

Summary of my experiences - after capture

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As it is apparent from the main story, the 2/5 AGH, although raised as a 1200 bed hospital, acted as such for a very small part of the five and a half years of its existence. During the greater part of the war the staff was largely detached to other duties. So the history of the hospital is the history of its personnel rather than of a base Unit.

I spent very little time with the main body. In Palestine I was for several months at the CRS (Casualty Receiving Station) at Julis, and from the first day in Greece until a couple of days before the evacuation, I was at the RAP at British Army HQ in Athens.

In retrospect, the one thing lacking in our training was ward work, and in a hospital unit we should all have been trained in ward work - in case of emergency. Before I joined the 2/5 AGH, I held the St John Ambulance first aid and home nursing certificates. In Greta we worked in the wards (mostly medical, very little surgical) for a short time, and although some of the sisters were helpful, Matron Best's idea seemed to be that we should be good at mopping floors and dusting the tops of doors, cupboards etc. Our ability to treat patients was never officially considered. Perhaps we should have been sent for a few weeks to the surgical wards of civilian hospitals.

On the first evening after the evacuation of the sisters from Ekali, I was asked to take over a ward of about six to eight patients. Before starting, I was shown how to give a subcutaneous injection and then I was on my own.

A few days later we moved to Kokkinia where, with one assistant who had never worked in a ward at all, I was night charge orderly of a 50 bed surgical ward. We did 12 hour shifts, with one night off after a month. After a couple of months the work load eased, and as the patients were evacuated to the convalescent hospital, or to the hospitals and camps in German occupied Europe, we had more time off.

In addition to the 12 hour shifts, often during our time off duty we were required to carry stretchers - the hospital was a building of four storeys, with no lifts.

The senior man on the night shift for the whole hospital was L/Cpl Tom Loch, so the full responsibility for the wards was on the shoulders of the nursing orderlies, practically untrained. During the day the doctors worked like horses, so we called them as little as possible at night.

My ward surgeon was Lt (later Captain) Foreman, 1st NZGH, dedicated to the patients, and never sparing himself. He always did rounds twice a day, and when he had a full day in the theatre, he would commence rounds at 5am. He usually

finished evening rounds about 9pm. After that he would leave me to decide what drugs - including morphine (our main pain killer) - and what dosage were needed during the night, and to administer them as required.

The hospital closed in December. Those of us still at Kokkinia went by ship to Salonika, stayed a couple of days, then by train (12 days) to Thorn in Poland, arriving on December 31st 1941. In Thorn we lived in a 19th century fort, already the home of British, French and Poles.

Here there was no medical work. Under the Geneva Convention, NCOs and medical personnel were non-workers, so we spent our time in studios, sports and other recreations. Everybody with a reasonable knowledge of some school subject helped with the teaching, so we had a large range of classes.

On the sporting side there were 'test matches' in cricket, football and basketball. Concerts and plays were always popular, so many of the men were busy rehearsing, making clothes, props etc. I also spent a lot of time playing bridge and monopoly etc with the Frenchmen, thereby improving my school French.

In September 1943, I was transferred to Fort 14, the area POW hospital and again was involved in medical work. For the first few months I worked with an Englishman in the infections ward, mostly TB cases. My main memory of the treatment was taking innumerable blood samples for BSR and administering calcium drugs intravenously. Later I took over the French general ward. Here the surgeon was English and the physician French.

As the Russians advanced during the Winter of 1944/45, our hosts decided they did not want to lose us, so on January 20th 1945, all who could walk, set out to keep ahead of the Red Army. Each man took only what he could carry, in the way of blankets, food and clothes. In the party of about 500, there were a couple of medical orderlies, so we carried what medical gear we could to treat foot blisters, cuts, stomach upsets etc at the end of each days march. When possible we built up our stocks at hospitals as we passed. After crossing the top of Germany, then travelling south, we met the Americans on April 11th coming the other way.

On reaching England, we had 2 weeks leave, then most left for home. However the 2/5 was still needed. Noel Cragg and I stayed at the CRS at Eastbourne until the last Australian troops left England late in August.