

## BROADCAST TALK BY DAME KATHARINE JONES, D.B.E., R.R.C.,

MATRON-IN-CHIEF, Q.A.I.M.N.S.

Saturday, September 11th, 1943.

On August 1st, I left England by air to make a tour of inspection in North Africa. I was going to see the nursing profession on active service with the Army. You have heard how Harley Street surgeons are operating in the front line, and now I want to tell you, at first hand, of the work of these doctors' trained nurses—many of them sisters from the large civilian hospitals—district nurses, industrial nurses, Queen's nurses and private nurses, who, in peace time, look after the health of the British people at home, but who, in war time, have offered their services to the Army overseas—over all the *seven seas*—for they are with the Army in all the war areas, and in many isolated parts of the world.

I flew out, and in 21 hours found myself in Algiers. I stayed for 15 days. I travelled hundreds of miles and visited 14 large hospitals. By large, I mean from 600 to 2,000 beds—they were all located far from towns—in *nothing!* Hospitals in Nissen huts and tents, and I saw for myself Q.A.s (our short nickname) living and working under conditions of total warfare.

It is grim. But they are busy and nothing matters when they have their nursing work to do. They have plenty of that—sick and wounded—friend and foe—and friend includes ally. What do they do? Well, they administer and keep discipline in the wards, nurse all the worst cases themselves, and supervise the nursing work of the R.A.M.C. orderlies, who are helping them splendidly. Those are their duties—doing their own professional work, doing administration and *training* the R.A.M.C. orderlies, who are really male probationers. That is exactly the same work as any Army officer does in a non-combatant unit—so now all the Q.A.s are commissioned officers in the Women's Forces. As they are professionally trained before commissioning, they enter as Sisters with the relative rank of lieutenant.

Shall I try to describe a typical hospital out there as I saw it?

After a long drive through vineyards and fig-groves and olive trees, we arrived at a railway crossing and saw beyond it rows and rows of tents and a few Nissen huts. The Nissen huts housed the cookhouse, the offices, the operating theatres, and X-ray room (all wonderfully equipped), and the acute medical and surgical wards. After I had seen these, I saw the tents. In the tents there were literally hundreds of beds, many of them occupied by patients suffering from malaria—often up-patients, but kept in hospital to get the modern treatment for this disease, which has been so successful that most of the men are able to leave hospital after 15 days.

The field hospital equipment is very good now; but I wish we had high beds, to save the Sisters' backs, though the beds we have are just as comfortable for the patients. We get the most welcome gifts of hospital comforts from the Red Cross—all sorts of little extras, extra pillows, bed-rests and pyjamas, and so on—and so the Sisters can make the patients really comfortable.

I saw sick Sisters themselves being nursed in tents—fortunately all with minor illnesses. I saw infectious cases—16 German prisoners with diphtheria and even two of our own men suffering from smallpox—which is very rare. They were in small tents and nursed by volunteers, a young Sister (a general and fever-trained nurse) and nursing orderlies. I spoke to these patients, they said they felt better and were comfortable, though perhaps you couldn't have believed that if you'd seen them—the rash looked so terrible—but at least I knew that they were getting the

most expert medical and nursing care possible. And they were recovering, they had both got over the worst.

Then I was taken to the Sisters' quarters, a collection of lean-to tents, with two Sisters sleeping in each tent, and the whole surrounded by barbed wire to keep out any light-fingered local visitors. I slept in one of those tents—slept like a top in the warm fresh air.

In these Sisters' quarters, which are just like all the others out there, sanitation is primitive, water is very scarce. Laundry is impossible—it really is—and necessities are hard to get—all the stockings get lost en route. One American chief nurse I met was wearing a pair of man's shoes. The town is miles away and nothing can be bought in local shops anyway, because all clothing is couponed. But who cares? Not the Q.A.s, nor the American or Canadian nurses. They're busy nursing all the hundreds of patients lying in the tents and huts just across the path.

Amongst the individual Q.A.s who asked to see me all but one wanted to serve on a hospital ship, or in a casualty clearing station or a forward hospital, or even to volunteer as parachutists! I've got several names of Sisters who want to drop from the skies with the R.A.M.C.

I arrived at one unit at nine at night—it was just getting dark—to find an outdoor concert in full swing—stretcher cases, medical officers, Q.A.s and patients, an audience of five or six hundred. I wish you could have heard that concert!

I came back by air, travelling one short lap in a huge American bomber. It was all a wonderful experience.

I wonder if you read about the torpedoing of Q.A.s on their way to North Africa—212 of them? The very next day 207 started to nurse (I am sorry to say five were lost). They were fitted out in soldiers' clothes—it's all there was—underclothing, battledress fore-and-afts and boots. But they don't appear to have nursed any the worse for that, and, indeed, it has proved to us that this clothing was the most suitable for the dreadful rain and cold in that part of the world in December and January.

The Principal Matron told me "there was no sign of any panic." And one matron, who was up to her armpits in water in a waterlogged lifeboat for six and a half hours, only remarked: "Yes, it was terrible, because we thought the boat might sink at any moment, but it didn't do me any harm at all—none at all." They were black with oil in one boat, and just before they landed, so it is said, the Principal Matron produced a comb from her pocket and, handing it round, she said "Here, tidy up a bit, and try not to *look* like survivors!"

I've got hundreds of letters written by Q.A.s describing their work and all these experiences, and by Christmas this year we hope to publish a selection of these letters in a book, which will be called "Grey and Scarlet," the colour of our well-loved uniform.

They have lived in luxury hotels, villas, Nissen huts, tents, houseboats, dugout sunken quarters in the Western desert, native built mud huts in the Sudan, and on trek they have even slept in the open—for on one occasion nine Sisters were attached to a unit which followed close behind our victorious Army from Egypt to Tripoli—the first British women to arrive with the 8th Army in Tripoli. They travelled in lorries and wore battledress, and a high tribute has been paid them for their nursing work with this unit.

Fifty Q.A.s were in Greece, and did trojan work there, and again almost by a miracle they all escaped injury from the incessant bombing on their way from Greece to Crete and on to the Middle East—where they arrived, sorry but safe. By now, of course, they are in Sicily, and no doubt will very soon land in Italy, too.

And so the story goes on, more and more, till now over 7,000 of these State Registered Nurses are serving with the

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