and the programme referred to former productions and this visit to Belsen.

Dr Janet Vaughan (later Dame Janet Vaughan) came over to Belsen with her research team giving intravenous infusions to starvation victims. She was given a room for this purpose, but as soon as the evacuated inmates saw the drip stands, they began to scream "nicht crematorium", so attuned were they to the atrocities of the S.S., and she had to abandon her project.

Two Privates RAMC in our unit had a fascinating job. They were stationed at the entrance to Belsen camp and everybody who entered, including Field Marshal Montgomery, Marshal of the Air Force, Lord Tedder, and B.B.C. correspondents including Richard Dimbleby, were subjected to the same process. They were armed with a hand operated spray gun filled with anti-louse powder, which had a barrel approximately 15" long by 3" in diameter with a nozzle about 1/8" in diameter and again 15" long. Every person had to have a spray inside the cap or on the hair, another up each arm towards the armpits and one down the front of the trousers or skirt, prior to entering the camp.

Even after the evacuation of the inmates, deaths continued to occur and each night men of our Unit toured the barrack "hospital" area to remove the dead. Typhus also took a toll of our Unit of whom 10% contracted the disease. Fortunately none of them died (they were all inoculated against typhus), but they were all seriously ill for about a week and then recovered only slowly after several debilitating weeks. We nursed them all on site in a very well equipped small hospital which had clearly serviced the barracks during its German occupation.

After about three or four weeks we could begin to see the end of our job of evacuation. On Whit Monday, 21st May 1945, we were able to witness Royal Engineer

flame-throwing tanks doing a ceremonial burning of some of the evacuated huts.

In conclusion here is the Special Order of the Day by our Commanding Officer, Lt Col M W Gonin, RAMC.

"I wish to thank all ranks of the 11(Br) Light Field Ambulance and every member of 567 Coy American Field Service Unit who have worked with us so closely, for what you have done since coming to Belsen Concentration Camp on 17th April 1945.

The Unit will always be remembered for what some of you did on D-Day with 27 Armd Bde, for those uncomfortable weeks at Hermanville before Caen fell, for the restless months from Caumont to the Maas when you made for yourselves a reputation with the Guards which any unit might envy. With the Guards you helped to clear the Sittard Triangle and with them took part in the muddy, bloody battles of Cleve and Goch. Since 27 Feb and the formation of the Bank Group you have had not more than two days consecutive rest and at the Rhine you evacuated 1,700 casualties in 56 hours – a role which has never been undertaken by any unit in the history of warfare. Finally, and again with 6th Guards Armoured Brigade you shared with the Americans in the capture of Munster. For all this you have received well deserved acknowledgment from Higher Command.

You then undertook what, for this unit, was the thankless and unspectacular task of clearing Belsen Concentration Camp. Our American friends and yourselves, with the B.R.C.S., have moved well over 11,000 sick from Belsen. To do this, 63 of you have worked for a month amid the most unhygienic conditions inside huts where the majority of internees were suffering from the most virulent disease known to man. You have had to deal with mass hysteria and political complication requiring the tact of diplomats and the firmness of senior officers. During the first 10 days in the Concentration Camp and before any organised attempt had been made to feed the sick in those huts you distributed 4,000 meals twice daily from what RSM Marno could scrounge by initiative and subtlety.

By collecting medical equipment from all over Germany you produced a dispensary which has supplied drugs for 13,000 patients a day and has met the demands of excitable medical officers of all races requiring the most exotic drugs in half a dozen different languages. You may have, without hesitation, acted as undertakers, collecting over 2,000 corpses from the wards of the hospital area and removing them to the mortuary – a task which the RAMC can never before have been asked to fulfil.

The cost has not been light; 20 of you contracted typhus – a disease causing great personal suffering. Thank God all the patients are doing well.

One of us will never leave Belsen – the dawn attack by the German Air Force on our lines was the price he paid to come here.

Life can never be quite the same again for those who

have worked in the Concentration Camp but you will go with the knowledge that the 11(Br) Lt Fd Amb has once again done a good job.

Brig H L Glyn Hughes, CBE, DSO, MC, and Lt Col J A D Johnston, MC, SMO, Belsen Camp join me in thanking you all for the part you have played in achieving the impossible.

Lieut Colonel RAMC
Commanding No 11(Br)
Light Field Ambulance

BELSEN
23 May 45."

ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENTS

MSc – Occupational Medicine Major W A Freeland, RAMC
Major C J Box, RAMC

DRCOG Major G J Hayes, MB, BS, RAMC
Capt J W McCorkingdale, RAMC

FFARCS – Part 1 Major W De Mello, RAMC

MRCGP Major C Dieppe, RAMC
Major (Miss) V Foot, RAMC
Major P M D Kennedy, RAMC

Diploma in Obstetrics and Gynaecology Captain H L Grisewood, RAMC

MSc in Community Medicine Major S A St J Miller, RAMC

Membership of the Faculty of Occupational Medicine Major C J Box, RAMC

Honorary Consultants to the Army

Mr T L T Lewis, CBE, FRCS, FRCOG, was appointed Consultant Emeritus to the Army with effect from 27 June 1985.

Dr W Somerville, CBE, MD, FRCP, was appointed Consultant Emeritus to the Army with effect from 27 June 1985.

Dr B G N Smith, BDS, PhD, FDSRCS, MSc(Mich), was appointed Honorary Consultant in Restorative Dentistry to the Army with effect from 1 October 1985. This is a new appointment.

Mr J Metcalfe, FDS, D Orth, RCS, was appointed Honorary Consultant in Orthodontics to the Queen Elizabeth Military Hospital with effect from 1 November 1985. This is a new appointment.