



War Work-Part One by derbycsv

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People in story: [Mavis Burton](#)

Location of story: [Derby](#)

Background to story: [Civilian Force](#)

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This story has been submitted by Alison Tebbutt, Derby CSV Action Desk, on behalf of Mavis Burton. The author has given her permission, and fully understands the site's terms and conditions

Part Two of this story can be found at bbc.co.uk/dna/ww2/a5141611

During the war my St John activities kept me very busy and apart from the anguish of seeing good, young bodies partly destroyed for the rest of their lives, I cheerfully did any job that was given to me.

One of my duties was to act as escort to improving wounded, taking them from our local hospitals to one nearer their own home. Then there were the wounded that had to be discharged from the forces. They were in a very different position to some others. This was due to the fact that they were given their discharge papers in Derby and then, having no Army papers and not yet being absorbed into civilian life, became no one's responsibility.

After the Officer in charge of the British Red Cross in Derby discovered this unhappy state of affairs and that some poor lads, probably minus a limb or two, had to make their own way home, she called on all volunteers to provide an escort. Rolls-Royce, the firm for which I worked, was very understanding and allowed me to go to these duties. In return I almost always managed to get back for work the next day although, in some cases, accommodation had been provided and the duty should have taken two days. Then by working frantically for a day or two, my own work was cleared up.

One of these occasions provided me with a rather eerie experience. I was to pick up a soldier from the Military Police- R.T.C at the station, who was taking care of him until I arrived. Our seats were booked on the train and I was to stay the night in Ulverston near Barrow-in-Furness. His home was in Lancaster and he was most anxious to show me the hills of his home county of which he had talked all the way but this wasn't very successful as we passed through in dense fog. The hospital, Conishead Priory, was in peace time a Durham miner's home and was indeed a lovely place, standing in beautiful surroundings.

The soldier and I reached in good order after a train and bus journey and at some time along the way he had decided to fasten both locks on my little travelling case. Unfortunately, only one lock worked and I had been too late to stop him doing his good deed for the day. He, being something of a gentleman had insisted on carrying the case and as it was very small and light, I had let him do so as this sort of thing made a man feel a little better. He wasn't badly wounded, it was just too bad that it was his left arm that had been run through with metal splinters from a bomb and he was left handed. The case jammed and the first thing the doctor, to whom we reported, had to do was a major operation to get it open again.

At the beginning of the week I had read a book, a rather stupid story about a rambler who on getting soaking wet one day, had gone to a large house seeking shelter. No-one was about and after ringing the door bell for some time he had gone into the house and sat down in one of the rooms. It was then someone locked the door. Suddenly he heard Bach's Fugue being played on an organ, there was a tremendous crash of notes then silence. He rushed to the door, found it had been unlocked and, seeing a double flight of stairs merging into one he dashed up to find a man in period

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costume sitting stabbed to death at a little organ.

As the hospital authorities didn't know we were on our way they had not arranged my accommodation for the night. So it was decided that I sleep in the nurses' sick room which was up in the battlements, in a turret. They showed me to my room which was reached by a double flight of stairs merging into one at the top of which sat a smug little organ. I could almost see it leering at me. Was I relieved to find the nurses' kitchen right next door to the bedroom, it was a funny place to have a kitchen but it was great comfort to hear them pottering about all night.

The hospital was run by seven nursing sisters and a matron, their staff being St John and Red Cross nurses. Now although I believe in firm discipline in hospitals, a sloppy sister and the patients suffer through lack of good treatment, the Matron was really too much of a Martinet. When she and the other sisters had finished their meal, everyone had to stand up while they swept out of the dining room. This was also the signal that all other ranks had to be finished too. It was too bad if you had only just managed to get started. A nurse had to jump up and open the door. In my ignorance and not quite noticing what was going on, I almost walked out in front of them. For this heinous crime I should in all probability have been put in solitary on bread and water.

When the Red Cross had omitted to provide lodgings for me in Ulverston, they also omitted to provide me with refreshments. The result of this mix up was that the nurses had to chip in with their meagre rations and believe me, they were meagre in the extreme.

While I was wondering about with nothing to do and no one to talk with, my soldier having been whisked off to some chalets in the grounds where the less desperately ill were housed, the receptionist informed me that a shell had exploded in the breach of one of the guns at the gunnery school at Barrow-in-Furness and that the wounded were to be brought in.

I at once offered to help with such menial jobs as cutting bread for the hospital meal, making beds etc. But Matron would have none of this and sent her knitting to me. This I at once sent back, no doubt to her displeasure. I often wished afterwards that I had done the knitting, because I could never follow a pattern.

Being bored having nothing to do, not even a locker to scrub out, I decided to take a walk in the grounds. They were at their loveliest. It was February and the woods were carpeted with snowdrops. I found a soldier rather disconsolately picking a flower here and there. He was also extremely bored, a sure sign that he was getting better. He said Matron was no longer on speaking terms with him because he had walked down the front staircase and on being told 'You are not supposed to be on those stairs Soldier' he had retorted 'What's good enough for your dogs is good enough for me.'

We saw two large white owls floating noiselessly around in the dusk and there were ducks on the estuary. The woods dropped down to a little backwater of the sea and a short distance away, was a small island, on which a stone tower was built. My informant told me that it was generally believed that there was a secret passage from the Priory to the tower under the sea but as almost all old family houses are wrongly reputed to have underground passages, I have my doubts.

