Sisters in Arms

British Army Nurses Tell Their Story

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Extract

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HOME AND ABROAD

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‘Not when they have work to do’

They were ordinary girls from ordinary backgrounds, yet few groups of women in history have had more extraordinary adventures – or faced more ordeals – than members of Queen Alexandra’s Imperial Military Nursing Service (fondly known as the QAs) during the Second World War. Two hundred and thirty-six paid with their lives. Theirs is a story of guts, self-sacrifice, inspirational leadership and dogged good humour in the face of suffering, privation and death.

Army commanders had noticed how, in those sad wards of the Great War, the spirits of mutilated victims had revived at the sight and touch of a nurse. When war was declared in September 1939, therefore, nurses were positioned as close to the front line as possible. It was a radical decision, matched nowhere in the Axis war machine: German, Italian and Japanese casualties were all cared for by men on the battlefield. Its implication for the nurses was incalculable. This was to be a war that showed no respect for the ‘fair sex’.

For much of the war, waged from the air or from under the sea as much as on land, there *was* no front line – the enemy attacked indiscriminately. Between 1939 and 1945, wherever there were Allied troops risking their lives, there were QAs. A thousand newly enlisted QAs went over with the British Expeditionary Force in 1939. Trapped in the lightning advance of the Germans as they invaded Holland and Belgium, they rescued thousands of wounded British troops by loading them on to hospital trains – trains that might later be blown up or bombed. At the docks they helped carry the injured on to waiting hospital ships under wave after wave of attacks by the Luftwaffe.

Their darkest hour came when the Japanese invaded Hong Kong and Singapore. During a horrific massacre on Christmas Day, which

included their senior doctor and dozens of patients, QAs were raped and murdered. Many QAs were taken prisoner and died as a result of starvation and illness. Those who survived devotedly nursed the sick, and it is from this ordeal that some of the most inspirational examples of courage and leadership spring. In all, thirty-one QAs died at the hands of the Japanese.

Wherever the troops went the nurses went with them. Over a hundred fell victim to the unseen but deadly enemy – the U-boats that hunted convoys crossing the Atlantic, the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean. Ships were blown out of the water without warning, survivors having no choice but to jump into the burning oil spreading over the surface of the sea or to drift for days on life rafts.

When the Allies invaded North Africa the QAs were there too, sharing the rigours of desert life with the men of the First and Eighth Armies. Conscious of their appearance, the young women dreamed of baths rather than the unsatisfactory canvas washstand stripwash dictated by water rationing. Somehow, even in these harsh conditions they imported a woman's touch, decorating the wards with desert flowers, setting their hair and fighting doggedly to look after their complexions when sand invaded the pores of their skin.

With Rommel defeated in North Africa the QAs followed the troops to Sicily and Italy. Several lost their lives when the Germans bombed hospital ships, and their bravery during the terrible battle at Anzio, which raged for days and caused terrible casualties, won the admiration of the doctors who worked with them. In addition, they took part in the greatest adventure of all – the opening of the second front and the Normandy landings. From camps along the south coast, while waiting for their orders, they looked up and saw the skies studded with the thousands of planes and gliders carrying the first wave of troops. Thousands of QAs sailed to France, disembarked from assorted ships and landing craft on to the legendary Mulberry harbour, and witnessed at first hand the greatest seaborne invasion in history.

The war forced them to develop emotional strengths that few suspected they possessed. Day after day they faced terrible sights but, as professionals, they could not afford the luxury of tears. No training could have prepared them for the hideous injuries that war inflicts. Some had never seen a man die before. Overnight they had to learn to

put on brave faces when men the same age as themselves were brought in groaning in agony – in some cases with both legs amputated, in others with head-to-toe burns, blinded, with mangled chests or with jaws blown away.

It was QAs who took care of the group of men whose sufferings, by general consensus, exceeded those of all other Second World War victims – the prisoners of the Japanese and the survivors of the Nazi concentration camps. QAs worked on the hospital ships that took the POWs liberated from the Japanese to British military hospitals to nurse them gently back to health. The sight of servicemen who had been driven mad by their sufferings having to be straitjacketed as they were brought up for fresh air on the deck was, for one QA, the worst experience of the war.

The first women to go into Belsen and several other Nazi concentration camps were QA nurses. It was they who shaved and bathed the stinking diseased victims and tried to restore human dignity to those reduced to the level of animals by their brutal captors. The suffering they found there, and the inhumanity of those who had inflicted it, would haunt them.

But the story of the QAs is not only about suffering and death. Nor were the nurses merely pious heroines virtuously doing their duty. These were flesh-and-blood women. They slept in curlers, which led to much embarrassment when there was a raid in the night and they couldn't get their tin hats on. When they were off duty they hummed the latest dance tunes, sighed after Spitfire pilots, bounced around in the backs of army lorries on their way to dances in the desert or shared moonlight swims and beach picnics with fellow officers. Non-medical observers were always impressed at the way the QAs were able to switch with apparent ease from the most harrowing work into carefree leisure mode.

