

*A Sister's Experiences on a Hospital Ship.*

A FEW NOTES ON A SISTER'S EXPERIENCES  
ON A HOSPITAL SHIP.

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Of my many and varied experiences at a General Hospital, at numerous Casualty Clearing Stations, at a Stationary Hospital, and on board a hospital ship, the latter was to me the most interesting, as it was the most exciting experience of my life.

I was posted to the Hospital Ship "Anglia" in May 1915, and was on board her till November 17th, when we struck a mine while crossing the channel on our way to Dover with a complement of wounded patients, and the ship foundered.

Work on a Hospital Ship varies very much according to what is going on "up the line". During the heavy fighting, we often did two journeys a day to and from England. As soon as we were warned that a convoy of patients was expected on board, each Sister went into her own ward where the cots were made ready, feeds prepared, hot bottles filled, and everything put in readiness for the reception and comfort of the wounded and helpless patients. We usually kept these patients on board for the day only, but occasionally kept them overnight, and then we found it easier for each Sister to do 3 hours on night duty, and thus were all in readiness for the unloading which usually took place the first thing in the morning. As a general rule the patients made very bad sailors.

On arrival at Dover where the Ambulance train was in waiting, the patients were very quickly transferred, and after a fresh supply of stores had been taken in, the ship at once returned to Boulogne, Calais, or Dieppe. On the return journey the cleaning of the wards took place; beds were remade and everything put in readiness for the next convoy.

One never-to-be-forgotten day, we were told to prepare for a distinguished patient, and shortly afterwards the Director General of Medical Services arrived, and told our Matron that the King was coming on board, having met with an accident up the line. Four orderlies were sent to the station to meet the train and the King was carried below to a small ward which had been previously prepared for him, and beautifully arranged with flowers. We had only a small load that day, and soon got away, feeling very important, with destroyers encircling us on either side, and bluejackets on board to keep a lookout for mines and submarines. It was very rough, but fortunately we reached port without any mishap.

Our last and very memorable journey was on the 17th November. We had taken about 500 patients on board at Boulogne, and a very happy crowd they were - fractured femurs and head-cases who had been in different hospitals in France for some months. In their anticipation of returning home, they were anxiously on the lookout through the portholes for the first sight of the white cliffs of England. Alas! many of them were destined never to reach there alive.

About 12 noon, and when some six miles from Dover, we had just given the patients their dinner, when there was a tremendous crash, and iron girders etc. came falling down like match wood. We realised all too quickly that we had either been torpedoed, or had struck a mine. My first act was to fix a

life-belt on myself, feeling that I was then in a better position to help others. All Sisters and orderlies did likewise, and the patients who were able to do so were ordered to put on theirs (every patient had a life-belt under his pillow), and walking cases were ordered on deck. We immediately set about removing splints, for the obvious reason that if the patient with his legs in splints got into the sea, his body would go under, while the splint would rise to the surface. We carried as many as possible on deck and those that could, threw themselves into the sea; others were let down in the life-boat, but unfortunately it was only possible to lower one boat as the ship was sinking so very rapidly. The patients kept their heads wonderfully. There was no panic whatever, and when one realises that in the majority of cases, they were suffering from fractured limbs, severe wounds and amputations, it speaks volumes for their spirit, their grit and real bravery, for they must have suffered real agonies of pain. After we had satisfied ourselves that there was no possible chance of getting any more patients out, for by that time our bows had quite gone under, and only the ship's stern was above water, with the propellers going at a terrific rate, and blinding us with spray, we then got down onto the rudder and jumped into the sea where hundreds of patients were still struggling in the water. It was some time before the destroyers could get out to help us, and when we did boats were quickly lowered and we were taken into them. Unfortunately in some cases, the struggling patients hung onto the sides of a boat and capsized it, and once again we were thrown into the sea. Alas! by this time many of the patients had gone under, but it was a never to be forgotten sight to see armless and legless men struggling in the water, very many of whom were eventually saved.

I personally was in the water about 40 minutes before being taken on a destroyer, and that would be about the time experienced by most of us. Our relief can be readily understood, and never shall we forget the men on the destroyers whose kindness and helpfulness was beyond words. On reaching Dover, imagine our delight on finding many of our patients lying on the Admiralty Pier, whom we had last seen floating in the water, and who had been picked up by other destroyers, and whom we had hardly expected to see again. Many were the handshakes and kindly greetings and expressions of real thankfulness at meeting again on terra firma. And with it all there was a humorous side to it, for we must have looked very weird in the different garments that had been so kindly supplied to us by the officers and men of the destroyers, who did everything in their power for our welfare. I would remind you that 40 minutes in the water in November is not the kind of sea-bathing that many would indulge in from choice, and yet largely due to the kindness of the men on the destroyer, I do not think that any of us suffered seriously from cold. After a good meal on the ambulance train we were soon on our journey to London.

