

Reminiscences of War-time nursing

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I was born at 68 Buckingham Road, Dalston, and lived with my parents here and subsequently at 96 de Beauvoir Road .The number in de Beauvoir Road was changed to 112 while we lived there owing to the construction of a new property in the Road, but because of later bomb damage this number can no longer be found, the site being occupied by 110A! I attended Tottenham Road School and at the age of 11 I won a Free Place to a Roman Catholic Grammar School, The Convent of Our Lady of Sion, Eden Grove, Holloway , to which I travelled by train (to Highbury Corner) and bus.

Two weeks before the outbreak of war, at the age of 17, I enrolled as a Nurse at the Mildmay Memorial Hospital, Newington Green. One of the buildings here was reputed to have been used as a hunting lodge by King Henry viii and subsequently to have become an academy where Isaac Watts and Daniel Defoe were educated. We were sent from here for a few weeks at the outbreak of War to Whipps Cross Hospital whose 1000 beds were almost all unoccupied in anticipation of air-raid casualties and we had little to do other than to construct splints. The hospital was over-run with cockroaches and we were told they had sometimes been ladled off our soup.

Back at Mildmay, during an air-raid a land-mine was seen dangling from its parachute from telephone wires near the hospital and a hurried evacuation was performed in the night, patients being taken to various other hospitals. The bomb was successfully disposed of fairly quickly. Landmines were delivered by the Germans quite often, as an alternative to ordinary bombs, not so much because they descended slowly and silently as because the gentle contact with the ground enabled the blast to radiate horizontally and demolish more buildings than bombs which made craters. I had an appendicectomy while at Mildmay and afterwards my mother and I stayed for a few days with family friends (Mr & Mrs Hensman) in Hounslow. Their daughter was a student at the Royal Holloway College and one day I accompanied her on her way there by train and bus, and was shown round the college. On the way back to Hounslow I sat waiting for my train to start but the air raid sirens sounded and the journey was cancelled. Another lady and I started to walk over Bedfont Common, or rather under it through tunnels, in the din of the anti-aircraft guns situated there. (Walking in the open in the blackout, with guns firing, was a bit hazardous. One night Mr Hensman himself was nearly struck by a piece of shrapnel from an AA shell, in his own back garden.)The lady invited me to spend the rest of the night in her home, nearby, and there I slept with her and her husband, all fully-clothed, on their bed which had been brought downstairs. When dawn came they showed me the direction to take and I walked back to Hounslow, along Staines Road. There had been no means of telling my mother where I was (if you could access a phone you had to book a call) and I was shocked to realise afterwards that I had no idea where I had spent the night or who with!

Some time later, my mother decided to go to live in Brighton, where she thought there was less chance of bombing (but was perhaps unaware the town would have been a prime target for a German invasion), our furniture was put into store, and my father went to live in a bed-sit in Highbury New

Park, in a house owned by Germans! He was suffering from slowly progressive post-encephalitic Parkinsonism, but was still able to do some work. Later, my parents were re-united and moved into a flat at 24 Kenninghall Road, Clapton, though my mother evacuated herself again when we were attacked by flying bombs, staying in West Pennard in Somerset for some months.

The second half of my General Nursing training was done at the Metropolitan Hospital, Kingsland Road. Discipline was quite strict. One evening after duty, another nurse and I decided to go out for a meal at a Lyons Corner House, the one at Marble Arch. There were two or three restaurants at each Corner House, at least one of which boasted a small band of musicians. Prices were moderate and you were waited on by "Nippies" waitresses in aprons and caps. We missed the last tube train and had to walk home, followed by two friendly French-Canadian soldiers whom we tried to ignore. Any ideas they may have had of further acquaintance were, however frustrated when we entered our quarters by unconventional means at about 2 am. Most of the light available in the blackout was from one's own torch and woe betide you if an Air Raid Warden thought it was too bright!

During my time in training, we benefitted from the commitment of an aristocratic family to help the war effort by allowing the use of their stately home as a free holiday venue for nurses. This was near Souldrop in Bedfordshire and small parties of us had 7-day holidays there. We were well looked-after and enjoyed the large grounds, through which ran a small river, and we had fun on the family boat. We had one or two excursions by bus to Bedford and the surrounding district. A dance at the village hall was packed with American soldiers. A few days in the peaceful countryside made a welcome break from the rather eventful environment of East London. Any sense of security deriving from the cessation of air raids disappeared when flying bombs began to arrive. When their engines stopped a big bang followed. They were succeeded by unheralded rockets flying faster than sound.

After qualifying as a State Registered Nurse I obtained a post as Staff Nurse at High Wycombe Hospital and subsequently returned to London to train as a State Certified Midwife, at The Salvation Army Mothers' Hospital, Lower Clapton Road, and in the Dagenham and Becontree districts. At the Hospital the patients were accommodated at night in purpose-built tunnels in the grounds, with beds for mums and long shelves for babies. The cacophony of sound was unbelievable!

Soon after the War ended, blackout restrictions were lifted, enabling people to see out of the windows of buses and trains, which had been protected by a yellow translucent mesh; and traffic lights, which had been visible only as small crosses, just big enough to be seen, had their black covers removed.

When I was married, in 1949, I relinquished the post of Ward Sister, at Mildmay, where my career had begun.

Ruth Sims