In those days there were seldom days off, or even half-days, and when they came off duty the girls would tumble into bed to get a couple of hours sleep before going on again. Like all young people they were irreverent, and secretly mocked their superiors. Plenty about army ritual struck them as absurd. The failure of the hidebound army tailors, used to making uniforms for men, to take female curves into account when the corps abandoned its grey dresses and white veil caps for khaki battledress made them groan in despair. These were girls who wore

dainty, lace-trimmed underwear made of crêpe de Chine or silk, and the army's doomed efforts at concocting regulation underwear provoked particular hilarity. 'Good news this morning: some replacement uniform and underclothes arrived from England including ghastly khaki knickers. These pants are hilarious, huge and elasticated at the waist and legs, but we could hardly have expected army-supplies to have equipped us with glamorous cami-knickers.'[1]

Some aspects of Army protocol appeared ludicrous to them. The view of one QA on procedure in the event of shipwreck was probably widespread. 'Standing on the boat deck watching the docks recede we were amused to hear a talk on the use of iron rations being given to a group of men by an NCO. After impressing on the men that iron rations were only to be used on the order of an officer he continued: "If you are torpedoed and you are in the water for more than 24 hours you may open your iron rations without waiting for an officer's orders." '[2]

Above all the QAs were women of character. They were the stiff-upper-lip generation. Their upbringing and training had dinned into them that service to others was far more important than personal fulfilment, and that to complain was unacceptable. Self-discipline was paramount and they put up with hardships unimaginable to their children and grandchildren. When things got really bad, in the best British tradition, they turned the nightmare into a joke. The troops also cracked jokes in the darkest hours and the QAs loved them for it. A nurse whose ship was torpedoed describes how they were about to board the Royal Navy rescue ship after twelve hours in lifeboats filled with the dead and injured. Suddenly a soldier appeared on a small raft, paddling with his hands. Seeing the sailors he put up his hand and shouted, 'Hey! Taxi!' 'We thought he should receive a medal just for his marvellous attitude.'[3]

There was deep affection and camaraderie between the troops and the QAs. The soldiers liked the Sisters for their pluck, and for their willingness to muck in whatever the conditions. The Sisters, for their part, had boundless admiration for the British Tommy's unwillingness to complain in the face of pain, which was in marked contrast to the wounded POWs. The soldiers showed their respect for the Sisters in a variety of ways. American troops took pleasure in teasing and embarrassing nurses and whereas the Australians were renowned for having

hopelessly untidy lockers, the British patients' lockers were always immaculate for the daily 10 a.m. inspection. Being a tiny handful of women among a sea of men presented certain problems. For the early years of the war the uniform was skirts and dresses, so climbing up on to the back of a three-ton army lorry presented a decency problem. In these situations the men turned away.

Bravery was a huge issue for people who fought in the Second World War. People worried whether, when the time came, and the shells started whining and buildings began collapsing, they would be able to behave with dignity, be an example to others, do the right thing. The inspirational QAs' story shows just how brave many of them turned out to be: there are the young nurses who, when their ship was torpedoed, refused to take to the lifeboats because they couldn't bring themselves to abandon their helpless patients in the ship's hospital; there are Sisters who declined to take their place on life rafts after being shipwrecked in the seas off Singapore and who, ignoring their own wounds, opted to stay in the water, leaving the safer space to children and civilians.

Time and again it was Matron who came into her own as leader. The army Matron, no less than her civilian counterpart, was seen by many young nurses as a battleaxe – the female counterpart of the regimental sergeant major – wedded to the army, a stickler for discipline and often a bully. But in danger, that discipline turned Matron into a rock to whom others looked for strength and comfort. Amid the terror of the Japanese attack on Singapore, when the Sisters' home suffered a direct hit, Matron thought nothing of her own safety as she tore into the shattered building to check on her girls. Later, still under fire yet showing no fear, she shepherded them all to the blazing docks and the getaway ships. One of her young nurses confided in a letter home that although the situation was very worrying, as long as she had Matron around she wasn't afraid. In the terrifying siege of Malta, in which for months the hospital itself came under fire on a daily basis, Matron's upbeat letters were full of motherly concern for her nurses and for the privations of the civilian population, with no mention of her own feelings.

On occasion, the guts of some of these women put even seasoned fighting men to shame. The distinguished Allied commander, Lieutenant General Sir Brian Horrocks, was at Arnhem in Holland when the Germans cut off the road to their rear. While visiting his men in a

Casualty Clearing Station in a converted school in Nijmegen, he was talking to the Head Sister when he heard the sound of a large enemy shell approaching:

> After a time in war, one gets to know instinctively whether or not an approaching shell is likely to land nearby. This one, I could tell, was going to be very, very close indeed. I would dearly have liked to take cover under one of the beds, but as the Sister seemed quite unmoved, I felt I had to grin and bear it. Then came a resounding crash, and all the windows were blown in. The Sister never even blinked. She finished what she was saying, then looked round and said, 'What a bore – we shall have to get all that repaired.' She did not know the meaning of the word fear, but had the gentlest of touches when it came to tending a wounded soldier.[4]

On occasion the nurses even won the grudging admiration of the enemy. In one detention camp in Hong Kong, where the food was typically inadequate and medical supplies withheld, the Japanese officer in charge was so impressed with the selfless dignified way in which the Matron and Sisters devoted themselves to the sick and needy, despite being weak themselves, that he saluted them when they left his camp.

But it was at a hospital in Hong Kong in the aftermath of the raping and killing that marked the Japanese victory that a QA Matron uttered a phrase which encapsulated everything the corps stood for. A Japanese soldier had been brought into the hospital in the fighting and had died of his wounds. Knowing the Japanese custom, the Matron had taken the Japanese flag the soldier carried in his pocket and laid it over his body. When a horde of Japanese soldiers burst into her hospital the Matron was tied up at gunpoint and treated roughly and insolently, this at a time when mass atrocities were taking place all over the island. She repeatedly demanded to be freed, contrasting the humane way she had cared for the Japanese patient with the way the Japanese were treating her. Finally a Japanese officer asked to be taken to identify his dead compatriot and when he saw him, he was moved and wept. The Matron, standing beside him, maintained her dignity, even though she had no idea what her fate would be. Astonished at her self-control he asked her, 'Do English women never cry?' To which she replied, 'Not when they have work to do.'