

LETTERS TO THE MATRON-IN-CHIEF Q.A.I.M.N.S. FROM MEMBERS ON ACTIVE SERVICE—No. 3.

FROM MISS F. M. SMITH, MATRON,
NO. 51, GENERAL HOSPITAL.

EVACUATION FROM FRANCE—JUNE, 1940.

It was while I was at home for my second leave period from France that news was broadcast on the radio that Germany had invaded Belgium and Holland. All leave was immediately stopped, but those who had already arrived in Britain were allowed to stay.

There were ten of us from the hospitals near Dieppe in the "leave ship"—six from No. 3 General Hospital at Offranville, two from No. 5 General Hospital, and two from No. 6 General Hospital at Le Treport. We were all told to report to the R.T.O., Victoria Station, on May 18th, when we would be due to return to our Units in France.

On duly reporting we were told that we should have to spend another night in London, and so entrained at 08.30 hours on the 19th, eventually finding ourselves at Southampton instead of Newhaven. We casually wondered why, but I don't think it dawned on any of us how serious the position was in the North of France.

We arrived in Cherbourg early on Monday, May 20th, and found a great deal of activity in the docks, and there appeared to be a great many officers and men of the Air Force coming in cars and lorries, who looked as though they had been through rather a strenuous time. Some of them were short of part of their uniform and equipment, and all looked very tired and dirty, but not one of them seemed to be depressed.

We filled in the day; did a little shopping in the town, had a good meal and provided ourselves with fruit, rolls and coffee for the train journey.

Our train left Cherbourg at 21.00 hours, and we were informed by the R.T.O. that we should probably arrive in Dieppe some time during the afternoon of May 21st.

Glad to get away and looking forward to rejoining our own Units, which we had decided must be doing a great deal of work, we settled down for the night.

To our amazement, the first big station we stopped at early next morning was Le Mans, and from thence our train headed East to Rennes. Here we were told the journey's end had been reached, and the ten of us were to be attached to No. 8 General Hospital temporarily. None knew why we had come to Rennes instead of Dieppe; at least, if they did, they would not tell.

We had our meals in the Sisters' Mess, but slept in a dormitory which had been prepared for A.T.S. who were coming out later. This billet had baths with automatic hot-water geysers, and needless to say we took every advantage of them. We all got to bed fairly early, as I think most of us were tired. About midnight we were awakened by the arrival of three sisters from an ambulance train which had been bombed and machine-gunned as they were about to transfer patients into the Hospital Ship *City of Paris*. The coach which the M.O.'s and sisters used was set on fire, but it was uncoupled and the remainder of the train pushed into safety.

The *City of Paris* was sunk; luckily the patients were not yet aboard, but some of the crew were machine-gunned as they tried to swim to safety in the harbour.

These sisters were able to tell us that the hospitals from the Dieppe area had been evacuated, and that those patients who could be moved had been sent home. A few M.O.'s and R.A.M.C. personnel were still in some of the hospitals

doing what they could before moving the casualties on. All the sisters had left, having had about two hours' notice, and were obliged to leave their kit behind except what they could carry themselves in small suitcases. Some of them had gone home, but quite a few had arrived at La Baule.

A few days later we were joined by 30 sisters from No. 10 General Hospital who had been attached to No. 9 General Hospital after leaving the North. They slept on the top floor of our billet and drew rations and had their meals here, too. By this time a couple of A.T.S. had also arrived having been evacuated from Rouen, and were occupying the ground floor. They very kindly did the cooking for the sisters.

The ten of us continued to go to No. 8 General Hospital's Sisters' Mess for meals. I used to accompany the home sister to market every morning, and help her in every way possible. I found the French people at the Market stalls most friendly, and we quite frequently had a bunch of flowers or some fruit given to us.

I thought Rennes a very fine town, and the surrounding country beautiful. It was sad to hear that it had suffered so heavily from bombing attacks after we had left, and that there had been so many casualties.

The three sisters from the ambulance train left us after refitting themselves to the best of their abilities. The train had been hastily repaired and set off again to collect casualties.

All the evacuee sisters, except the two of us from No. 6 General Hospital, left for home on June 10th, and as there were only two of us, the Matron of No. 8 General Hospital very kindly made room for us in the Mess.

The Principal Matron, Miss K. H. Jones, had also arrived in Rennes by this time. She told me that about 60 of the sisters from No. 6 General Hospital were at La Baule with our officers and men, and that a good deal of our hospital equipment had been salvaged from Le Treport, tents had been re-erected and about 400 beds equipped ready to receive patients. Furthermore, as our Matron had got separated, and was at home, I was to go as soon as possible, and commence organising the hospital.

The other sister, who was the Theatre Sister, and I motored to La Baule with the Principal Matron on June 13th. We were delighted to get back with our own Unit, and the thought of work after our enforced holiday in Rennes was like a tonic.

Most of the sisters from No. 1 General Hospital, and about 12 from No. 2 General Hospital, were all living in hotels on the road facing the sea, and were very cramped for space. I don't think there was a single empty room in the whole of La Baule, and refugees from the North continued to flow into the town.

The sisters from No. 6 General Hospital being without their Matron or Assistant Matron had elected Sister Miss M. Fullerton, Q.A.I.M.N.S.R., to be responsible for them temporarily. The cooking was done by R.A.M.C. cooks, but the sisters did everything else themselves, and the work was apportioned out. Miss Fullerton, in spite of many difficulties, managed to keep her staff happy and contented. She detailed certain sisters each day to do the washing-up, laying the table, etc.

On June 15th, just as I was trying to contact our O.C., word was passed round that we should probably all be leaving for the U.K. the following day. We had not heard any wireless news, and were thus at a loss as to knowing what was happening.

We were ready by mid-day, but did not actually leave until 19.00 hours, when a convoy of lorries and ambulances arrived to take us to St. Nazaire. German bombers had been over seven times during the day, but at last all seemed peaceful. We had a most triumphant drive along the country roads, all the French cottagers waving and smilingly

[previous page](#)

[next page](#)