Reading for Pleasure

Arbitrament of swords

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It may seem that reading about the bloody business of war is not a matter for pleasure, but it is certainly an interesting one—did not H G Wells say, “Man still finds his most fascinating game in war”? And as doctors should we not remember the words of Hippocrates, “War is the only school for the surgeon”?

“Very secret, Sir”

Recent releases of documents have thrown much light on war-time events. There was so much at the time that we never knew. Although I worked for four years as a surgeon in the RAF, I sometimes think that I never knew a secret that might have been of use to the enemy. At one station airmen would sometimes give their unit as “Starfish,” and when I asked the NCO what this was, he would say, “Very secret, Sir, *very* secret, *VERY* secret” so that I was afraid to ask further, and it was not until 30 years later that I learnt that Starfish was the code name of the unit that constructed decoy sites which very successfully attracted bombs away from built-up areas. It was well known, of course, that there were arrangements for getting home airmen from Western Europe, and sometimes one would hear them just saying that they had had rather a long walk, but nothing more. Security was certainly good in the RAF. A colleague who had been stationed at Gibraltar told me that when the escapees arrived, there was almost a free fight between the intelligence and medical officers about whose duty it was to see them first.

There is still much we may never know. Some documents were destroyed, or perhaps nothing was written, or those taking part have died. How, for instance, did the RAF regularly know the German recognition signals, and why was Leslie Howard’s plane shot down?

Where I live there are many retired ex-Service people who also like to read war histories, and sometimes they are addicted to correcting library books with marginal comments in pencil such as “Nonsense,” “Not so, I was there.”

Churchill’s *Second World War* must still remain the most comprehensive story from our point of view. It was, however, written rather soon after the war and from the heights, or depths, of Whitehall. At one time there was a small trickle, which has now dried up, of books from high-ups, describing how they tried hard to prevent Churchill losing the war. Others with the great advantages of hindsight have told how the war might have been fought differently—what fun rewriting history, either factual or fictional, must be! Jon Kimche in *The Unfought Battle* thinks it might have been won in 1939, and John Grigg in *The Victory that Never Was* in 1943.

Personal histories

It is, however, personal histories that are most enjoyable. Attitudes to some of the great figures—Churchill, Montgomery, and others—cover a wide range of likes and dislikes, but sometimes a more U-shaped distribution of either great affection or great abuse.

Wingate, of Chindit fame, whom Dr Weizmann once called “my favourite madman,” is one such. Tullouch, who served under him, in *Wingate as Military Commander* is one of those full of admiration. There can be no doubt of his influence at a bad time of the war in raising morale, which Napoleon said is “to the material as three to one,” although I would rate it much higher. In backing him Churchill showed his usual inclination to support the young man who wanted to get on with the war, regardless of tradition or higher authorities.

Macrae’s *Winston Churchill’s Toyshop* tells a fascinating story of how a small unit under Churchill’s immediate direction was able to create special weapons speedily without the hampering of red tape or the “chortling” of bureaucrats.

With the passing of the years, and the fading of memories, it might well be that we are at or past the peak of the flow of eye-witness accounts, so that the opportunities to us of indulging in armchair Walter Mitty syndromes of being war heroes are getting fewer.

Eye-witness accounts

Of the many escape stories, Airey Neave’s *They Have Their Exits* is still perhaps the best. This great man, whose untimely death deprived us of someone who might have done much to solve the Northern Ireland problem, after his escape from Colditz helped to organise the escape routes described in his other war histories, such as *Saturday at M19*, and finally, just before his death, *Nuremberg*.

George Millar, who seems to have been one of the few Englishmen de Gaulle respected, in his *Road to Resistance* described his long escape from Italy, which was so remarkable that his debriefing had to be very stringent to make sure that he had not been “turned” by the enemy.

General Sir John Hackett described his return home after being wounded at Arnhem in *I Was a Stranger*, with due praise for the courage and ingenuity of Dutch civilians. His injuries included multiple wounds of the intestine, and when we see him on television over 30 years later in full vigour we can realise what magnificent surgery the parachute surgeons must have performed in appalling conditions. What a contrast to the German surgeons of the time, who offered only morphia for head and abdominal injuries, and with it inadequate resuscitation, treatment of shock with adrenaline and lobeline, and dismissal of penicillin as just “mouldy cheese.”

In prisoner-of-war camps in the West medical officers seem to have been able to ply their trade with some help from the Germans, and Borrie gives a good account of his experiences after capture in Greece in *Despite Captivity: A Doctor’s Life as a*

Prisoner of War. Other facilities, especially with the services of the Red Cross, may even have made things appear almost luxurious to those such as naval officers brought up at Dartmouth. Gramophone records of the great German composers were made available until at the request for something by Mendelssohn an iron curtain descended on any arrangement. I once met in Russia a Russian who had survived imprisonment by the Germans, and also escaped liquidation by his countrymen on his return, who told me that his main memories were of great hunger, and of his great gratitude to fellow British and American prisoners who shared their Red Cross food parcels with him.

I have not so far found an adequate account of medical work in prisoner-of-war camps in the Far East, though I have heard accounts from both medical and lay sources of the good work done under great difficulties—of transfusions successfully done without citrate or cross-matching serum, of major surgery, including fascial suturing done without gloves or antiseptics, and of chloroform being found to be the most suitable anaesthetic—as it was in parachute surgery. I am sure that some detailed account of this would be of great value to medical teaching and practice in these super-sophisticated and “throw away” times.

