Celia Packe's own wartime memoirs

Celia Dibblee (nee Packe) wrote these memoirs towards the end of her life. There is more information at Celia Packe's wartime experiences.

MEMORIES OF NURSING IN THE ROYAL ARMY MEDICAL CORPS DURING WORLD WAR II

by Celia Dibblee (nee Packe)

The Voluntary Aid Detachment (VAD) was formed in October 1914 as an auxiliary nursing service to be attached to Naval and Military Hospitals in wartime. VAD nurses worked in both World Wars. They were given a superficial traning by local branches of either the Red Cross or the St. John's Ambulance Brigade. This training consisted of attending lectures on First Aid and Home Nursing and working a certain number of hours as a volunteer at a local hospital. Mobile VADs were prepared to travel anywhere and Immobile VADs worked from home.

St. John's Ambulence Brigade
button worn by Celia Packe
while a VAD

Besides nursing, VADs were recruited into other occupations, including clerks, cooks, laboratory assistants and medical dispensers. VADs retained their individual uniforms, either St. John's or Red Cross, and had their own offficers, 'Commandants'. They were not subject to Military Law and so

maintained their independence, with discipline kept by their own officers.

The Army paid VADs weekly and gave them an allowance for uniforms and free travel passes four times a year for leave. They were issued with an Army Service Book / Combined Pay Book, which was carried at all times as an identity check, a service respirator, tin hat and a tag to be worn round the neck with their name and Army number.

INTRODUCTION

The wartime account of W/661757 Pte. Packe VAD, RAMC

SERVICE:

From 1942 to 1946 I nursed in the Army as a Mobile VAD. These initials stood for 'Voluntary Aid Detachment', which was formed at the beginning of World War I. During my four years I remained in England and nursed in three different Military Hospitals, at Catterick and Leyburne (Yorks) and Shaftsbury (Dorset). I also nursed in three Camp Reception Statiobs (CRS) on detachment from Shaftsbury, at St Mawes (Cornwall), Warreham (Dorset) and Droxford (Hants).

The CRS were small medical units for soldiers with minor ailments, such as bad 'flu or a severe ankle, who would need only a few days rest and medical care. The CRS were usually staffed by four or five VAD nurses, sometimes with an Army Sister in charge and a full-time medical officer. But frequently the MO was a civilian, the local village doctor, who called daily. Often there was only an RAMC Sergeant and a senior VAD in charge of the unit.

However, I spent most of my war service at Shaftsbury, a hospital with 600 beds, which was one of the busiest military hospitals in Southern Command. Shaftesbury town is on a hilltop; the hospital was situated in a valley about 2 miles to the southwest of the worn and an equal distance from Melbury Beacon.

DUTIES OF A VAD NURSE:

The duties were much the same as those of a RAMC orderly: Her job was to keep the ward clean and tidy and help with the distribution of the meals; wash patients, make their beds and deal with bedpans and urinals. She also had to check patients' temperatures, pulses and respirations, give out medicines and help the Ward Sister with dressings. But like most people in wartime, a VAD nurse often had to do considerably more than her own job.

HOURS OF WORK:

Day Duty: The shift was from 7.30am to 7.30pm with 3 hours off duty. There was a half-day holiday during the week and also on Sunday. After 3 months, a nurse was entitles to 10 days priviledge leave.

Night Duty: 7.30pm to 7.30am with an hour's break in the middle of the night. The nurse worked every night for a month without any off-duty. This was followed by 36 hours duty leave.

GENERAL EXPERIENCE:

I nursed on most of the Surgical and Medical Wards at Shaftsbury. I was a trained blood transfusion orderly. I also worked in the four Operating Theatres, General Surgery, Othopaedic, E.N.T and Eye Surgery.

I have chosen ten varied hospital anecdotes, which after half a century have remained strong in my memory. Each anecdote has been checked against my diary of that time, to confirm dates and any details that I might have forgotten. A short word about my diary. I have kept a diary all my life, starting at the age of 14. The entries are written in a five year format, so each is a mere four lines, usually between 40 and 50 words. Having established this diary habit early, I kept on through the war, always writing it last thing at night. I remember that on night duty this caused problems and there tended to be an "extra" day on change over from one duty to the other. But the years of my war service in the RAMC were strictly covered and I hope the following anecdotes will give a brief flavour of those times.

