

Painting the town

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Chapter published in "As You Were", VE day – A Medical Retrospect. Published by the BMJ 1984 ISBN 0-7279-0181-8

Doctors look back at their days in the second world war, and one day in particular: 8th May 1945.

The eminent urologist Mr Yates-Bell and his minion registrars and housemen sprayed us liberally with what we hoped, in retrospect, was nothing more sinister than soda water. This urological baptism heralded the start of VE Day and somewhat dampened our plans to take the "mickey" out of the consultant staff. They had got the blow in first.

We had been sitting in the refectory at Leatherhead Hospital, drinking what in wartime passed for coffee, and feeling that an era had come to an end; rejoicing that the war in Europe was over, and wondering what life would be like in peacetime. Because so many doctors were in the armed services, the senior medical students at King's had been given responsibilities and opportunities normally available only to newly qualified doctors. King's students were split among Denmark Hill in London, Horton Hospital in Epsom, and Leatherhead Hospital. Far from suffering from this disruption, our clinical education was widened by having to deal with the casualties of war from the services and civilian life.

Descent on London

Abandoning plans to do anything collectively outrageous, we changed into dry clothes and went our separate ways. I decided to walk to Epsom and catch a train to Wimbledon, where my fiancée Elizabeth, also a medical student, lived. All the pubs on the way to Epsom were thronged with happy, singing people, and my recollection is that pubs stayed open all day and night. Elizabeth's family had a definite army background. Her father had served in the Boer war and in both world wars, and he was now the head of the explosives department at the Home Office. Her brother David

was a regular officer in the Royal Artillery, a youthful veteran of Dunkirk and north Africa, recently returned from a German POW camp. When I arrived many of their friends were there, including an attractive Wren, Jill, and Stephen, who was a paratrooper. Stephen was planning a VE night descent on London, not by parachute but by train. I found myself being indoctrinated in the art of jumping out of a moving train by numbers, as though from an aircraft, and landing in one piece on the platform. When he judged us all to be reasonably proficient, we set out armed with smoke canisters, thunder flashes, and, above all, Stephen's tremendous personality. There were eight of us in the group and we spent the time in the train between Wimbledon and Waterloo in further rehearsal for the drop. He had us all lined up in a row holding on to the luggage rack, whilst he lay full length on the rack supervising the descent. As we approached Waterloo the train slackened speed and we were made to leap out in order. Number one in pride of place was Elizabeth, who landed on the platform, to my relief, without breaking her neck or anything else. I had barely time to take that in before I was shoved out, followed by the army, navy, marines, and civilians remaining in the carriage. We all picked ourselves up in time to see Stephen descend sedately from the compartment, letting off two thunder flashes as he did so. This caused a certain amount of consternation in the station and we left hurriedly in the direction of Waterloo Bridge, making our way along the Strand in the direction of Trafalgar Square.

Joy and laughter

The crowd grew thicker. "Keep behind me and form a chain," said Stephen, lighting a smoke canister, and he charged through the throng, which opened before him like the Red Sea in front of Moses. We came to one of the lions around Nelson's column opposite the National Gallery. Stephen climbed on to the back of the lion and began to auction off the gallery and all its paintings. "Who will make me an offer?" he said. Elizabeth's younger brother Martin, a schoolboy, bid half a crown. The bidding progressed in leaps and bounds before the gallery and contents were sold to an American master sergeant for 100 dollars. He was told to take the money to the director of the gallery next morning to collect his purchase.

Leaping down from the lion, Stephen led us to a boarded-up statue near St Martin-in-the-Fields with the object of continuing the auction of the sights of London. By this time, however, we had

attracted the attention of the police and they had formed a cordon around us. Unconcerned at the presence of the law, Stephen shouted, "What am I bid for this pride of policemen — all in excellent condition?" The crowd loved this, and bids came fast and furious. In no time at all they were knocked down, in a manner of speaking, to the selfsame master sergeant for another 100 bucks. Before he could collect his purchases the "pride" sheepishly shuffled off, deciding that we were mad rather than drunk. Since Stephen was in fact a teetotaler their diagnosis was correct. The victorious auctioneer had by this time acquired a vast crowd and, with our help, scaled one of the recruiting hoardings in the square. There, bathed in the light of mobile searchlights brought into London, Stephen began an oration. "Tonight, we are celebrating a famous victory. A victory won by one army alone, and to that army we owe our lives and liberty." The American master sergeant didn't much like the sound of this and neither did 50 other GIs with him. They started to climb up the hoarding with murderous intent. "For goodness sake tell Stephen to shut up," whispered Elizabeth to me. But it was too late. "Which army won the war?" yelled Stephen. "I'll tell you which. It wasn't the American army. It wasn't the French army. It wasn't the Poles." The master sergeant had nearly reached the top of the hoarding by this time and the tension in the crowd was rising. "The army which won this war," cried Stephen, pointing to the recruiting poster below him, "the army which won this war was the Women's Land Army." The relief of tension was instantaneous and the crowd roared with laughter at the joke as the Americans climbed down from the lynching party and joined in the applause.

... When the lights go up

Piccadilly Circus was the next stop, where our smoke canisters disrupted a group on top of one of the air raid shelters. They were celebrating VE night in their own inimitable, not to say intimate, style. A girl stood up, naked except for a cigarette holder. As if by design or even magic a roving searchlight focused on target, joined swiftly by yet another searchlight. The crowd gazed astonished at a sight more usually seen at the nearby Windmill Theatre. Even more action packed, for in those days stage nudes were static. This shapely nude was neither static nor sober, and began to pirouette around, swaying and waving her cigarette holder to all and sundry. She had been entertaining about half a dozen of our gallant allies, who cascaded off the roof of the air raid shelter in various stages of undress, leaving her as the star attraction, until the searchlights moved on. We also moved away, as a rumor spread through the

crowd that the Royal Family and Winston Churchill were due to appear on the balcony at Buckingham Palace. Our invaluable smoke enabled us to get right up to the gates of the palace, where we had a superb view of the King and Queen, the two princesses, and Winston Churchill and his wife, Clemmie. We sang all the usual patriotic songs and cheered ourselves hoarse. After numerous appearances the King and Queen waved their final farewells and the crowds began to disperse happily for home. We were feeling tired by this time and walked back down the Mall, climbed the Duke of York's steps and found ourselves outside the Athenaeum Club. "They might put us all up for the night here," said Stephen. We did not think that the Athenaeum was a very likely resting place, especially as there were three ladies among us. Nothing daunted, Stephen rang the doorbell. A venerable retainer eventually appeared, listened to our request for lodging with great courtesy, and politely but firmly stated that we could not enter as we were not members. After he had locked and bolted the imposing doors, we decided to extend the embargo placed on us to the general public. Removing the barriers and notice boards from a nearby road works, we carried them back to the Athenaeum and barricaded it off with "No entry" signs. By this time, we really were tired and walked back to Waterloo, where we slept on the wooden benches until a milk train at 5 am took us back to Wimbledon, weary but feeling that it had all been worthwhile and memorable.