So ended my experience with a Hospital Ship.

The sinking of H.S. Anglia is now a matter for War records only, but to me it certainly supplied the most exciting moments of my life as a member of the Q.A.I.M.N.S.R., and little as I should again like to go through the experience of being on a sinking ship, still I shall always look back to my time on H.M.H.S. "Anglia" prior to that incident, as some of the happiest moments I have ever spent. We were a very happy party on board and our work was always interesting, in addition to which the life was healthy, for we were much of the time at sea, and yet in port we always had opportunities of going ashore for getting exercise in rambles round Boulogne or whatever place we put in at.

The actual sinking of the ship itself pointed out to me the value of the life-belt, and the advantage of having it always at hand; for in my own case, and still more so perhaps in the case of wounded patients, the majority of us could never have kept afloat in a cold sea for forty minutes if we had not had life-belts to sustain us. Also another very valuable means of saving life was the buoyant deck seat, of which we had many on board. As soon as we had attended to the patients below, we got as many as possible on deck to set about unlash~~ing~~ these seats and throwing them overboard. Many a man must have been saved by being picked up by the boats of the destroyers while hanging on to these floating structures. Anyone who has been to sea and spent some time in one ship will realise what we all felt when we saw H.M.H.S. "Anglia" disappear from view. She had been our Home for many months, and we all felt very sad about it. The King, who had had personal experience of the "Anglia", and who had graciously expressed his thanks for the attention he received on board, made special enquiries, on hearing of the loss of one of his Hospital Ships, as to the welfare of all who had been on board her at the time.

sd: A. Meldrum.

O.A. I. M. N. S. R.

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It was with somewhat mixed feelings that I read my orders to report for duty at 13 Stationary Hospital early in June 1916, and after hastily packing my kit, which appeared strangely swollen in comparison with the boxes belonging to it, left the Sick Sisters' Hospital, which had become more or less of a home after eight months duty there.

After a cross country journey of about 30 miles which took over six hours to accomplish, I arrived late at night, in pouring rain, feeling rather frightened at my first real experience of a base hospital. There was only one other V.A.D. on the staff, and the knowledge that we were by way of being an experiment there did not help to dispel the dreadful feeling of inadequacy on being confronted with new and strange work.

However it was a very busy time, just the beginning of the Somme push, and with convoys pouring in and being evacuated all day, there was no time to think of anything except the men, and how to look after them and make them comfortable in the minimum of time.

After two days in a surgical ward I was sent to the eye department, little realizing that, with the exception of a month or two, I should spend the next three years there. It was one of the busiest wards in the hospital, being the opthalmic centre for the district, and in addition to taking in from all the convoys, constantly received cases direct from Field Ambulances

and Clearing Stations in the northern sector; the men being sent down by ambulance all the way, for immediate operation and treatment, which ensured the best possible chance of recovery from an eye injury. Large convoys would come in during the night and at intervals all day, and many cases were operated on at once and if possible sent to England the same day, joined by any others who were at all fit to be marked up; while the lighter cases went to Convalescent depots; the strain on the fifty beds in the ward was great and generally there was a line of men on stretchers waiting for the next empty bed; some months later a small ward with twenty beds was added, which relieved the pressure, also an opthalmic theatre which was kept busy all day; during July 1916, 508 cases passed through the ward, and conditions remained at much the same pitch all the summer.

A wonderful assortment of cases was dealt with in the ward <sup>and</sup> of a perfect Tower of Babel of nationalities including French, Italian, Portuguese, Russian, German, coal black men from the British West India regiment and several of the Indian troops, who always slept in their turbans, sometimes these inadvertently came off in the presence of a sister, disclosing a tight little coil of black hair, exactly on top of the head.

We also had a Japanese and several Chinese labourers; one of the latter, badly injured during a raid, came in clasping to his chest a basket of fruit, given him by his friends, which he absolutely refused to part with, throwing everything within reach at



anyone who tried to move it; so, much to the surprise of the theatre staff, he arrived for operation still hugging his basket, and only when he was under chloroform did we venture to remove it, he became most friendly afterwards and was a great pet of the other men, one of whom was always to be found holding his hand during the night raids, which terrified him.

We took in several French civilians, one injured by a bomb exploding while he was plowing; and for some months two small French boys of eight or nine years old, both victims of detonator accidents were treated in the ward, they were very happy and good and very loth to leave when there time came, and must have been a considerable trial to their respective families after the spoiling they had received from the other patients.