ANECDOTE 1 - A Memorable Beginning

I arrived at Catterick Military Hospital as a complete novice, having had only three weeks of brief theoretical training and no practical experience of working in hospital. I was issued with a tin hat and respirator and had a medical and dental inspection. Then I was told to have lunch and report to the Officers' Ward. My uniform felt theatrical and strange as I stood outside the Sister's Duty Room. She was busily writing in a large book and, seeing me lurking there, looked up and said "Oh nurse, find the other nurse and take over from her. She'll want to get off duty and have her lunch." So I timidly went into the ward, where I heard the nurse's voice from behind the screens round a patient's bed. She came bursting out, and said "Thank goodness you've come, I'm absolutely starving. I've just started to give Major Beale a blanket bath. Can you carry on with it?" And before I could say a word she was off.

I looked round in despair, then joined Major Beale behind the screens. He was a fat and jolly man, who smiled at me and said "Hullo nurse, why are you looking so scared?" "I'm absolutely terrified" I said, and my cap started to slide off. "I've never given anyone a blanket bath and I don't what to do!" "Oh" he said, "Don't worry, it's easy; I'd do it for myself but I had a hernia operation yesterday and must take things easy for a day or so. But for goodness sake don't make me laugh." Under his guidance I washed his face, then his arms, hands and chest and was very careful to dry him properly and not to make him laugh.

"Now" he said, "Turn back the bottom of the blanket a bit - then wash and dry one leg and foot and then the other." Which I did. "Finally" he said, "Hand me the flannel and put the towel near me. Give me a nice smile and say 'I'll be back in a few minutes. Will you just finish yourself off in the meantime.' And that's all there is to it."

By the end of four years I must have given thousands of people a blanket bath and often thought of Major Beale and his splendid lesson.

ANECDOTE 2 - Christmas on Night Duty

There was a large Italian Prisoner of War Camp fairly near to Shaftsbury. Italian prisoners were treated far more leniently than the Germans. They were allowed to work on the land for wages and when admitted to hospital

they didn't have a guard sitting by their bedside. They were entitled to a special national diet, consisting of a supplement of cooked pasta and a small ration of coffee grounds which they were able to brew themselves in the ward kitchen.

While I was on night duty in December 1942 I had one Italian patient. He had been ill for some time, but had now almost recovered and would soon be going back to his prison camp. He was very popular with the other patients, because, although he spoke no English, he had a beautiful tenor voice and often sang along, in Italian, with the ward wireless.

On Christmas Eve the ward had been well decorated by the Day Staff. A big Christmas tree stood in the corner and there was plenty of holly, mistletoe and paper streamers. The lights had been dimmed and all the patients were very excited and noisy. In this medical area of the hospital there were six wards of twenty-four patients with a solitary VAD on duty in each ward. There was one Night Sister only for the whole corridor. So with plenty of mistletoe about I had to hold my own against my lively patients. But it was all good natured and I didn't mind. But I did notice that the young Italian was sitting up in his bed looking very unhappy. So I went over to him and smiled. Later I wrote the following poem:

Christmas Eve in Hospital 1942

Black oily hair and dark olive skin
Pale from the weight of recovering pneumonia.
Ebony eyes talk with much expression
Yet ignorant of the language spoken around him.
"*Canta*" I whisper "*Voi cantate Natale*"
And hope he is able to understand.

Suddenly the ward is loud with silence,
As laughter and mistletoe kissing cease.
And frivolous figures become intent statues.
Out of the darkness the Christmas tree sparkles
On the British soldier far from their homess.
And near to his bed I stand hopefully waiting.

His eyes lighten up with understanding,
And quietly he starts to sing to us all.
His voice flows on like a southern breeze
Swaying with lovely liquid sounds.
Sadly he sings of the *Bambino Gesu*,
For Christmas and memory go hand in hand.

Only in England could this have happened.
As the soldiers listen with quiet attention,
While an enemy prisoner captured in war
Sings of Christ's birth in celebration
This moment in time stands outside of time
And shows me the strength of our bomb-shattered nation.

Some comments: M.O. means Medical officer. Jerry is slang for German. A cornfield in Britain means a wheat field, not maize. 'Entente cordiale' was the name for a political alliance between the French and British government before the first world war, but is used here for a friendship between nationalities.

ANECDOTE 3 -

During the summer of 1943 I was working on a surgical ward with patients who had been wounded by the Germans during the Italian campaign. Some had lost a limb and others had lost their homes in recent bombing by the *Luftwaffe*. They were all very depressed and bitter about their personal disasters. We had just heard on the hospital grapevine that two Germans from a recent shot down plane were thought to be hiding in farmland near the hospital. The patients in my ward were unexpectedly savage and shouted across the ward exactly what they would do if they could lay their hands on those something something Jerries.

