

ALEXANDRAS

① MILITARY

Queen Alexandra's Imperial Nursing Service (QAIMNS)

In 1942 King George VI granted all QAs a King's Commission and we became Queen Alexandra's Royal ^{ARMY} Nursing ^{CORPS} Service (QARANC) and our uniform changed from Grey and Scarlet (apart from indoor uniform) to Khaki.

All QAs were fully trained nurses and held the rank of ~~full~~ full Lieutenants, with more ^{senior} ~~senior~~ ie Matrons etc. having rank up to Brigadier and often made Dame of British Empire.

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I joined the QAs from the Radcliffe Infirmary Oxford in 1942 having the qualifications of SRN SCM and some ~~exper~~ ^{EXPERIENCE} ~~exper~~ of ~~neuro~~ neurosurgery, having worked with Prof Hugh Cairns who at that time was England's leading neurosurgeon and he persuaded me to join the QAs.

I was posted to Ormskirk in ~~June~~ ^{OCT-NOV.} of /42 to Edgehill College which was a staging post for medical personnel to collect before going overseas. We had Medical Officers ~~de~~ dentists and everyone connected with a hospital we were allowed to visit the local town and occasional visit to Liverpool and Southport both about equi-distance, but had to be back in College for 6pm. Everything was very secret and we were discouraged from talking to civilians, which seemed strange as we had all been civilians only a short time before. Over the next few days nurses and doctors arrived from all over the kingdom, none of whom I had met before, so we had a great time getting to know each other and speculating as to where we were going. All letters had to be posted in the official box and all phones were out of range. Our so called heavy luggage was collected in ~~NOVEMBER~~ ^{NOVEMBER} sometime and we were told to have all our remaining kit to be ready to leave at short notice. We were by now 48 ~~nursi~~ nursing sisters and we were part of #69 Field Hospital. At beginning of Dec we came down to breakfast to discover that all our ^{OFFICERS} medical had gone and that they were part of the advance party. We still had no idea where they were advancing to. On Dec 8 we were told to have all kit ready to leave ^{AT A MOMENTS NOTICE} everyone was allowed one phone call home (phones were made available and to say we would be leaving for

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an unknown destination within the next few days, and ~~the~~ they must not contact us as no messages would be passed.

on, and once we arrived they would be informed by the War Office. This over, we ~~we~~ were given a good supper and then told to be ready to leave in 15mins by a side door and from then on absolute silence because there were other units in the College and they must

not know. How 48 females kept silent I shall never ^{KNOW} but we did. It was a terrible night dark, and pouring with rain

but we boarded a bus complete with our kit + resperatory and a travelling rug if you were lucky enough to possess one, I was lucky and very glad of it. We were driven to a railway station which I imagine was Liverpool, but as every where was blacked out it was difficult to tell. We were

ushered into the shadows in crocodile formation and again maintained silence. Eventually a train ^{ARRIVED} and we got on, at last being able to talk. The journey was not a very long one, and once more we got off and into the shadows to await

another train. A compartment ^{WAS RESERVED} and we were then told to settle down and try and sleep as the journey would be long, and

of course, no refreshments so the ones who had not eaten well, or taken chocolate were to be pretty hungry. The night seemed endless and sleep very difficult. After ages two of

the Glaswegians in my compartment suddenly lept to their feet pulled down the window and declared "Oh, we are in Bonny Scotland" The air is so fresh. I can tell you, they were very rudely told what to do and the window was firmly shut. and remained so until amidst "Scotch Mist" we did arrive

in Glasgow. It was still dark and we were then taken by bus to Greenock. Still could not see much except mist but we ^{boarded} boarded a ferry and were taken out to what seemed the largest ship I had ever seen. It loomed ahead and we started

to embark amidst ^{CHAIRS} chairs and waves from troops who were in the area also waiting to board. Once on the ship which was the ^{SS} Strathallen and was now a troopship, we were given a

very warm welcome, shown our cabins which were now ^{separately} ~~now~~ ^{separately} bunks, and then taken to the dining room and given