New light on the code-cracking business was first thrown by Winterbotham's *The Ultra Secret*, and there have been many books about it since, but the use of specialised machines was only part of the story. Bletchley collected a vast conglomeration of brains of all types. I liked the story of one of the great specialists there who at a depressing time of the war buried his valuables in a wood, but unfortunately at the end of the war he could not remember where the spot was, being presumably so security conscious that he had committed nothing to paper.

One of the most interesting stories of the war is that of Spencer Chapman who fought a one-man war against the Japanese, as described in his *Only the Jungle is Neutral*. If there had been more like him in Malaya before the Japanese attacked how different things might have been. His difficulties in civilian life, his residual physical troubles, and his sad end, as told in Barker's *One Man's Jungle*, tell of the price paid for “our today.” It is nice to record that his widow's treatment by both the pension and Treasury authorities shows that even British bureaucracy can sometimes give adequate recognition to the services of a war hero.

An outstanding British historian is David Irving. As a young man after the war he went to Germany as a steel worker. Mastering German, he started to write a series of war histories which have established his reputation, even if he has had much criticism and worse. His *Destruction of Dresden* describes how a modern war machine, fighting unnecessary battles, is difficult to stop in its tracks, in this case resulting in a casualty list probably greater than that of either Hiroshima or Nagasaki. His *Virus House* has nothing to do with microbiology—this was the name of the building where a team of German scientists,

weakened by racial persecution, strove to make an atom bomb. When they did hear of the dropping of the first atom bomb, they could not believe that it was not just a propaganda story. One of the more courageous German scientists, who told Hitler that the expulsion of Jewish scientists was harming German science, received the reply that if necessary Germany would do without chemistry and physics for a hundred years. The American intolerance of the McCarthy era never quite reached such depths, though Stern's *The Oppenheimer Case, Security on Trial* tells how free scientific thought and independence of conscience may have to face poisonous political extremism.

“All war is an atrocity”

Accounts of atrocities and escapes from atrocities are only too plentiful, and we can say with Macbeth that we “have supp'd full with horrors.” Perhaps we should remember Lord Kitchener's comment in the first war when told of alleged German atrocities “All war is an atrocity.” I believe that there is only one thing worse than committing atrocities, and that is to keep atrocities alive. Are not the finest words in the English language those, in the best version, “Father forgive them for they know not what they do”?

Finally, can we find absorption in any one of the vast mass of war books available? I believe we can in Hugh Thomas's *The Murder of Rudolph Hess*. When the author was serving in the RAMC he had occasion to examine Hess, and, failing to find the scars of the wounds which Hess is known to have suffered in the first world war, he went exhaustively into all the available medical and other evidence and concluded that the man known to all the world for 40 years as Hess, and now the sad aging prisoner of Spandau, is not the real Hess. If this is correct it would explain much—his apparent madness, his amnesia, and his statement at Nuremberg, “There is no such person as Rudolph Hess here, but if it's convict — you want, then I'm your man.” It raises serious medical questions—the importance of the rule, “Always identify your patient,” and it makes one wonder how many of the innumerable psychiatrists who saw him ever carried out a physical examination. At the time he arrived here, 41 years ago, the Duke of Hamilton, then serving in the RAF and later killed in the war, whom Hess had come to see, said the whole affair seemed like something “out of a Phillips Oppenheim novel,” and Churchill said, “Well, Hess or no Hess, I am going to see the Marx Brothers.” Do you think this theory put forward in yet one more book about the Hess affair too fantastic? Well, read on for yourself. Whatever it is, it is certainly good postgraduate education.

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Is there any evidence that onions and vinegar improve peripheral vascular disease? A 65-year-old man with a seven-year history of severe intermittent claudication, which limited his walking to only 18 m, claims that after three months of heavy consumption of vinegar, pickled onions, herrings, and cucumber, his pain has gone.

What an intriguing question. The symptoms of obliterative arterial disease are subject to spontaneous remission that may be enhanced by reducing weight, stopping smoking, a programme of exercise, and the correction of associated diseases. The eccentric nature of the diet described does raise the question as to what other features of the patient's life style may have been altered at the same time. Nevertheless, this remission sounds exceptional. Such a remission would be assumed to be due to improvement in collateral circulation, since regression of atheroma or recanalisation of occluded arteries has not been shown in man. Onions (and garlic) have properties that could protect against atheroma or its complications. These include an enhancement of blood fibrinolytic activity¹ and inhibition of platelet aggregation through inhibition of the cyclo-oxygenase component of

the prostaglandin and thromboxane synthetases.² While I have been unable to find any information specific to herrings, there is evidence that when fish is a major component of the diet, beneficial changes in the composition of platelet membrane lipids and hence platelet behaviour may be expected, and that the associated shift in lipoprotein profile in favour of high density lipoproteins has a protective effect against vascular disease.³ No specific evidence is forthcoming on vinegar. Pickling would not be expected to affect the anti-aggregatory properties of foodstuffs, but oxidation during storage or cooling promotes the formation of pro-aggregatory peroxides. The frying or boiling of onions does not alter their fibrinolytic effect. Cucumber probably has no specific effects, but vegetables in general contain useful unsaturated fatty acids such as linoleic and linolenic. Your patient may have made a serendipitous choice.—C V RUCKLEY, consultant surgeon, Edinburgh.

¹ Menon IS, Kendal RY, Dewar HA, Newall DJ. Effect of onions on fibrinolytic activity. *Br Med J* 1968;iii:351-2.

² Vandenhoek JY, Makheja AN, Bailey JM. Inhibition of fatty acid oxygenases by onion and garlic oils. *Biochem Pharmacol* 1980;29:3169-73.

³ Vane JR. Fats and atheroma: an inquest. *Br Med J* 1979;ii:484-5.