The irony was that Reception soon rang through to our Ward Sister, telling her that they were shortly sending us a couple of wounded German airmen found hiding in a cornfield, and would we prepare two beds immediately. The Ward Sister told me to do that, so I turned down the sheets on two empty beds next to each other and made room for the trollies. In a loud voice I said to all our patients, "By the way, these beds are now ready for that German pilot and his observer." There was a stunned silence as I walked out of the ward.

Shortly, two trollies arrived and the showed the orderlies to the beds. Sister and I prepared the two injured men for the M.O. I was amazed how young these two lads were, not much more than schoolboys, and how dead scared they looked. They were absolutely filthy, having hidden in a cornfield for two days. Sister left to phone for an armed guard while I went back to cleaning up the lunch things in the kitchen. When I returned to the

ward, there was a group of British soldiers round the Germans' beds. "Hey Nurse", said one of my patients, "These two Jerries haven't got any kit - no washing things, no razors or combs. Can't you do something about it?" Another said, "Look, Nurse, this one has got his wallet and he's been showing us snaps of his girl." The arrival of the M.O. stopped this *entente cordiale*. The pilot had a broken leg but otherwise seemed all right, the observer a broken arm and other possible injuries. They needed immediate attention at the operating theatre. When an orderley arrived to take them there the ward patients gave them a great send off, with much thumbs-up, waving, encouraging grins and shouts of:
"Don't worry mate, you'll be O.K."
"We'll look after your beds and get you some food."
"You'll soon be back with us."
The two young Germans each waved a hand. And now they no longer looked quite so scared.

ANECDOTE 4 - Cornish Fishing Port

By autumn 1943, Fortress Britain seemed to be one colossal transit camp for troops preparing and training for the tremendous event ahead, the invasion of Europe. This vast army was an international affair. Some of its members had come from Europe, the proud fragments of armies defeated by Hitler, the "Free" French, Poles, Greeks, Norweigans, Danes, Belgiums and Dutch. Then there were the Commonwealth soldiers from Canada, Australia, New Zealand and many other places.

The foreignness of these people added to our own feeling of frustration, as Britain became increasngly claustrophobic. We felt we were being caged up behind the massive coastal defences and longed to be free and have the chance to travel and explore the world.

Of all the foreign troops in the country, by far the largest were Americans. The south of England seemed to be weighed down by their invasion of Britain. We seldom had them as patients, though, because they had their own hospitals. In trhe October 1943 I was posted to a small CRS at St Mawes in south Cornwall, a remote fishing village on the River Fal. Falmouth is about two miles across the estuary by boat, though a 15 mile journey by car. This CRS served a large isolated area where a number of anti-aircraft (AA) sites were positioned. Our M.O. would visit these sites daily with an orderley and bring back for treatment any gunners who were

hurt or ill. These gunights were for the protection of the American Navy, who occupied the whole river estuary as an anchorage for their craft. Their personnel were billeted in Falmouth and St. Mawes, so they ran a regular hourly ferry service between the two ports, normally using small landing craft which carried about 35 people. Permission had been given to anyone in British uniform to use this service, which was free.

One Saturday I had a half day holiday and hitched a lift over to Falmouth to meet a friend. Unfortunately I missed the usual boat back and had to wait for the last one, which was supposed to leave at 10pm. This was *not* a good idea. It was Saturday night, the boat was very late and there were a large crowd of Yankee sailors waiting on the jetty. But my luck was in; I was adopted by a kind sailor who said, "Don't worry, Nurse, I'll look after you. You'll need a bit of protection from this lot."

My escort took my arm and got me right up to the front of the crowd. Instead of our normal small landing craft, a very large one arrived, capable of carrying tanks and well over 100 passengers. He managed to push me on board first and along to the stern, where he put me in charge of one of the crew. Then he patrolled the ship, shouting out loudly, "NOW THEN, NO SWEARING! WE'VE GOT A LADY ON BOARD." During the journey he told me all about his wife and how he missed her. At the end of the trip, he escorted me back to the CRS. "This is no place to be out on your own after midnight," he said.

St Mawes 1943

Strange little Cornish fishing port
Of Yankee sailors and invasion craft,
War-weary Tommies and camouflaged guns.
Do you weep for the days of peace?

Do your tears mingle with the ebbing tide
At the alien slanging of your native tongue?
Does your body ache when the restless guns,
Grafted on to your granite side,
Crash out their salvoes at the sky?
Are your nerves frayed at the angry sound
Of barges roaring across the bay,
Scattering the gulls asleep in the creek?

