

# Men and Women in Medical work during the Second World War

## Historical Sources

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### **Task. 1. Nursing and comforting patients in different medical environments during the Second World War.**

In groups, examine these three wartime photographs and answer the following questions:

- How are nurses and patients represented in these photographs?
- How are the spaces in which they work represented? How far do you think the patient's environment impact on therapeutic treatment?
- Where does these photographs come from? Why do you think these photographs were taken?
- How useful are photographs to the historians of medicine? What can we learn from studying this type of historical sources?



Document 1.

Document 1. Imperial War Museum, Ministry of Information, Cecil Beaton, IWM CBM 1006. [February – July 1942]. A Hadfield Spears Ambulance Unit nurse helps a patient to drink from a bowl on a ward. The patient is Corporal Carl de Wet, 1st South African anti-aircraft regiment. The sister is Nurse Cohen, a Jewish refugee from Lubeck in Poland. Document 2. Friends' Library London, A77, Hadfield Spears collection, undated.



Document 3. Amicale des anciens de la Première Division française libre \*\*, *Annuaire de la Première division française libre et ses unités dans la guerre 1939-1945* (Paris : Imprimerie N. Fortin et ses fils, 1972), ACL, p. 8. (\*\* This is a French veteran's association)

## Task 2. Facing danger

In groups, read this extract of an article in the British newspaper *Picture Post*:

At Tobruk, the women live like soldiers. They sleep in tents in the desert, eat in a mess-tent, wear regular battle-dress, consisting of khaki blouses, shirts, ties and trousers, topped with neat berets. Even the nurses wear this outfit at work in the Desert (a mobile operating theatre is used close to the front line). But they change into nursing uniform for working inside Tobruk General Hospital, which bears the scars of many bombs, though it has never been put out of action.

Document 4. Extract from 'Our Nurses in Tobruk', *Picture Post*, 21 March 1942.

- What dangers did medical staff face near the frontline? Were these dangers the same as those faced by male soldiers?
  
- How far do you think the presence of medics and female nurses help boost the morale of their patient-soldiers?

- Why do you think *Picture Post* decide to publish an article entitled 'Our nurses in Tobruk' in 1942?
- How are women and 'Senegalese' represented in the first page of the article?
- What aspects of their war experiences might have been censored?
- How useful are British newspapers to study the history of an hospital? What can a historian learn by looking at the British wartime press? What might be silenced in the press?



*Four Battle-Dressed Nurses Take an Afternoon Off on the Shore of the Mediterranean. They are trained nurses of the Haddfield-Spence Hospital Unit. They arrived with the Unit a short while ago, to serve with the First French Forces in the Western Desert. Some of the nurses are British, some are French. They live in tents, and wear battle dress off-duty. On their few afternoons they go down to the beach with books and a portable gramophone to listen to the music by the sea.*



*A Senegalese Orderly Waits on Them at Lunch. They sit down at mid-day at a long table in the mess tent. There is plenty of fruit on the table and here. Orderly duties are done by Senegalese, who wait on the nurses at mealtimes.*

## OUR NURSES IN TOBRUK

Women take their share of the Western Desert War. These nurses and doctors have been in the front-line before.

"The Haddfield-Spence Hospital Unit is the first of its kind. The nurses and doctors who form the unit are tough, battle-hardened women who have seen battle-line service in every part of the world. In France the Unit worked with the French Army. After the collapse of France it was based in Italy, and afterwards appeared in the Hospital zone during the war. It was sent to the Western Desert, last week, to serve with the First French Army. It arrived yesterday in the Western Desert, with only a few days to spare, by way of England. Since then they have been working in the desert, and the unit has been most successful. And now, following the fight in Tunisia, they have arrived at Tobruk.

Lately, the Commanding Officer, has worked hard for peace in the Anglo-French Desert, and the Unit is now attached to the First French Army. There are something over a hundred members, including French women doctors and nurses, as well as British Nursing Sisters and M.T. Officers—and some of the



**Their Bomb-Scarred Hospital**  
The walls of their hospital at Tobruk show the marks of enemy bombardments, but inside everything is still intact.

