

IMPERIAL WAR MUSEUM
Department of Sound Records

ACCESSION NO. 11540/2

NAZI EUROPE 1933-45
William Dillon Hughes

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CXW Can you tell me how it was that you came to go to Belsen, please?

WH I was ordered there as the senior medical officer in charge of, to be in charge of the hospital in Belsen.

CXW Where did the orders emanate from?

WH Director of Medical Services, HQ BAOR.

CXW What had been your position when you received the orders?

WH I had been officer in charge of the medical division of a general hospital in Brussels. Sorry, Doewe Hospital, near Bad Oeynhausen in Germany, sorry about that.

CXW How did you react when you received these orders?

WH I think I was quite pleased to get the order, get the orders.

CXW Why so pleased?

WH Well it was something new that I hadn't undertaken before.

CXW Did you know anything about Belsen before you went?

WH Other than hearsay, that a British force had been asked by the Germans to come into Belsen because they had lost control. And a severe outbreak of typhus fever had broken out of which the German army medical authorities were very afraid. They didn't want it to spread to their own troops.

CXW Do you remember when you received these orders?

/About

WH About early May, 1945, would it be?

CXW Yes. Did you go straight away?

WH Yes.

CXW Within a few hours?

WH No within a matter of twenty four hours, a day.

CXW What did you take with you, if anything?

WH I took some personnel who would be the nucleus and staff of the proposed, to look after the proposed hospital.

CXW How many personnel approximately?

WH Approximately thirty officers. Other ranks I couldn't quite state the exact number.

CXW So these were RAMC personnel?

WH RAMC personnel.

CXW Anything in the way of equipment?

WH No, equipment was already there.

CXW How did you all travel to Belsen?

WH In various forms of transport, mostly cars.

CXW What were your first impressions of the place?

WH The place was not quite so bad as I expected because it had already been cleaned up by previous personnel.

/Chiefly

WH Chiefly military but not necessarily medical who had cleared up a great deal of the mess.

CXW Was it . . .

WH When they entered they found conditions chaotic, corpses were lying in various parts of the area, the camp area, because they had not been collected. Quite a number were dead and they had to collect. They had to bulldoze graves etcetera to bury the very large number of dead who had died from typhus or starvation.

Belsen was not an extermination camp, it simply got out of control of those running the camp. Because the British army had blocked all supplies to go into Belsen.

CXW Was the place as big as you thought?

WH It was bigger than I thought it would be. And the hospital, a small hospital of the camp, which originally had been an SS barracks but was now used to house patients.

CXW Do you remember who you took over from?

WH There was no official takeover. I arrived there and found a not very big hospital, perhaps a hundred or more patients but the rest of the barracks was being used, the barrack rooms was being used to house patients of varying degrees of illness.

By now we were able to have some British nurses. They arrived on the scene.

There was no official equipment. Equipment and dressings and medical supplies were the property of the Red Cross.

/They

WH They had been there already.

CXW What differentiated those who were in the hospital from those who were in the barracks?

WH The hospital patients were Belsen detainees who had some hope of recovery. The patients in the barracks were almost, one would say, hopeless cases.

CXW What kind of numbers were in the barracks?

WH Several thousand. And about, in the small hospital, at the most a hundred.

Figures were very difficult to obtain. Even at this late stage, the dead were being collected every morning from the various wards which would be barrack rooms to be buried each day.

They were dying either from the effect of malnutrition, plus illnesses, such as typhus, typhus not typhoid. Tuberculosis was rife. Severe diarrhoea and malnutrition.

Gradually we obtained some information which was collected by the hospital staff. And the number of dead were diminishing each day from my time of arrival, early May on to the time I left, which was mid to late July, when some order had taken place with regard to segregation of patients who were infectious.

Food and equipment for patients of course was being provided.

A hitch in the proceedings was caused by the arrival of some hundreds of Russian patients suffering from
/ tuberculosis

WH tuberculosis who were evacuated from the Ruhr district of Germany where they had been prisoners of war. And forced to work in the mines in the Ruhr.

The Russians could not take such a large number as some hundreds of Russian tuberculous cases at that particular time so it had been agreed with the British and I presume other authorities, that Belsen would accommodate them until such time as Russia could take them over.

CXW How soon after you arrived did the Russians come?

WH The Russians came end of June, beginning of July. They came in a convoy train. Some had died in the train on the way from the Ruhr. Others were in advanced stages of tuberculosis.

At the beginning of my time the first priority had been the burying of the dead of course, then the use of a DDT type of powder to kill the lice on any patients because that is how typhus is spread.

CXW Were the lice easy to eliminate?

WH Yes the DDT, dusting DDT powder, is specific against lice. Powders (?) are no good, it takes a duster, this particular dusting powder was AL63.

CXW What about the tuberculosis?

WH Well there was no treatment, no active principle against tuberculosis in those days. That didn't, the discovery of streptomycin, which is specific for tuberculosis, didn't, wasn't discovered until the 1950s, so there was no particular drug to cure tuberculosis.

/The

WH The commandant of the Russian force, force is not the right word, he was the commandant in charge of the patients, he wasn't a doctor. He wasn't very co-operative regarding any treatment of the patients. He wouldn't allow them to be x-rayed for example. So it was difficult to assess the extent of disease of the chest in most of the severe cases.