Do you remember those days of summer,
When holiday makers flocked to your shores;
And then like faithless lovers left you
When autumn's breath was felt at evening?

Their gramophones were the guns of peace,
Their motor launches and gaudy yachts
The invasion craft of yesterday.

Perhaps they loved you in their fickle way
During the drowsy days of sun.
Yet, did they probe your secrets and learn
Of smugglers, wreckers and ancient craft?
Did they love your intimate streets,
Your jumbly houses and muddly quays?

I am a stranger and don't know the answer.
Do you weep for those halcyon days?

ANECDOTE 5 - A Dying Patient

We had all heard of penicillin, which we understood to be the newly invented wonder cure for all illnesses. It had been discovered by Alexander Fleming at St. Mary's Hospital in London and was a common mould which he had cultivated on old orange skins. But as there weren't any oranges about, we reckoned that penicillin wouldn't get off the ground until after the war.

It was early December 1943. I had returned from St. Mawes and was back on a ward at Shaftsbury. I had a young patient called Pte. Williams who was suffering from general septicaemia. It was originally caused by a blister on his heel which had become infected. He was on the 'dangerously ill list' and was dying. I was expecting to go on night duty shortly, but just before that our Colonel, the Big White Chief, was going to show an American Colonel, also a doctor, round the hospital. They would arrive on our ward about 11am.

There was a great stampede to get all the ward chores completed. There were drugs to issue, bedpans and bottles to give out and collect up, beds to tidy, lockers to tidy, patients to tidy and nurses to put on clean aprons. A great deal of spit and polish, in fact a complete flap. I was told to stand by Pte. Williams' bed in case he needed anything.

On the dot of 11.00 the two colonels arrived. The American was very informal and chatted to the patients as he went round. When he reached Pte. Williams, who was groaning, he asked our Colonel what was the

problem. "He has general septicaemia and is not responding to drugs."
"Have you tried penicillin?"
"Penicillin? We can't get hold of any of that."
"Oh, I am sorry. We are lucky, we can use it now for all serious cases."
"You are very fortunate."
"Look here, have you got a dispatch rider? I could make out a request form to our nearest hospital, it's only about a hundred miles away. You should get some penicillin by late afternoon."

Which we did. I saw the Sister open the package and take out the bottle of penicillin. She shook it up and said to me, "This little bottle is worth £500." A fortune in those days. She drew up the correct dose into the hyperdermic syringe and said slowly, "Look, Nurse, my hand is trembling!"

The next day I was put on night duty and worked in a ward on the other side of the hospital. We were so busy I didn't think of Pte. Williams again until just after Christmas, when a nurse from his ward came on night duty as well. While we were having our midnight break, she said to me, "Oh by the way, do you remember Pte. Williams? I wish you could have seen him on Christmas Day. He was up and about and tucked into a bigger Christmas Dinner than anyone else."

ANECDOTE 6 - Leg and shoulder

In April 1944 I had my first stint of working in an operating theatre. It was the orthopaedic one. We were very busy and no one had any time to tell me what to do. There were so many things I could do wrong, such as how should I mop a surgeon's brow when his perspiration is dripping into his work? There were plenty of night calls, which involved many hours loss of sleep. The whole time I worked in the theatre I felt totally inadequate and completely exhausted. I was thankful to be posted to another CRS.

In the theatre there was a nice young surgeon who was very keen on his job. One day he said to me, "Can you help me over something? Tomorrow there is to be a leg amputation above the knee and I want to have that leg to practise on. Can you save it for me?" I asked the theatre orderly, who was my only friend, how I could do that. He said "You'll need to take it into the sluice and wrap it up in masses of newspaper. Then hide it somewhere and tell him where you've put it. I won't take it down to the incinerator like I'm supposed to."

The next day I came on duty with as much newspaper as I could find, not easy in those days as newspapers only had one or two sheets per issue. Not having any string I brought some thick wool left over from my knitting. To my horror the Sister who was not my friend, said "Nurse, we are having an amputation this morning and I want you to be responsible for holding the leg steady during the operation." It was much, *much* worse than the blanket bath experience, but I didn't faint, and when the much-desired leg parted company from its owner I quickly carried it out to the sluice and fairly efficiently parcelled it up. Then I hid it behind a distbin. A couple of days later, the young surgeon thanked me. He told me how many operations he had been able to perform; I can't remember the number now, but it was a great many, with all those toe bones, foot bones, ankle bones, leg bones and knee bones - just like the song.