Another civilian patient of mine was a French sailor with a badly poisoned hand, he could get nothing done for him at the town hospital, so one of our N. O.'s opened it for him, and he came daily to have it dressed, making a terrible fuss and looking very fierce over it, he was evidently grateful though as on his last visit he presented a newspaper parcel which contained four beautiful macarel.

In May 1917 the hospital was rechristened 83 Dublin General, and there were many changes, though fortunately not in the eye department - several new hospitals came out that summer and we were never again quite so busy as in the old days, though

often for weeks at a time the wards were very heavy.

On several occasions, after bad weather, the harbour was closed on account of drifting mines, and no cases could be evacuated, though they continued to pour in from up the line; every inch of ward floor was filled with stretchers to take the overflow, and the difficulty of getting about and attending to the bad cases was very great.

But in spite of pain and discomfort and the most dreadful wounds, the men were always splendid; cheery and plucky and so considerate at a time when they would have been quite justified in thinking only of themselves. Any that were able to be up and about would do all they possibly could to help the Sisters, and took no end of interest in the ward, cleaning and polishing it far better than most orderlies did; when the Pushes were on ~~no~~ <sup>and</sup> one hardly knew where to begin on the work, things would have gone hard <sup>with</sup> ~~on~~ the staff but for the up patients.

A terribly large number of blind men passed through the ward and the pluck with which they faced their awful tragedy was amazing; relief at reaching the comparative peace and comfort of the ward after the horrors of the trenches perhaps accounted for some of their content, and one felt that the realization of all they had lost would come later when they had settled down to endless days of darkness. Fortunately, many apparently hopeless cases improved wonderfully with treatment and left us with a fair amount of sight. One of these, a boy of eighteen, with both eyes badly injured by pieces of steel, spent nearly three months



in the ward with both eyes bandaged, a typical Cockney and the happiest boy one could imagine, always laughing and talking; his greatest friend was a severe looking old American sergeant, who washed and mothered him and waited on him hand and foot; the day the boy first saw light again was a red letter day in the ward, and it is sad that the limitations of war friendships prevented the Sergeant from ever knowing what a wonderful recovery his protégé had made.

Boulogne always held a great attraction for Taubes and the Hun rarely let any suitable night pass without one or more visits; even in the day time he often came to take photographs, while an interested crowd in the hospital watched the bursting shrapnel, which looked so near its mark yet never was quite there. Considering the number of raids and bombs dropped the damage was wonderfully little, but the inconvenience was great, and it was intensely annoying after a hard days work, to have to get up sometimes three times in the night, and dash out to a cold and gloomy dug out. Much happier at those times was the lot of the night staff, who were much too busy to think about bombs; when the warning sounded and all the lights went out, the first thing always was to let down the beds on to the floor so that the men were below the sand bags built up against the wall; any who were well enough, rolled themselves in blankets and lay on the floor under their beds, and I have often found them, hours later, fast asleep there with their heads on an iron rail, much too comfortable to move: the nursing staff were supposed to sit on

the floor in tin hats, but the thought of the pictures we should present if the lights suddenly came on kept most of us on the move. The noise from the barrage was terrific as the hospital was just between three forts and with showers of shrapnel falling on the tin roofs, windows and doors rattled and crockery shot out of cupboards to add to the pandemonium; yet it was wonderfully soothing to some of the patients, and one very badly wounded boy slept through our worst raid and said it was the best night he had spent in hospital. Poisoned sweets fell on the roof of my hut one night, but after a shower of rain, were not of much value as Souvenirs.

Athletic activity was much encouraged at 83; the hospital ran a good football eleven, and their ladies', men's and mixed hockey teams held an unbeaten record in 1918, of which they were justly proud. Our R.A.M.C. company was rich in talent and gave many concerts for the men's benefit and travelling parties would often arrive unexpectedly and give excellent entertainments. <sup>Xmas Day</sup> ~~Thursday~~ was a great day for the patients and the most strenuous of the whole year for the Sisters, who laid and cleared one meal after another all day and washed up hundreds of greasy plates, fortifying themselves with sandwiches snatched whenever possible, a huge tree was always the climax of the day and things were done in style with a Father Christmas to hand presents all round.

The last Christmas in the ward was an unforgettable one, and the happiest of all, with the burden of the war lifted and everyone content in the knowledge that the next few months would see us

all home though to me personally and I think to many others of the V. A. D.'s the festivities were somewhat clouded by the feeling that this was the beginning of the end of several happy years of work for the men.

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