Clinical and Other Notes

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REFERENCES.

"NOW—WHEN I WAS THERE..."

by

Major HARRY POZNER, M.C.,
Royal Army Medical Corps.

Every single characteristic of Johnny H. was a substantial peg on which to hang a legend. His shambling bulk, his imperturbable amiability, his unerring appraisal of a situation, even his nickname—"The Little Flower"—were sufficient to make him prominent in an embattled Arakan. When the Colonel told the story of Johnny's reluctant grapple with the Charpoy Cobra we laughed immoderately. Knowing the protagonists it was easy to see that the really humorous aspects of that passionate dilemma could never adequately be translated into speech. One anecdote flowed casually into another, and laughter being very near the surface, we tumbled over each other to tell of the exploits, either shared or hearsay, of that brave and beloved fool.

That is all of us except two, who being very young and new to the Service sat and looked at us with a compound regard of polite interest, disciplined resignation and youthful impatience. It was the identical look with which we had listened during our own apprenticeships to the interminable, deathless sagas of the Hills and the Plains.

It is never a pleasant nor flattering realization to metamorphose suddenly from being bored to being the bore. The perception of that look and all its implications rang down irrevocably the curtain on a colourful decade. During the last eight years the minutes have ticked relentlessly on, and although one has no regrets for the hair greying at the temples or a more than incipient double chin, we mourn the passing of moments and men who are already part of a rapidly fading yesterday. Of course, in the Mess, we were talking about the war, this last war, the war that is now the historical pabulum of to-day and
Most of us have no particular affinities for the occasionally necessary crudities of mutual destruction, but for all of us this thing had happened, had bitten a large slice out of our carefully organized lives, kneaded it and remoulded it with a diversity of outlandish ingredients, and had replaced it as an irritant foreign body in our intellectual and emotional make-ups. One day, time and the Army List being kind, when we have become reasonably senior "Old Men," saluted respectfully in public and dissected irreverently in private, the first Global War will have become merely a matter of maps, prickling with arrows of varying breadths, a collection of multicoloured isotypes, and the discarded plaything of a statistician. The pundits will talk gravely of economic causation, retrograde nationalism, the power politics of the atom and, with the sublime presumption of all pedagogues, professing omniscience, will know just a little more than nothing of the reality of a war.

Posterity always tends to look back on a victorious campaign as if it were the façade of a fine mansion set in a wooded park. It sees only the clean spacious outlines, the harmonious integration of wood and stone, the appropriateness of triumphal arches. It ignores the earthy intrigues in the mistress's boudoir, the petty larcenies of the butler's pantry and the multifold activities in the kitchen garden. We, who have lived through an epoch, however small and individually unimportant the parts we played, were still elements, of the living matrix of history. As such we have contributed something to the future, whose historians can only guess at what we know.

It will never appear in textbooks that a German Army H.Q. was destroyed because a bomber-pilot had bungled a date with a W.A.A.F., that a critical campaign was in jeopardy because one general didn't like another's accent, and that the mainspring of victory was the patent trinity of a cigar, an obsession and a beret. Will the next generation ever know that success was not a decisive, clear-cut mathematical positive but only myriads of small, blurred negatives which unrelated but superimposed gave somehow miraculously the same unequivocal result? All the millions of little personal histories will be forgotten, and that is why, before the outlines of memory become distorted, I want to recall and savour again a few of the incidents which make it possible to fix in my mind an appreciable portion of a lifetime.

The first vivid memory in my scrapbook dates back to Dunkirk. On 3 Corps beach I felt miserably and deservedly sick. That was mainly because whilst passing through Poperinge the medical orderly and I had made a gluttonous meal of Mars bars and champagne, which we had smugly rescued from a bomb-damaged and desolate N.A.F.I. He, swathed in a white blanket, and I, huddled in an anti-gas cape, squatted in the middle of our battalion's survivors and waited exhausted but unable to sleep for the first light and the possibility of rescue. When there were no boats we shaved and argued the whys and wherefores of that precipitate retreat to the coast. Then at last under a grey sky a fantastic flotilla of salvation nosed its way into the shore. We tried to be calm and remember our responsibilities, but uppermost was always the thought that only a few yards away over the shingle and the sand and the debris-littered narrows of oily water was the last chance for freedom—
a gate which an unlucky moment's delay might close for ever. We were patient because we had to be, and eventually as Dunkirk burnt and the smoke spiralled into the air behind us, we scuttled over the wreck of the Mole, snatched tins of condensed milk from a dump, and hurled ourselves on the deck of the destroyer "Vimy." Bending down to pick up a tin of cigarettes, my orderly had his legs shot away from under him, and yelling and cursing with pain and excitement he was dragged unceremoniously on board as the "Vimy" began to zigzag away to the open Channel to evade the double assault from the coast and the air. Back on shore a very gallant naval officer continued to cycle, as he had done all day, calmly and unhurriedly along the quay on his evacuation duties. Meanwhile Oerlikons, Brens, A-A guns and rifles combined in unholy disharmony, and we, not knowing our destinations and not caring, lay propped up on the decks, sipped mugs of steaming cocoa and smiled fatuously up at the lowering clouds and sideways at each other.

