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WAR

I took the Cambridge entrance exam in Natural Sciences in February 1944, but to no one's surprise, least of all my own, I failed. My call-up papers for National Service had already arrived and the call-up had been deferred until the result of the exam was known. It turned out that my striving with science had not been completely in vain. My name was put on the Women's Technical Service register.

I was called for an interview almost immediately at the Royal College of Surgeons and offered a job as an assistant lab technician at the highly satisfactory salary of £360 a year.

It was the location of the job that intrigued more than anything, the pathological laboratory of the 121st. Station. Hospital of the US Army Airforce, a sprawling complex of Nissen huts situated, off the London road, just outside Braintree in Essex.

There, beneath the Stars and Stripes, a small joint British and American medical research project was to be carried out alongside the routine work of the hospital. It was to be operated by two unqualified British girls working in a corner of the Path Lab, courtesy of the American medical authority. Digs were found for me in a village a few miles from the hospital, and I was taken there by pony cart. But when she realised the distance I would have to travel to get to work, and the difficulty I would be in, Mother put her foot down. No way was I going to go and live in that situation. The pony and trap was arranged next day to bring me home again and a complicated routine worked out.

I was to set out from home every day at 6.30am, cycle the first two miles and leave my bike under cover at White Colne station, then get a bus to Halstead, the half-way stop.

I then had to catch another bus to Braintree and pick up my second bicycle from the care

Of the bus park superintendent. The last leg of the journey was only a mile or so;- I dismounted at the entrance

gate to the hospital and showed my pass to the sentry.

With my colleague, medical student Wendy Watts, I worked under the direction of a British colonel in the R.A.M.C, who was a Professor at the Royal College of Surgeons. The project involved carrying out chemical tests to determine the nitrogen intake and output of a few selected patients with infective hepatitis, a form of jaundice that was causing a lot of concern at the time. Most of "out" patients were American, and a few from the British Armed Forces.

In charge of this section was Captain Johnson. What with his tendency to mumble and the (to me) strangeness of the American accent, I found it rather difficult to understand him at first. He was soon to be succeeded by Captain Fingerman with Lieutenant Brann second in command. Under them was a team of army-trained technicians. Sergeant Lavery had once been a cowboy. He would tramp into the lab balancing on one hand a tray of blood samples fresh from the ward and singing, or humming under his breath, depending on whether the Captain was around - "*She'll be coming round the mountain when she comes, boom, boom ?*"

Sergeant Bixby had been a shoe salesman; Corporal Frank Hutter, made in the mold of Fred Flintstone, was a former mill hand, and their handsome Homer Dill had been a mortician in civilian life. Then there was Sergeant Carlson, Corporals Sanford, Johnson and Smith and PFC (private first class) Stanley Durland, the youngest and newest member of the outfit. He was a good natured college boy who was mercilessly teased by the others and known to all as Doodlebug.

Twice a day I went to the patient mess to weigh out special diets for the hepatitis patients. From the vantage point of the little side office where the diet scales were kept I could observe the shuffling mealtime queue known as the chow list, ambulant patients in their dressing gowns. Here I met the hospital dietician, Lieutenant Ruth Jamieson. Wendy and I had our midday meal in the officer's mess. To a young Britisher used to wartime food rationing the food was a revelation. For the first time in my life I tasted sauerkraut, cole slaw, tuna fish and other foreign dishes such as sweet-and-sour pork, and there was the luxury of tinned grapefruit and pineapple. Good quality meat was flown over from the States. Occasionally the American Red Cross called and we were treated to coffee and doughnuts the lab.

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Every afternoon at 5 o'clock the Stars and Stripes on the flagstaff in front of Reception was ceremonially lowered to the sound of a bugle. Any service personnel in the vicinity automatically stood to attention and saluted. If I happened to be outside the lab, I too stood meekly to attention in my civvies as if it were God save the King. •

Just before nine o'clock on the Tuesday morning of my second week at the hospital, Having presented my pass to the sentry at the gate and parked my bicycle behind Reception, I donned my white overall and walked into the lab.

Something was up the benches were deserted, microscopes unattended, trays of specimens neglected, and all hands were grouped around the radio in the Captain's office at the far end of the lab. Usually it emitted a background of monotonous jazz. But now, instead of jazz there issued forth the crackling sounds of a non-stop news service. For it was

June 6th. 1944 and the D-day landings were at that moment taking place in Normandy.

as the morning wore on there was a sort of grim exhilaration in the air. we had been aware that the invasion was imminent and troops at the ready. every day we read the stars and stripes, the us forces newspaper, with its comic cartoons of the sad sack, comment on the war situation, and lighthearted gossip.

we had read that one commando unit that had vowed to a man they would not wash nor shave until they had landed in france

We soon felt the effects of the invasion. Trainloads -of casualties arrived overnight and were ferried up from the station by a fleet of .ambulances. On July 17th. 300 patients arrived from France. I .remember seeing as I cycled back into Braintree across the railway bridge the tail-end coaches, dark green and grimy, of a stationary hospital train. By August 10th. the 121st. had .expanded from.400 to over 1000 beds.

One brilliantly .sunny day next March I was cycling up the hill towards the hospital when a doodlebug (V1 rocket) bumped overhead. I stopped and. watched the tiny-object disappear westwards, waiting for the sound to cut out, and the inevitable explosion when it landed. But it kept going and was soon out of sight. The hospital emptied gradually and was officially closed at midnight on May 26th., two weeks after VE day. My boss, Colonel Beattie, had joined a -medical relief team flown to the Netherlands in April to organise the feeding of semi-starved prison camp survivors, and it fell to my lot to clear up our corner of the lab and pack up our equipment.

When I finally cycled away from the lab, past Reception and out towards the main gate for the last time, the commanding officer was standing in the doorway of the administration block surveying his territory.

I hadn't the courage to go up to him and say: Thank you for having me". but I nearly did.