On another occasion I once more had to hold a limb steady during an operation. It was an arm this time, which although it wasn't completely severed from the shoulder very nearly did come off at one traumatic moment. Apparently the lengthy affair was a new operation called a 'Banquart's', and was to prevent continual dislocation of a shoulder by tying things up with wire. When after hours of hard work, the Chief Surgeon was finally stitching up the large wound, he said to the Assistant Surgeon, "Have you ever seen a Banquart's performed before?" The Assistant Surgeon said, no, he hadn't. "Neither have I" said the Chief Surgeon, "Nor have I ever done one, except for the two I practised on last night in the mortuary."

Poem

Oh what a curse
To be a nurse
I can think
Of nothing worse.

ANECDOTE 7 - A Move Nearer The War?

As D-Day grew nearer, a 'banned area', 10 miles wide, was established right along the south coast. The entire military paraphenalia for the greatest sea invasion ever attempted moved from all over Britain into this southernmost strip. This huge army was fully prepared and on the move but it had to wait at the coast until the invasion date was decided.

The 'banned area' made things difficult for civilians. They were able to stay in their houses but were forbidden to move either out of the 'area' or more than 5 miles in any direction, without written permission from the police. No one from outside the 'area' was allowed in, even to visit relatives, without special permission. Bus stops and railway stations were continually checked for law breakers. Service personnel were subject to the same rules and their mail was censored.

My career in the operating theatre came to an abrupt end when I was posted to CRS Wareham, which was inside the 'banned area'. Furzebrook Manor was isolated, buried in Dorset countryside. Like my two previous CRSs it served the local AA sites. In this case they were scattered all over the Isle of Purbeck in order to cover attacks on both Poole and Weymouth harbours. But these AA gunners never seemed to need medical attention - they were tough. So I had gone from my extreme to the other; having been terribly overworked for weeks on end in the operating theatre, I now had nothing to do.

Furzebrook May 1944

There's a war on, so they say
And we're quite ready for the fray
Ax we start each leisured day,
For there's a war on.

Eggs for breakfast, don't be late,
Or cold the egg and cold the plate
And late Routine that cannot wait
For there's a war on.

Then starts the usual day of work
And if we don't, don't think we shirk,
For, though we search, we can't find work
Yet there's a war on.

Our patients number one, two, three,
A healthier trio you'd never see,
From temperatures they are all free
And there's a war on.

We daily argue who should dress
This one carbuncle, and unless
This pimple's it, you'd never guess
That there's a war on.

Has the 'impetigo' been?
A funnier sight you've never seen,
His face is daubed with brilliant green,
Hush! There's a war on.

Last, the most important case,
He should come first, it is his place,
He has a *gnat bite* on his face
And there's a war on.

It's not until I lie in bed
And hear the guns crash overhead,
I can believe the voice that said
That there's a war on.

I tried unsuccessfully to find voluntary farm work. Then I explored the beauty of the Purbeck Hills on my bike. But soon I became bored stiff and was delighted when it was suggested we might contribute a 'turn' to a local concert party, formed with talent drawn from various AA sites. The other nurses at the CRS didn't want to be involved, they preferred chatting other their knitting. But I persuaded one VAD to join me in this interesting

venture. Between us we thought up a very simple hospital playlet with her taking the part of a nurse. But that's all she would do, so I had to write and produce it.

The cast consisted of a 'patient', a 'doctor' and two 'nurses'. The props were a hospital bed with bedding and a hospital locker. The plot was extremely corny. A soldier in the Pioneer Corps with very low intelligence arrives in a hospital to inspect the drains. He is mistaken for a patient and put to bed by the two nurses and then examined by the MO. It worked well, as we were sending up a situation everybody could appreciate. The 'aptient' was very good and so was the 'doctor'. I felt quite confident about it.

The first concert was given on the remote AA site at Arne and was a great success. It was performed in the open air and lit by ingenious footlights made out of 7lb jam tins, with high wattage bulbs inside them. The electricity was brought by cable from the nearest source, half a mile away. This lack of blackout failed to attract any German planes, to the great disappointment of the men on the guns. The second concert was eqully successful, but the third was a complete disaster as far as our sketch was concetned. We had been asked to perform at RHQ to an audience mainly consisting of officers. My leading man turned up drunk, a fact I realised very soon. He was irrepressible and insisted on leaving the hospital bed and advancing to the front of the stage, where he delivered a succession of filthy stories. Everyone was terribly shocked. I tried to get him back to bed, bbut he shouted, "No, I haven't finished yet, I know LOTS more."