CXW Why did he adopt this attitude do you think?

WH I just don't know. He probably had orders from his superiors as to what he would allow.

CXW What kind of patients did the Belsen in-mates make? Were they cooperative themselves, or apathetic or . . . ?

WH The Russians?

CXW Yes.

WH Mostly apathetic, the Russian patients you mean?

CXW The Belsen patients, the Belsen in-mates.

WH Oh they were quite cooperative. By the time I left their families had been allowed to come and visit them. It's impossible to know the number of who were patients and who were family visitors. It was quite common for a family of about a dozen to be all accommodated in one bed, let alone one room. They came, they had nothing. They had no where to sleep. We didn't anticipate quite so large a number of visitors. In any case they wanted to be as close to their friend, their friends, that's to say the patients, as possible. And if we'd put them in accommodation elsewhere they rapidly came back to where the patient was.

/Each

WH: Each patient when he was discharged from the hospital, after they were fit enough, they were given equipment. This was all Red Cross, clothing, and they were able to make suits for themselves out of blankets.

CXW Were you able to speak to them? Did you have any common language?

WH Some of them could speak English. Others, one tried speaking French.

CXW Do you remember anything that any of them said to you? Did they say anything about their experiences?

WH A few who were able to communicate in English did describe lack of food, the cold, lack of sanitary arrangements. In fact when I arrived there the patients, a great many of them, had been used to defecating and urinating anywhere on the ground, the first thing that came to their mind. Because of malnourishment there was a great deal of diarrhoea. Diarrhoea can be one symptom of malnutrition. That made conditions very unfavourable for the rest of the inmates.

CXW Was the sanitary problem quickly got under control?

WH As reasonable as was possible at that particular time. But the patients themselves were not very fit, they were very weak to be of any help in working.

And the war was being fought all around so we couldn't allow a great many army personnel to carry out work.

CXW What was the state of the barrack rooms? What did they look like?

/The

WH The barrack rooms themselves were not bad as barrack rooms because they were meant for SS troops.

CXW Did the Belsen inmates show gratitude for the treatment they were getting from you?

WH Those who were well enough did show gratitude. But most, lack of communication because of language difficulties made it difficult. You see they had patients from all European, Eastern European countries like Czechoslovakia, Poles, Latvians, gypsies, all those. So language difficulties were as far as I'm aware of it, severe.

CXW Were any of those responsible for the situation in Belsen present, or had they been removed?

WH They had been removed.

CXW What was the attitude of the local populace towards Belsen?

WH I really couldn't say.

CXW Was there any danger to you and the other medical personnel there from the infectious diseases?

WH Well there would have been but for the anti-typhus powder which was sprayed over the patients. Tuberculosis was also very liable to spread because there were many cases.

omit
But during my period I didn't know of any of our staff who contracted either typhus or tuberculosis.

CXW We were talking earlier about the medical students who went there, were they there whilst you were there?

/No

WH No they had left, because we were able to take, by then, things were more civilised and we were able to have British nurses.

CXW You said earlier on that it wasn't quite what you expected, but were you shocked by Belsen?

WH Not as much as I thought I would be. In spite of the fact that a death cart was coming around each day to collect the dead for burial. We knew that things had been very much worse before we arrived so therefore we were not very badly shocked.

CXW Was there any sign of extermination apparatus such as crematoria or gas chambers?

WH No, I would say their condition was caused by neglect.

CXW What about personal belongings from the inmates which may have been confiscated from them, were there large amounts of that?

WH Not that we were aware of.

CXW How did you come to leave? And who did you hand over to?

WH I handed over to UNRRA. They then took charge.

CXW You just received an order from your superiors that your period of duty was terminated?

WH Yes. So UNRRA and their staff took over.

CXW What facilities did they seem to have?

/Facilities

WH Facilities of the Red Cross.

CXW What nationalities were the UNRRA people?

WH British.

CXW Solely British?

WH The ones I met were British.

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CXW Did the UNRRA people who took over from you ask for an inventory of what you had there?

WH Yes the commandant asked for an inventory and of course I had to explain that there wasn't such a thing as an inventory. The equipment it had belonged to the Red Cross and they had distributed materials, blankets, sheets to patients who were being discharged from hospital. They were given to the patients. So you couldn't keep an inventory under conditions like that.

CXW You talked earlier about the arrival of the British nurses, presumably they would not have been allowed to come until conditions were more stable or healthy?

WH Yes, quite right. They were kept mostly for the nucleus hospital which only contained a few hundred beds.

The British nurses were not used for patients in the barracks, I mean nursing by itself, but for inspection purposes they would go and suggest to medical orderlies who were male what ought to be done.

/You

CXW You said in the barracks, you said there were thousands there in the barracks?

WH Yes thousands.

CXW Were the patients on beds or . . . ?

WH On beds, yes.

CXW And they weren't given much hope?

WH Well they had recovered from the acute stages and the infectious stages of illness, apart from the tuberculosis cases, who were all isolated in a special part of the camp.

CXW Who was the UNRRA man in charge of the party?

WH Well I'm sorry I can't remember now.

CXW Did you say ^{/that} he was a specialist in London?

WH Yes an ear, nose and throat specialist in London, one of the London hospitals.