



War Work-Part Two 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 was 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.

This story is part two of bbc.co.uk/dna/ww2/a5141396.

The Cardiff effort was no better than the rest as far as I was concerned. I was supposed to pick up my soldier at the City Hospital, about four and a half miles from my home, at seven am. There was no transport laid on due to petrol rationing. The St. John Officer, who was also in charge of all surgeries at work, managed to fix me up with a lift in a works' car by arranging that it deviate slightly from it's route. I arrived in good order and then my troubles began. No one knew my patient. 'Had he come in on last Tuesday's convoy of wounded?' I pointed out that this was hardly likely as he'd had a leg amputated and couldn't possibly be fit to travel in so short a time. Finally, after frantic telephone calls, they ran him to earth at the railway station where he had been taken from Ash Hall after being transferred from the City Hospital.

By now, time was running out and I began to think I would miss the train. Fortunately, there was a 'bus waiting at the stop by the hospital and by mentally urging it out of it's early morning lethargy into something like a sprint, I arrived at the market place. Luck deserted me, there was no bus to the station and I had to run the next part, over half a mile, arriving in a breathless flurry at the R.T.O's office where I enquired gaspingly if there was anyone called Ennis, whereupon a boy of about 19, minus one leg taken off at the thigh, turned to me with tears in his eyes and said 'I thought you weren't coming.'

The R.T.C. at Derby had arranged with the R.T.O. at Gloucester to meet him because he had to change stations and they too thought I had missed the train. Once safely aboard he soon cheered up and chatted about going home. We had company in the shape of an R.A.F. boy who had been in hospital with a fractured ankle.

As we reached Wales, my patient got quite excited and kept hopping out in the corridor, leaning out of the window and taking deep breathes of his native air. He said he'd only just gone out to war and he knew something would happen to him. He was going home to be fitted with an artificial leg and to start work in a job that had found for him.

I handed him over to the inevitable Red Cross escort and thought how nice if I had been able to give him back to his Mum but perhaps it was all for the best because I should, in all probability, have bawled in sympathy if she had broken down.

As there was a train reaching home around midnight, I had my lodgings cancelled. There was an hour or two to spare, so I had some refreshment in a milk bar, we were allowed to charge our expenses to the Red Cross but I usually took my own sandwiches. There was a park nearby and as it was a pleasant day I spent a little time there chatting to a woman on one of the benches. A man came along begging, he too had lost a leg and had medal ribbons up. He pleaded that this was the way he had been treated after losing his leg in the war. The woman was very indignant about this but I wondered. My soldier had been fitted with an artificial leg and had been


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found a job, why not this man. I caught my train without further mishap and arrived in Derby around midnight as scheduled.

One little journey took me to Manchester. I went to work until ten o'clock as I had to meet the boy at ten thirty. The ambulance duly arrived but not the boy. He came nearly two hours later. We took our reserved seats amongst a gaggle of Red Cross Officers and their patients. A women passenger, who was standing in the corridor, fainted. Someone came for help and quite correctly went to the older Officer. They all immediately jumped up and rushed out. A moment later one dashed back and asked me if I would like to go see the woman. I was extremely annoyed at this, wondering what kind of impression it had created with the boy who was depending on me especially as I then had six years war chevrons on my sleeve. Needless to say, I refused.

We eventually arrived at Manchester, I handed him over as usual to the ambulance driver who stowed him away in a fiddling little van with numerous other boys. The van had been donated by America. The whole thing was a tangle of arms, legs, crutches, and other impedimenta. This time there was nothing to do so I crossed to the next platform to Derby train and went home.

On one journey my patient and I shared a compartment with another St. John man and his patient. I knew the ambulance man and he was very good at sleight-of-hand tricks so kept us amused most of the way.

There was a R.A.M.C soldier standing in the corridor so we invited him to our reserved compartment as there were only four of us. He told us some stories about the medical Corps that would make James Bond look like a beginner. He said the Germans would slip disc shaped mines under the seriously wounded or dead, either theirs or ours and wire them up so that when the R.A.M.C. tried to help them the whole lot went up. Apparently it wasn't so bad if the Royal Engineers went in first as they knew how to dismantle these booby traps.

He also told us about a sniper who shot a hole through the handles of every stretcher as it was carried up the line without touching a man then had gone on to shoot every third man as they moved along.

Finally, an Officer had volunteered to be third man while the others watched. The sniper got the Officer but the other men shot him to pieces, he was hidden in a tree. All this was intended to be a war of nerves. Fortunately the Officer was not mortally wounded. Just another unsung hero.

He described how the Royal Artillery had been shelling across a road, the Officer ordering them to cease fire every time a German Red Cross ambulance came through. Suddenly, to everyone's surprise, he ordered them to alter their range and shell the ambulance. This they had to do. The shells dropped on target and the ambulance went sky high. The officer said 'I thought so, I've seen that lot before. They were carrying ammunition, not wounded.

I couldn't always go rambling on sundays, I did voluntary work at the Royal Infirmary. We were sent to work with the wounded and only worked on the male wards. We did an eleven hour shift. What had happened to some of the boys would make another story.

The convoys of wounded came in, as a rule, at night, they had a clearer run and no people hanging about just to watch. As I and two other girls lived near to the officer in charge we were the ones to be dragged out of bed about 12:30 pm and told what time the convoy would be in. One dare not sleep again in case one overslept, so we'd shiver off down to the hospital and wait. The ambulance men would have to parade in a proper manner while the roll was called but as there would only be one or two of the girls we just had to report.

The stretchers were brought up the ramp, placed head to tail until the whole floor was covered. We used to give them drinks, cigarettes and anything else necessary while others took down all their particulars, name, rank, nature of wounds, etc. All this would be done as they waited to be carried in to the doctors. Matron was always there. If we asked her whether to give a drink from a cup or a drinking mug with a

spout, which are used for patients who are lying flat, she would say 'go and look if he has any hands.' It's always a great morale booster to let the patient help himself as much as possible. The ones to make your stomach lurch are the facial injuries. There is no expression and it seems you are looking at a dummy which moves. The worst cases were the ones after D Day, when there had been no time to set up field hospitals. They were flown in with their field dressing still in place. If the dressings were covered with almost black blood you knew they had stopped bleeding, but if they were bright red, then you had to hurry.

The ambulance men carried them into the room where the doctors waited. The stretchers were rested on trestles, the wounds exposed and the doctors, who had a nurse each to take notes, picked out the patients they wanted, amputations, abdominal ops, burns, etc. Sufficient, to say that, the hospital only had two deaths, or so I was told, out of all the men who passed through.

When all had been safely gathered in, we went home again, just as dawn was breaking, in time for breakfast and the bus to work.

The German wounded were all treated at the City Hospital, this meant that only one guard need be mounted.

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