The next few months were vague. They seemed to be made up of night exercises, regimental dances and the Band playing tattoo in the market square. But then came a Saturday night in September, 1940. We were all at a road-house on the Leeds-Selby road celebrating Quebec Day, a traditional battle-honour of the regiment, and it seemed queer even then that one had to switch wars in order to provide an excuse for entertainment. The first sign that it was not to be an ordinary evening was when it was noticed that at one moment all our R.A.F. guests were there, and the next they were not. Before this had time to sink in the Adjutant appeared from the telephone booth and told us individually to report back to Battalion H.Q. To all my inquiries I received a single muttered word "Cromwell" from a pallid and harassed I.O. who left me as ignorant as before. The C.O. knew as little as anybody, but he assured us with statesmanlike confidence and sang-froid that the situation was at once grave and urgent. We were given two hours in which to discard everything but essentials, and the battalion was instructed to form up in line of battle along the main road facing south. The men were all billeted out, and it was impossible to keep a manoeuvre of this nature entirely secret. At two in the morning that quiet little Yorkshire town suddenly became alive with activity. Carriiijers spluttered into noisy life and cluttered round the Abbey, and men doubled over the cobbled street. Windows were flung open and there were a hundred tearful, tender and tremulous farewells. Naturally, the rumour had gained credence that the enemy had secured a foothold on the coast. Since we could neither refute nor confirm this we packed with a sense of finality and mixed exuberance. Emergency rations and grenades were issued and the general purposes ambulance, a laundry van impressed for war service and freshly camouflaged, was stripped for action. I soon discovered, however, that the stretcher-bearers, loath to leave their band instruments behind, had loaded them on the truck in the firm belief that they would be invaluable to morale in repelling the invader. Wondering and expectant, we waited on the road till dawn. Shortly afterwards came the orders to stand down till further notice, and after some days of fruitless speculation "The Night of the Long Knives" passed into obscurity as a minor regimental mystery.
A year later I was attached to a General Hospital as part of a convoy in the South Atlantic, two days off the Cape. On a cool blustery afternoon two ships at opposite ends of the convoy were crippled and destroyed by the agency of either mines or torpedoes. As a result the “Capetown Castle” on which we were fortunate enough to be travelling was ordered to proceed alone at full speed to Durban. In that gay and delightful city, recovering from the successive onslaughts of the Anzacs and the veterans of Madagascar, we heard all that popular rumour had emphatically stated had happened. That we had been lost at sea was inevitable, but there appeared to be some truth in the idea that all our carefully and laboriously acquired hospital equipment had gone down with the ill-fated freighter. That fact may have accounted for the later dispersion and harrying of our medical personnel over the length and breadth of India. But for the moment Durban claimed us, and claimed us for ever with a hundred exquisite memories. A certain very bright dawn we walked back to our quarters in the Royal Durban Golf Club from an all-night party which the gregarious Durbanites had seen fit to give us. Tired and contented we might have ambled drowsily across the racecourse track without comment but for the sight of “Tash.” He was a subaltern in a Light Infantry regiment and with the determined aggressiveness of a certain type of small man he was always unpleasantly obvious. At that particular moment he lay curled up sleeping between the rails, a double Sam Browne carefully adjusted over a nude and hirsute torso, clutching in one hand a lady’s short fur cape and in the other an empty, unlabelled bottle. We often attempted to find out why. No matter where you started, with the cape, the bottle or the bizarre deshabille; you were faced with an infinite choice of permutations. He could give no help, first, because he was apparently afflicted with a complete retrograde amnesia, and secondly, because he was doing penance in isolation for the rest of the voyage. Later on I met him when he was Assistant Beachmaster in the Arakan landings, and having extracted the story agreed that it had matured with keeping and deserved a much larger and appreciative audience.

Glancing over the hastily scribbled and fragmentary diaries of India, Burma and Assam, one is overwhelmed by the abundance of incident. There always seemed to be something happening that was new, and even if at times wretchedness and discomfort were unavoidable bedfellows, we were at least adding to a respectfully increasing store of experience.