As it was by now almost dark, we returned to the hospital and on enquiring about the gun crew were told that only one had been brought in. The other seven had been killed outright. The sole survivor was in a pretty bad way and a nurse was telephoning his parents. I had to leave early next morning and never did find out whether he made a recovery or not.

Another memorable thing about this hospital was that it was here that I saw my first German. He was a high ranking Officer and therefore the loneliest man in the place. It was forbidden by the German Army to speak to a lower rank, so apart from the doctors dealing with his case, he had no one to talk to. I don't know if I expected Germans to have two heads or something but I felt quite amazed to find he looked just like any other human being there. In addition to his quite ordinary looks, he had a very good English speaking voice and no accent at all. In those days of spies and

what not, this would have probably raised doubts and given him away, were he not already a prisoner.

Although we had our seats booked on the train for the outward journey, I had to fight my own battles coming back and as the trains were always packed, my uniform stood me in good stead when looking for a seat. The members of His Majesty's forces would always squash up a bit and make room for a nurse. They would look after me in other ways too, bringing me cups of tea from the W.V.S. trolleys although I told them I was really a civilian and helping to carry my wounded soldier's kit. Some of the kit bags were nearly as big as me and I'm sure were full of old disused tanks, jeeps etc, they were so heavy.

In addition he would have a valise and I would have my little case. To complicate matters further, the patient would sometimes be on crutches. The best thing to do was to gaze around the platform in a dazed, helpless sort of way whereupon some tough male character would rush up, grab these great packs and hurl them onto the racks, not willing to show his masculinity, but being so damned glad he'd got all his limbs in tact that he would do anything to help his less fortunate brother.

On one occasion I was asked to take a soldier from Derby to Edinburgh. He had a rather bad wound in his foot and was only able to walk by the aid of crutches. Sister said I was to take him to the transport and bring the crutches straight back. I pointed out that he had a large kit bag, his great coat and a valise and no possible way of getting along unaided. With that and on promising to bring back the crutches the very next day, she graciously allowed him to borrow them. He should have had a male escort but there was no one available, the only male who could have helped having gone to Maidstone. His escort duty which, incidentally, should have been a female, would have been very nice for me as I had friends living in the lane where the hospital is situated and I should very much have liked to have seen them. However, he would not change duties as he had made all his arrangements.

We struggled off to the station loaded down with kit and looking as if we were on Safari to Mongolia. To add to our troubles we were to change at Trent. Well, as anyone who knew Trent will tell you, it was the end of the world. Kit bag, valise, great coat, my little travelling case and soldier were duly unloaded and I prepared to do my helpless female act to persuade some manly male to load it all onto the Edinburgh Express. (I was quite capable of doing it myself.) The best laid schemes etc duly ganged apley, whatever that means and mainly males were conspicuous by their absence. I was just resigned to lugging it all on by myself when suddenly a large lady porter hove into view, grabbed the kit bag like a bundle of feathers, slung it into her shoulder and marched into the train.

Gazing in open mouthed admiration, we galloped on board as quickly as wounds would allow and once more we were off. The guard must have been a bit of a romantic because he came to tell us that a honeymoon couple had boarded the train and he had locked off their compartment so they wouldn't be disturbed.

As it was such a long journey I had the forethought to take a pack of playing cards and being fond of a game of 'crib' we played solidly all the way.

On arriving safe and sound at Waverley Street Station, I handed him over to the Red Cross escort who was providing transport, got him signed for, said goodbye and not forgetting the crutches, was whisked off to my digs for the night. It had been arranged that I stayed with a Red Cross Officer. She herself was lame and walked with two sticks but she worked full time for the Red Cross. Her brother, she told me, was a Major. It was a huge house, in fact some of the other houses in the crescent had been converted into hotels. Stairs went down to the back rooms and the dining room looked out onto a walled garden. My room was one used by her nephew when he was home. This room too was on the bottom floor.

As I've mentioned before, I'm not at all keen on being alone indoors but will be quite happy to be outside by myself. To add to my nervousness, after I'd got down on hands and knees and yanked out the cat which had rushed under the bed, it suddenly began to stare and followed with his eyes something that only he could see move up the wall, across the ceiling and down the other wall. I shoed it out and

hurriedly shut the door hoping he'd taken his 'friend' with him. Every time I dropped off to sleep the ships hooters on the Firth of Forth woke me up again. I had had time for a walk in Princes Street before supper but it rained so hard that the dye came out of my great coat into my starched cuffs and ever after they had a lovely marble effect.

After my near sleepless night I was glad to get on the train which, as was the custom in those days, was packed to overflowing. Having fought with knees and elbows to a seat on the side of the gangway, I stuck the crutches at the side of the seat and promptly fell fast asleep. I was awakened periodically by people wanting to go out, come in, get cups of tea and falling voer the thoroughly damned crutches. But on the whole I slept the sleep of the just from Edinburgh to Derby. No changing trains this time.

I had a sneaking feeling that people were looking at me rather sympathetically but thought perhaps my over fertile imagination was playing tricks on me again. It wasn't until we reached Derby and I picked up the crutches and walked jauntily off the train that I realised by a few astonished faces that they thought I'd joined the ranks of the war wounded.

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