A few days after that, the entry in my diary for June 6th. reads: "At first no one believed it. The usual old jok. But finally the wireless proved the truth. Incessant aircraft all day. Ships lying off Poole Harbour. Invasion Day!"

Looking back on that day, the rumour certainly reached us before the official announcement. I remember very clearly coming off duty at 5pm and climbing up a nearby hill. From the top I watched an unbelievable sight. A vast amada of British bombers were flying overhead towards France. They looked strange, because their underwings had all been newly painted with broad black and white stripes. Above them squadron upon squadron were returning from bombing France, accompanied by fighters. As they passed each other the bombers flashed '*Dot, Dot, Dot, Dash*' (the 'V' Sign) on their signalling lights and some of the fighters did a Victory Roll. I could see Poole Harbour with all its reinforcement ships ready to sail. I can also remember on that historic evening feeling full of fear and horror.

The Coming Invasion

This will be no gentle spring
Christened with April's tender showers.
Fiercely will Justice turn her back
On lovers, poets, lambs and flowers.

This will be a fearful spring
When retribution summons dread
Then, baptised with grief and tears
Will Europe bleed and count her dead.

Spring has brought, though eternity,
Fresh courage, hope, a time to pray.
Will crucifixion be her birth?
Who can say, oh who can say?

This was written three months before the great invasion of Europe of D Day.

ANECDOTE 8 - Explosive Situations

My next posting was to Droxford CRS. Unfortunately I arrived there too late and missed its finest hour. This CRS was at Greville Hall, which was on a minor road leading through woods towards Portsmouth. Hidden in the woods was the huge transit camp for all the convoys travelling down to Portsmouth Harbour for embarkation to France. In the camp were eating and sleeping facilities and even a cinema. The CRS was near at hand to provide medical facilities. Immediately before D Day, Churchill and General Montgomery had visited the camp to inspect the first convoy ready to invade France on the morrow. One thought of Laurence Olivier's film 'Henry V'. They also inspected the CRS. An official photograph was taken of them shaking hands with the nursing staff, who later received free copies. All this, however, was before I arrived. I was glad to be quite busy but understood why our patients were extremely unwilling at being left behind. Their units and their mates had abandoned them.

One evening a convoy of Free French came into the camp. On arrival one of the French soldiers fell out of the back of a 3-tonner. He was brought into the CRS on a stretcher with probably concussion and a bad cut to his head. I was on night duty in the MI room when he arrived with his kitbag, which seemed extremely heavy. He pointed to it and shouted, "Bang, bang, bang, *prenez garde*!" In his battledress pockets were cartridges and two flt tobacco tins. "Bombs" he shouted. So we put them in a bucket of water and carried them outside. When we got back he had disappeared and so had his kitbag. We didn't see him again. I do hope he got back to his unit all right.

There were five of us VADs. We all slept in a fairly small bedroom, which was just above the kitchen. My bed was beside the chimney of the kitchen stove. There was a heat wave at the time, and the fact that our smll window had bars made it seem worse. I got bad claustrophobia and couldn't sleep. Eventually I persuaded a couple of orderlies to put up a tent for me in the garden. It appeared to be a wonderful answer, if it hadn't been for an unfortunate coincidence. During my second night in the tent the Germans launched their new flying bombs, commonly known as 'doodlebugs'. They were aimed at Portsmouth - but not very accurately as far as I was concerned. A doodlebug was something like a huge bomb fitted with wings and a small motor bike engine. I don't know the technicalities, but I do know that we seemed to be at the centre of the attack and inside an Army bell tent wasn't the best place to be at such a time.

ANECDOTE 9 - V.E. Day

I was just coming up to my 22nd birthday, the age with VADs were considered responsible enough to be posted overseas. I had plenty of nursing experience and many of my hospital friends were already in Italy and Belgium. Their letters were full of ecstatic tales and I dreamed of Italy. But it was not to be. I fell seriously ill and was sent back to Shaftesbury. I was slow to recover and was then medically downgraded. You had to be A1 to go overseas, so that was that.

The following winter and spring were difficult and I was very depressed. The war was going badly in Europe and my own life seemed to have ground to a halt. But youth is very resilient. By April 1945 things were going much better in Europe, the Rhine had ben crossed and the German army had started to crumble. Here are some extracts from my diary:

May 1st At 10.30pm hear the incredible news that Hitler is dead. What a great day indeed.