C N M T W N

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~~We were given~~ a very warm welcome, shown our cabins, which contained 4 bunks, two ^{up} and two ^{DOWN}, taken then ^{BACK} to the dining room, and offered the most wonderful breakfast of bacon e eggs and all the things we had not seen for along time. The ship by this ~~time~~ was taking on many troops, so afte^r a quick look round, tiredness overtook, and we retired to our bunks and slept. We were all allocated certain duties should we be needed and instructed in the boat drill which would take place very regularly once we sailed. On Dec 11th the mist lifted and for my first time I was able to see ~~the~~ the beauty of Scotland. Also revealed ^{WERE} many other ships of different sizes and our ship was in the centre of what was a large convoy. We passed the Isle of Arran and into the Atlantic. I began to feel a bit squeamish but tried to stay on deck which seemed a good idea. The troops who were in the bowels of the ship did not fare so well and two of us were sent down to tend them and try and help. This was ghastly as they were in hammocks and you can imagine the results. However, my term of duty came to an end eventually and I thankfully returned to a pleasanter deck. Another ~~1/2~~ 1/2 days sailing and we were in a very bad storm. There was quite a bit of structural damage to the ship and at times it felt as if it could never get on an even keel again. I was very sea sick and unable to leave my bunk, but as we know nothing lasts for ever, and with various medications I recovered. A good way of slimming! The storm raged for 5 days until we were in the Meditteranean. Great excitement as at 6am we were to go through Straits of Gibraltar. It was so dark and wet I never saw a thing, so back to bed u

until a more civilised hour.

Sunday 20 Dec Amost beautiful day. All QAs very smart in our Grey and Scarlet for a service on board. For somereason played ^{PIANO} for this..I think they must have been hard up for a pianist. A lovely service with Christmas carols, and we were so happy to have survived the awful storm. Apart from the usual boat drills which were very effeciently run and at many times during the day. most of us spent time on deck under travelling rugs reading and chatting and speculating on our destination. There was also a full moon that night and it was all very romantic for we 22-23year olds. One of the rules was that we all slept in trousers with a warm sweater at hand to pull on, with a small bag ready packed f for any emergency. At 1-30 am I was sitting in my bunk before going to sleep eating an orange, when there was a crash and the lights went out and the ship listed badly. This was closely followed by 2 more crashes which were of course torpedoes. As I have already mentioned , we were v very well informed as what to do in an emergency, so we quickly made our way to our respective boatstations. It was still ^{MOONLIGHT} and we lined up to abandon ship. Our particular ^{LIFEBOAT} seemed a long way down but most people seemed to arrive in it as far as I could judge. My turn came nearer, and the girl in front of me missed her timing and went straight down between the ship and the lifeboat. Now my turn. I think I said my prayers pretty hard and launched myself forward, and landed on the extreme edge of the lifeboat, tin hat emergency satchel. My feeling of relief was soon dispersed as a voice of authority said. "The boat is filling with water" Use y your tin hats to bale out the water. I had managed one or two hat fulls when I found myself out of the boat and in midst of people drowning and panicking including a friend from my cabin who was a very strong swimmer. AS a non swimmer I could only try to comfort her but to no avail, as she v very quickly went down. All I could do was to hang on to my life belt and try not to panic and to keep on my back if possible. I forgot to mention, once on board our respirators were replaced by life jackets which we had to carry at all times. They weretwo cushions made of kapok and fitted over ones head, and were quaranteed to keep one afloat fof 24 hours. With no help from me I suddenly found myself in a very sticky black patch of something, and the other side of the ship and some distance away from everyone. I could hear voices calling over the Tannoy System " Not to come

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hear voices calling over the Tannoy System "Not to come near me" I will come back for you. This was the two destroyers advising the lifeboats as they were dropping depth charges hoping to sink the U boats. They were the Verity and the Lightning. Eventually the moon went to bed and the night was dark and cold. I floated on my own for 4½ hours by which time as you can imagine many thoughts went through my mind.

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personnel. During the afternoon we were put into the Capt Cabin as the destroyer was now taking off troops from the Strathallen which had not sunk when first hit, but now a fire had broken out and she was beginning to go down. We found out from some of them that the other destroyer Verity had taken most of the remaining people off the Strathallen so we hoped our own people were safe. Eventually, when all

First of all, anger because I now would never know our destination, and my 5 years of very intensive training would never be of any use. Then of course there was great sadness that I would never again see any of the people I loved. This was hard to come to terms with. I had already decided that I could never be found in this vast expanse of sea, which I appeared to have all to myself. Once I was reconciled to this I was no longer afraid, only very sad that I would have no way of letting all my loved ones know that I was not afraid. It was so very peaceful. A feeling I had never before experienced and I felt perhaps I should try to take off my life belt and just go down to the depth of the sea. I was contemplating this next step, when I thought I heard something which sounded like sea gulls. A light then appeared and voices, and a dark object came nearer. I was roughly pulled into this which was of course a boat, and I was so conscious of my wet face feeling spawful that I said to this great hulk of a man, "Have you got a hanky". He peered at me and said "Good Lord" Are you a woman? I said with as much dignity as I could muster "I am a nursing sister" He crossed over and hugged me ~~ti~~ tightly wiped ^{MY FACE} and said "I thought you were a Lascar" "You are as black as the ace of Spades!" I said Where are the others? to which he replied. There's no one else around, so back we go to the ship..