With a feeling of embarrassment I recalled the episode in a Dakota over Allahabad. At that time we were flying with a precious cargo of irascible V.I.P.s to a top-security demonstration of air-ground co-operation in Southern Bengal. Having some ready-packed personnel parachutes aboard we were asked to demonstrate parachute procedure in order to titillate the Delhi-jaded appetites of the completely uninterested passengers. The airfield at Allahabad was nominated as the D.Z., and we having donned our chutes the pilot steered in for the dropping run. I was “No. 1.” We went through all the realistic routine preliminaries. When the green lights went on and the jumpmaster said “Go,” I went. Having been trained for months never to hesitate at a jumping order, the action was purely automatic. It was only when the canopy bellied open
and I was drifting down safely that I awoke to the dangerous possibilities of
the situation with a shocked and horrified surprise. However, I landed without
any complications in a field behind the hangars, and after waving to a white
smear of faces that crowded the jumping door of an agitatedly circling aero-
plane, prepared for the prospect of reprimand and the barrage of irony, which
in fact exceeded anything in my gloomy expectations.

In Calcutta in 1942 there were sporadic outbursts of rioting. During one of
these episodes a Czech medical officer and I were trapped in a taxi in a narrow
street off Chowringhee and surrounded by a solid press of hysterical and brick-
bat-heaving adolescents. We had no great inclination to draw our revolvers,
but it seemed that something drastic would have to be done to relieve a situation
which was rapidly deteriorating. The Czech solved the problem. He stood up
in the open car and began to harangue the crowd in a hotchpotch of English,
Czech, German, Russian and Urdu. What he said was unintelligible, but it
was impassioned and so very obviously sincere. At intervals throughout this
linguistic tour de force was heard the international clarion call “Liberty,
Equality and Fraternity.” Ranting and declaiming to such effect he hushed
the jeers, which changed to silent approval and eventually to a tumultuous roar of
cheering. The revolution had found an unexpected champion. Some hastily
discovered garlands were thrown round his neck, his admirers attached them-
selves to the running board, and we were escorted in triumph to the gates of
the Military Hospital. As I passed through, relieved and perspiring, in the
shadow of a great man, he smiled impishly and admitted that he had been
reciting with histrionic trimmings the multiplication tables of his multilingual
childhood.

Early in 1944 the Japanese 18th Army made a swift, determined and almost
decisive thrust across the Chindwin to Manipur. Amongst the formations
which were caught up in the succeeding maelstrom of events was our independ-
ent composite brigade. After a self-crippling defensive action which held
up the enemy for a few precious days, the brigade was instructed to extricate
itself as best it could from an untenable and profitless situation. So it came
about that some days after a night withdrawal from the original position a
small party of us, the survivors of a widely scattered unit, staggered in the
twilight from the sheltering jungle-scrub into the irregular compound of a Naga
village. Hunger and thirst had become torturing realities. After almost a
week of constant ambush and evasion we were only kept going by the desperate
urgency to remain uncaptured and to make the rendezvous at Imphal. In the
process we had suffered. We had not scrupled to chew the tasteless, charred
remnants of biscuits that we had found on the scorched bodies of our soldiers
trapped and burnt by the enemy, nor had we worried overmuch about hygiene
when we had crawled on hands and knees to lick up the fetid water which had
collected in the deep imprints of animals’ hooves at mudholes. We may have
only been minutes ahead of Jap patrols when we reached the village, but that
consideration was ignored in the mind-consuming thought that here at last was
water, food and a little rest. The Nagas were unbelievably generous. In a little
while they had prepared curried wild sucking pig, sweet potatoes flavoured with
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rock salt, which they could ill-afford, and bamboo gourds of that potent distilled rice beer, zu. The first mouthful of meat was indescribably delicious, but it was so highly spiced that we had to swallow large quantities of the milky zu to quench the inferno in our mouths and stomachs. And so it went, alternate handfuls of pork and long heady draughts of zu. Finally we stretched out replete, bemused and entirely oblivious of the jungle war. We might have stayed there dozing indefinitely in the gathering darkness, if suddenly a little Naga boy had not burst into the clearing and told the elders amid much consternation that a Japanese party in what was presumably platoon strength had been reported in a near-by village down the track. We looked at each other unconcernedly. A paratroop major limbered to his feet and said conversationally, “I’ve been pushed around enough by these little b——s. What say we go back and fix ‘em—we could take them on all right.” In our state of self-satisfied stupefaction it seemed just the right idea. We scrambled unsteadily to our feet, collected an assortment of guns, kukris, spears and hand-grenades, and prepared with a great deal of inconsequential chatter and hilarity to do battle. Fortunately the Nagas were more sensible than we were. Fearful for the treatment they might receive on our account when the Japs took over, they provided us with a guide and set us off on a little-known track that led to the outskirts of Imphal. Arms round each other’s shoulders, happy and exquisitely drunk, we stumbled off in the moonlight into the dark and welcoming forest shadows. I think we hummed monotonously “Lily Marlene” until by silent tacit consent we all lay down by the track and immediately fell fast asleep completely regardless of danger. And that is how we were found the next morning by an advanced patrol of the Dogras, who escorted us, hangovers and all, to the sanctuary of “Catfish”’ Box. We chain-smoked cigarettes, read mail, shaved off with a certain regret those magnificent black beards, and squatted on the ground in the evening at an open-air performance of Greer Garson in “Random Harvest.”