### Task 3. Witnessing pain and confronting death

In groups, read these two extracts (Documents 5 and 6) of a woman and man working in the Hadfield Spears hospital and answer the following questions:

- What do these two extracts tell historians about the challenges that men and women confronted when nursing severely injured patients?
- David Rowlands was a pacifist and a conscientious objector. What does his testimonies tell us about his experience in Daraa?
- Why do you think Rachel Millet wrote a book about her experiences after the war? Are there aspects of her work and experiences that she might have wanted to keep silent? Do you think she might have wanted to present herself in a certain light?
- How useful are oral testimonies and memoirs to the historians of war medicine? What can they tell us that photographs cannot?

#### **Document 5. David Rowlands – member of the Friends Ambulance Unit – remembering his work in Daraa (Southwestern Syria)**

I can remember we were set up in this god forsaken place *and euh* with flies and a lot of us had dysentery and the casualties were coming in faster than we could cope with them and I always remember captain Jiberry and his calmness when you had stretchers as far as you could see outside the reception tent with people with legs shattered and facial and throat injuries. They were horrible sights *and euh* I felt at this time that this was just more than one could stand and yet somehow we kept going it seemed to be days and nights... and I always remember we ran out of orange boxes for Jacopin who was one of the Breton fishermen who came over to make hasty crosses for burying the dead. We had just to smash out these orange boxes and in these improvised sort of graves we put crosses of a kind up and this work went on and I remember that captain Asquin, who was one of the medical officer, was absolutely exhausted with dysentery and could scarcely keep going; but Jiberry and this seems right through the war was the tire strength – he was an incredible man – I don't remember him losing his temper.

IWM, 13631, David Rowlands interviewed by Lyn Smith, 15 November 1993, reel 2, 15'00 (available at : <https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/80013339>)

#### **Document 6. Rachel Millet *Spearette. A memoir of the Hadfield-Spears Ambulance Unit* (London: Fern House, 1998), p. 18.**

'Above all I had to learn to cope with horrendous wounds without showing faintness or distress. Luckily I was so busy I had no time to think of myself. Bullets made a small entry wound and a large exit, often taking with them pieces of clothing or anything else that stood in their way. Shrapnel made terrible jagged wounds. Landmines shattered arms and legs, and often blinded as well. Some of the saddest cases were men who had lost their eyes and hands through stepping on a mine. We prayed they would die, but they seldom did. The worst wounds to dress were amputation, often double. They took ages and caused agonising pain however careful one was. We gave morphia before we did them but it did not seem to help much'.



Friends' Library, A73, Middle East Hadfield  
Spears Hospital, undated.



#### Task 4. Researching the cultural and social history of medicine

In groups, discuss what do you think 'cultural' and 'social' historians of medicine are interested in:

Imagine that you were conducting oral interviews with one of female members of staff of the Hadfield Spears today for a project on the cultural and social history of the hospital for the Imperial War Museum.

Design 4 questions you'd like to ask one of these women if she was still alive today.

Is there anything you might need to be sensitive towards in your interview? What might these women be shy to talk about? Why? What do you think the historian should do in these circumstances?



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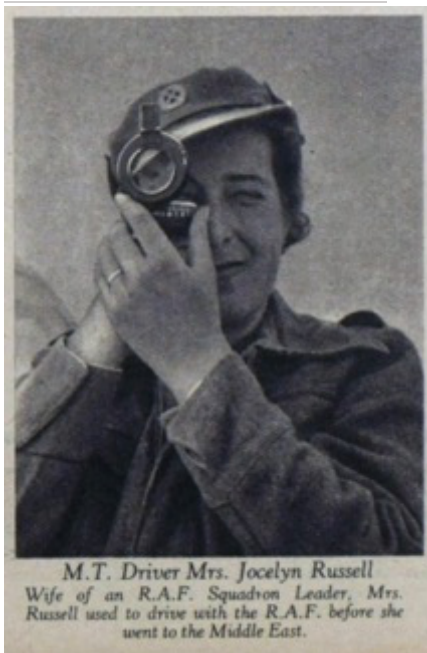


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### Task 5. Conclusion: creating an Instagram feed for a historical project on the Hadfield Spears hospital

In groups, imagine that you are working for a university and given the task to create an Instagram account for a project on the Hadfield Spears hospital.

How would you interest people in reading more about Allied medicine during the war?

How would you interest our families and our communities in this research?

What would you put in your first feed and/or story?