May 2nd Today Italy is completely finished and on top of that Berlin surrenders its garrison of 70,000 troops.

May 4th At 9pm on the news, hear that the German armies in Holland, Denmark and N. germany have all surrendered. There is a good Company dance in our Mess.

May 5th Wild V Day preparation. Collect about 50 slings from the wards and some old bandages. With the use of red and blue dye we are going to make bunting. Have a Mess Committee to organise things. But oppositition from some people who say "We shouldn't celebrate anything until the Japs surrender." What rubbish!"

May 6th We make the bunting and I borrow a huge Union Jack from the mortuary.

May 7th The GREAT NEWS comes at last. We hear it in the College Arms over some home brewed cider. Dash back to the hospital on bicycles carrying 10 pints of Dorset cider and collecting greenery on the way to decorate our Mess. Put up the Union Jack over the front door and climb on to the roof to nail up the red, white and blue bunting.

May 8th What a terrific day! The Premier speaks at 3pm, announcing the surrender of Germany. Off to the Officers' Mess at 6.0pm for a drink. The King speaks to the nation at 9pm. Then we go up Melbury and light the beacon.

It was a wonderful walk to the foot of Melbury. There were about 100 of us. We collected dead branches from the hedgerows and dragged them with us. We laughed all the way up the steep climb to the summit and we mingled with half the population of Shaftsbury, whose ancestors must always have done this at such a time. The bonfire was huge, it was to be lit at midnight. We added our own contribution, then I stood by myself and marvelled at the scene. I'd been up this beautiful hill so often and was quite in love with it and the tremendous view. There across the valley was Shaftsbury town, high upon its own hilltop. How wonderful to see it a blaze of lights, with all memory of blackout completely forgotten. The church bells were ringing a wild celebration, their use as a warning of enemy landing now a thing of past history. And down in the valley between Melbury and Shaftesbury town was the dear old hospital, with its own lights switched on

and its curtains undrawn. I felt this was my home and was deeply grateful for the extraordinary experience of having lived there.

Then I joined in the exuberant singing of the huge crowd and the wild dancing round the unlit bonfire. 'Doing the Hokey-Cokey', the 'Palais Glide' and 'The Lambeth Walk'. At midnight the bonfire was lit. It blazed high up into the night sky and in the distance we could see on other hilltops other bonfires being lit. We cheered, we laughed, we kissed each other and we cried. We cried because after five years of war in Europe, we were free at last.

ANECDOTE 10 - An Equally Memorable End

Was the weather really so beautiful during those summer months of 1945, or is it just the way I remember it? Checking up in my diary, it merely records a normal amount of sunshine and a normal amount of rain. Yet on looking back I remember every day bathed in sunlight and quite perfect. The whole of Europe was free.

Although the hospital was very busy, rules were much less strictly enforced. We were allowed some freedom to socialise both with the patients and with all ranks of the staff. There were plenty of entertainment provided that summer, lots of dances, ENSA shows, films and gramaphone recitals. We had a sports day, which was great fun and I won the slow bicycle race.

Matron, Matron,
Where have you been?
Did you go to London
To see the Queen?

Matron, Matron,
What did you there?
The Press took your photographs
Right in the Square?

Matron, Matron
Aren't Queens the thing?
Oh, you went to London
To see the King!

Matron, Matron,
Stones do carry moss,
For the King has given you
The Royal Red Cross.

Our Commanding Officer was called Colonel Williamson. He had given us magnificient leadership all the time I had been at Shaftsbury. He now started to entertain, in his own home, those of us who were veterens of the hospital. His wife spoilt us dreadfully and we loved it. By this time, I had

plenty of kind civilian friends in the neighbourhood, who entertained me to meals and had me to stay. I played bridge and my poems were starting to get published. There was plenty of work and I was very happy.

Our own P.O.W.s [*Prisoners of War*] from Germany were now returning to England, many of them needing hospital treatment. Their inadequate diet over years of imprisonment had lowered their resistance to disease. As Germany was collapsing, their rations became less and less. The Germans still optimistically hoped to negotiate a peace treaty, so they tried to keep some allied prisoners as hostages. Their aim was to move several camps of British officer prisoners towards a redoubt they were trying to establish. These officers found themselves marching out of their camps and away from the advancing allied armies. But the attempt was too late, they were overtaken by the Americans and liberated. They were immediately deloused and flown back to England, where they had a medical check-up. If fit enough, they were given home leave, otherwise they were sent to the hospital nearest their own homes.