The official end of the war did not see the end of my own bizarre experiences. Only a short time ago I was stationed in Paris. I was alone in the office, and owing to one of the inexplicable eccentricities of French municipal government the electric light had been cut off. It was an autumn evening, and on opening the window it was possible to see a panorama of the Paris skyline in a symphony of blue and grey. There was about it an irresistible fascination, the nostalgic shades of Verlaine, Whitster and Chopin. A timid knock came on the door, and in stepped hesitantly Mlle Aurore. She was vague and colourless, with an age anywhere in the dreary, spinsterish wastelands of 30 to 50. As an irritatingly conscientious stenographer she had survived the inundations of three occupations, German, American and British, and was now engaged at some fantastic salary typing all day, for no obvious reason, copies of routine orders. She stared at me intently with myopic eyes as I stood behind the desk pinning together some reports and said, “Mon commandant, excuse me, but I have been hearing voices up here in my head all day. First they told me to put all the teacups in the toilet, if you will pardon the expression. Now they tell me to jump out of the window. I don’t want to—but I must.”
She whimpered a little, placed a chair carefully near the window and clambered up on to the broad sill. I stared at her open-mouthed, and then realizing that this was exactly the sort of situation which, by virtue of my professed leanings, I should be expected to handle, I walked warily over to her, persuaded her to step down and guided her to an armchair. She gently took my hand away from her shoulder and said sweetly and very simply, "Ah, you must not be tempted by these sudden lusts. You know, of course, that the General is the father of my poor unmarried sister's child. You all are." She began to improvise on this unhappy inspiration, and sketched an intriguing new portrait of the sex lives of all the most senior officers in the H.Q. After some minutes we all agreed, Aurore, the voices and I, that perhaps it would be better if she saw her doctor and rested at home until she felt fully fit to return to work. She sobbed bitterly at the sudden thought that she would miss her daily tea and cakes, but brightened up considerably when after cocking her head sideways and listening intently she told me with dignity that I had no right to detain her in that ungentlemanly manner, as King George, who had been waiting all day to see her home, was becoming impatient. As soon as she had closed the door with an intimate little smile, I called up the O.C. Civilian Labour Unit to discover the subsequent procedure. The following conversation went something like this:

O.C. P.C.L.U.—"You say she threatened to throw herself out of the window?"
H.P.—"Correct."
O.C. P.C.L.U.—"What floor are you on?"
H.P.—"The Fifth."
O.C. P.C.L.U.—"Well it's frightfully simple, old boy. All you do is to take Mata Hari down to the ground floor and then give her notice."

A short time afterwards poor, addled Aurore was returned intact to the genteel and discreet nursing home from which the collapse of France and the onrush of the Panzer-Wehr had unexpectedly liberated her.

I imagine there is material enough in any of our war experiences to provide unique and fascinating autobiographies. And yet occasionally one hears voices, real voices, which say "Why don't you grow up? You are living in the past, playing at toy soldiers in fancy dress. That is finished. This is the real life." When I look critically at the post-war world, I tend to cling more tenaciously to my memories, because in those momentous days the issues were clear-cut, the goal straight ahead, the virtues fundamental and simple, and there was no time for little minds. Now we are confronted with a situation where our weary some old acquaintances, the regimental psychopaths, have blossomed into spivs, monied, over-elegant and publicized, where pimps and trulls with all the temporary trappings of authority strut across the international stage, and where national and racial paranoia is shattering the promise of the future. The day after to-morrow the medals will be tarnished and the battles forgotten, but for those of us who were there, we shall remember the men of yesterday, the vanished moments of high endeavour, and the basic truths which never die.