On arrival at destroyer Lightening a rope ladder was dropped over and my new friend said you have to climb that. I said I can't and he said You can't stay here, I'll push and you do your best. I struggled and willing hands leant over the side and when I came within reach I was hauled aboard, The ship's doctor came, as my eyes were in a bit of a mess and gave me a large Brandy, which a couple of mins later I vomited all over the place I gather that was the purpose to get rid of all the diesel oil I had ~~to~~ swallowed when in my earlier black patch. Two sea men came and apologized for undressing me, and I was put into lovely white silk pyjamas belonging to the Capt, rolled in a blanket, and taken below where I slept until I awakened about 1pm. Lunch was offered, and a hot bath in sea water, which was sheer heaven even if the soap could not shift the oil from my hair. Seven other nursing sisters had also been picked up by the Lightning, none of whom I knew and we were all anxious to know what had happened to our hospital personnel. During the afternoon we were put into the Capt

all were safely off, she slid beneath the waves, which was a very sad sight.

By this time we were off Oran and we were to be put ashore there. It was with great sadness we said good bye to the gallant crew who had treated us so well. My oil stained clothes had been washed and I was once more clad in trousers and sweater+ greatcoat, although stained, were at least better than nothing. Oran was a lovely sight as there was no blackout and it all looked so normal. We were put aboard a lovely ship the Duchess of Richmond and there again I tried to find out about the rest of the 669 with very little success except that it was thought they had been rescued. We had a superb dinner and the band played lots of Christmassy tunes all of which I felt made us a bit homesick, but the thought of adventure ahead and a job to do quickly put this out of one's head.

There was certainly no sleep that night, as people were in and out of the cabins and everyone so relieved to be alive and safe. A Medical Officer from the other hospital on board came to say that poor old Blondie from 69 was missing, and when I said "She isn't you know I'm here" he said "Well, you are no longer a blonde". After breakfast we left the Duchess of Richmond and were instructed to gather along the Quay and try to sort ourselves out. What a relief to discover my 69 colleagues and a great hug from an Irish friend who said "I told them you would turn up. I said 'Hail Marys' all night for you. She was a very devoted Catholic". Later we discovered that we had lost in all 15 nursing sisters five of which were our own from 669. Next step the Americans took over and escorted us by local bus to the station. Here we boarded the only train which went from Oran to Tunis. We were found accommodation and two Americans came with us to Algiers. There we were handed over to ~~the~~ THE BRITISH.

Rehilitouse

This representative was a cocky little Captain who was so full of his own importance, on seeing a croup of rather un-
 unkempt ^{FEMALES} said to our Matron. You cant stay here You must go
 go back where you came from! Well I can tell you Nan, he
 really had met his mark in our Matron. She was a very for-
 midable lady from Paisley. She held the rank of Major which
 of course our little Capt did not know. So, she glowered
 at him and said in her Paisley accent. You Capt. will find
 find suitable accomodation for my Officers. They are tired
 and you will find it forth with. By this time it was getting
 late and we could almost have slept standing up. After a
 while, some were sent to an American Mess for the night.
 and the rest including ^{myself} to a magnificent white building
 in Algiers. WE were not very well received but beds were
 produced on a kind of corridor we could not undress any
 how, just needed somewhere to lie down. An Army Sergeant
 brought us some kind of stew and we slept. In the morning
 it became ^{obvious} where we were! It was a Casino cum Brothel which
 Hitler had used as a Head quarters among other things
 and that is why it was an imposing building. We were not
 allowed out, but the "Girls" at the other end of our corridor
 were most intriqued, and came along to see if they could
 help us in any way. They were so kind and brought us fruit
 and chatted away whenever they had the chance,

After 3 days an ambulance appeared and we were taken
 to a hospital on the outskirts of Algiers There were no
 patients as it was in the throes of being equiped for a
 general hospital when casualties started arriving.
 There we were kitted out in all male uniforms Khaki
 battle dress+ mens boots, the smallest of which were size 7
 I had to stop in my tracks and physically turn to get round
 at all. Fortunately I had managed to keep my shoes on in
 the sea, so I coped. After a week we assembled at the Rly
 Station (26-30) am to board the troop train to join our
 men. We then discovered we were part of the second landing
 force in North Africa After our Matron once more complained
 that in no way would her ["]Gals ["]travel with French Troops
 and Arabs with no escort French Officials and British ^{O.K/E} came
 along and a first class ~~was produced and~~