At Shaftsbury we were having a busy time. Apart from the returning P.O.W.s, there were the war-wounded, plenty of Italian ex-prisoners and all our routine Army patients. An entry in my diary reads: "May 21st. A convoy of 57 German patients are admitted just for one night. Don't see any of them, thank goodness! How very intense are one's feeling of hatred towards them." I had just seen the official film of the liberation of Buchenwald Concentration Camp.

Back on night duty again, and most of the men in my ward were 'up-patients', who slept soundly all night. Because of this, I allowed myself to be persuaded into joining a small supper party in the kitchen of a nearby ward. It was organised by two officers. One was an ex-prisoner from Gerany and they both had T.B. This allowed them generous supplementary rations of eggs and full-cream milk from a neighbouring farm, so the menu consisted of fluffy omelettes followed by ice cream made in the frige where the blood plasma was stored. The ingenious chef had been one of the potential hostages who had been force-marched across Germany. For reasons that I don't remember, I jokingly called him my 'Steady'.

After a month of night duty I was glad to be back living in daylight again. Those happy summer months flashed by until suddenly, out of the blue, the Japs surrendered. The cause of this sudden collapse was the two atom bombs dropped on them by the Yanks. The results were horrendous and the entire world was stunned by such ghastly destruction. In the hospital the climate of emotions was very different from V.E. Day and the celebrations were far less spontaneous. Doreen Adams, the VAD who had

nursed my 'Steady' and his friend, suggested the four of us should get a taxi up to Shaftsbury and have dinner at the Grosvenor Hotel.

That evening I came off duty at 8.0 pm, having preached revolution to my patients. They had only been given one small bottle of beer each to celebrate the end of five terrible years of war. This seemed awful to me. "Why don't you," I said, "Just walk out in your 'hospital blues' and go up to Shaftsbury? I hope to see you there!" And I suggested a secret way of getting out through a hedge to avoid passing the guardroom. Apparently the whole ward took my advice. It was 2.0 am before the last patient came staggering back to the ward. The night nurse was very cross. After our dinner at the Grosvenor, we left the hotel to join the joyful crowds outside. The four of us linked arms and together we danced the Palais Glide right down the main street of Shaftsbury. At last the war was over.

Some weeks later my 'Steady' was moved to King Edward VII's Sanatorium at Midhurst. I was demobilised in February 1946. And in June we were married.

Acknowledgment

I am so grateful to my 'Steady', John Dibblee, for all the help and encouragement he has given me in producing this account.

Cubbington 1997

Comments by Jo Edkins *author of this website, daughter of Celia Dibblee (nee Packe).*

Celia Dibblee, my mother, told me a little about her wartime work. She described an early incident at work, where she was told to clean the men's urinals, which she thought was a rather disgusting task. However, she discovered that you can take pride in any task if you do it well, a philosophy that she passed onto me.

She also described some mischevious incidents. She was a great believer in keeping to the rules most of the time, but occasionally breaking them! We once climbed to the top of a hill near Shaftsbury - I suspect Melbury Beacon. She told me of her VAD working hours - 12 hours on, 12 hours off, and the shift work. Naturally they were supposed to sleep in their beds, but my mother described (possibly just once) during night shift climbing this hill during the day and sleeping there in the open air instead.

She also described once spending the night, possibly for a bet or dare, within Salisbury Cathedral close, overnight. Some cathedral closes are open, but some, like Salisbury, have a wall round, with gates that are locked over-night.

She was annoyed that the celebrations at the end of the war were so muted. So at midnight, she turned on the fire alarms, and rode through the wards on a bicycle, cheering! She said that the response was not too good, and there was trouble afterwards!

Some of her VAD exerience formed her subsequent behaviour as a housewife. She assisted at some operations, and was impressed at the high level of cleanliness required. Yet she observed that in spite of this, infections still happened. She reasoned from this that you could ***never*** *talk of something being completely clean. If operating theatres couldn't prevent infections, how could you ever get a normal house completely clean? So she worked out her own housekeeping philosophy. Certain areas of the house needed to be kept clean for hygenic reasons, for example, the kitchen and bathroom. But mostly things were 'dirty' because they looked dirty. So if you avoided white clothes and pastel plain carpets, then your house and clothes would look perfectly clean with much less work! She called this 'Limited Sordidity'. She worked this out, and followed it, long before scientists worked out that over-clean environments could be actively bad for babies and children, leading to allergies. Not a problem at home!*

And they talk of the bad behaviour of the 'Baby Boomers'! I think we got it from our parents.