Second World War

BERGEN-BELSEN

Refusing to ignore people in crisis
The Liberation of Bergen-Belsen concentration camp

On 12 April 1945, two emissaries of the Wehrmacht (the unified armed forces of Germany) contacted British forces to inform them of the concentration camp at Belsen, which at that time contained approximately 60,000 inmates.

When British and Canadian troops entered the camp, they found over 13,000 unburied bodies and around 60,000 inmates (including the satellite camps), most acutely sick and starving. The prisoners had been without food and water for days before the liberation, partly due to the Allied bombing.

After inspection of the camp, a British medical officer took over the duties of the senior medical officer and an urgent call for help was sent to the British Red Cross.

In the period immediately preceding and following liberation, prisoners were dying at a rate of around 500 per day, mostly from typhus.

Another 9,000 died in April, and by the end of June 1945 another 4,000 had died. After liberation, the death toll reached 13,994.

Red Cross relief at Belsen

On 21 April 1945, five British Red Cross teams and one team from the Friends Relief Service were sent to Belsen.

> doctors and nurses were sent to the hospital

> welfare officers cared for the children

> cooks established canteens

> drivers took patients from the camps to hospital

> others set up first aid posts and handled stores of fuel and clothing supplies for the patients

For ten days the British Red Cross (BRC) and Friends Relief Service (FRS) teams were the only British civilian relief workers at Belsen.

At that time only two Royal Army Medical Corps (RAMC) units were at the camp, and afterwards their senior medical officer wrote:

"unbounded admiration for the loyal, enthusiastic and wholehearted co-operation" of the six teams. He added that: “their arrival made all the
difference to us and changed what appeared to be an almost impossible task into quite a possible one.”

6th Annual Report of the War Organisation of the British Red Cross and Order of St John of Jerusalem 1944-1945

British Red Cross personnel at Belsen consisted of:

**camp 2** – welfare officers, clothing officer, camp commander

**camp 3** – welfare officer, sanitation officer

**camp 4** – welfare officer, health visitor

Services in camps 2, 3 and 4 included: schools and a kindergarten, mothers and babies home, a children’s feeding centre, clothing distribution, a bank and post office, and transport with a workshop and mechanics.

A group of volunteer medical students from London were sent out directly to Belsen under the British Red Cross to help in the hospital.

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**Feeding the Belsen survivors**

The British troops and medical staff tried the following diets to feed the prisoners, in this order:

- bully beef from army rations. Most of the prisoner’s digestive systems were too weak from long-term starvation to handle such food

- skimmed milk. The result was a bit better, but still far from acceptable

- Bengal Famine Mixture. A rice and sugar based mixture which had achieved good results after the Bengal famine of 1943, but it proved less suitable for Europeans than Bengalis, because of the differences in diets.

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**Extracts from the diary of Lady Limerick (deputy chairman of the executive committee of the British Red Cross)**

Lady Limerick visited the Belsen camp on 24 May 1945.

“Left at 10.30 am for Belsen, which is about 18 miles from Celle. The camp itself is tucked away in the pinewoods just beyond Bergen, and it was hard to imagine, motoring through this lovely part of the world, that scenes of such unimaginable horror could have been enacted in the peaceful countryside.
“Soldiers guarded the entrance of the camp, where a large and forbidding notice ‘Typhus’ warns that there is no entry except for authorised persons.

“Two British Generals have just come up to take over, but at the start, when the camp was first uncovered he only had his own C.C.S staff and our Red Cross teams to deal with about 20,000 sick. He couldn’t speak too highly of our Red Cross workers and said that he could not possibly have done without them.

“Miss Barker, the senior Red Cross staff officer has done grand work, and so have Miss McFarlane (responsible for the hospital registry) and Miss Daniels, who has been responsible for the clothes distribution. But it is really impossible to single out individuals when all have done so well. Many of the members who came out as drivers or welfare workers had never been inside a hospital and yet, they had been running wards of 50 beds with typhus patients.

“We visited the hospital clothing store, where Miss Daniels told us of the excellent psychological effect it had on the patients when they are able to exchange the awful striped pyjamas, which was the regulation Belsen issue, for some ordinary civilian clothing.

“We looked in for a short time to watch the first entertainment which one of our welfare workers had organised in a large hall. In some ways, it was the most striking feature of any of the relief work done by the teams. To have succeeded in inducing human beings, who a few weeks before had been little removed from animals, to take sufficient interest to run their own show and to entertain their fellows must have been no mean feat.”

Report by M.C. Carey (Red Cross correspondent for north-west Europe) on the relief work at Belsen camp

A mile or two further down this road is Camp 2, and here you turn into the gates of the elaborately constructed German army school, with its concrete roadways and carefully planned barrack squares, its woods, fields and lake. It is here that the British Red Cross sections are working as far as the women are concerned; the men of the various teams, both BRC and the Friends Relief Service team were mostly directed to work in Camp 1.

They have been, so far, the only British civilian relief workers there, who had come out under the aegis of the Red Cross. A party of expert dieticians from London, also in Red Cross uniform, had just arrived to study starvation conditions and advise on feeding.

All that at present can be done for the patients is to keep them warm, reasonably clean, and fed carefully and gradually with prescribed semi-fluid food.
The Red Cross teams are housed in well-built houses among the trees, which may have been married quarters, and live in tolerable comfort. They have their camp kit, and keep hot water going in a boiler, into which you dip a bucket when you want to wash in the basin in your room, or fill your hot waterbottle. There is a modern, sumptuously equipped bath house close by with 24 baths and hot water laid on, that just makes all the difference to comfort at the end of a long and gruelling day in those grim surroundings.

Although so many of the sections are nursing in the wards, others are driving ambulances and trucks. One girl takes dirty linen and clothes to and from the laundry in her truck all day long. A trained domestic science worker, who was in the diet kitchen of the Middlesex Hospital, is now in charge of the hospital kitchens, and has under her not only Red Cross cooks but Hungarian and Russian orderlies and Polish and Russian girls from the camp.

During the three weeks before the British entered, 700 people a day were dying. This is now reduced to 200-300 a day, lessening each week, though many are so far gone that nothing can save them, even though they are rescued from the huts.

This team is split up and, with the rest of the men in the other civilian relief sections of the Red Cross have tackled anything the RAMC have asked them to do. Two of them have worked with the army field hygiene section on the sterilization of the water supply, and helped to empty and clean out two tanks, one of 70,000 and one of 80,000 gallons. Water shortage was acute, and whatever water there was, was polluted.

Other FRS and BRC men are driving ambulances from Camp 1 to the cleaning station in Camp 2, and helping with the distribution of food, to the huts still occupied, and which are being cleared out one by one.

These are the patients who have been brought out of the huts direct from Camp 1. They are lifted on to the tables in turn, and soaped and washed and even scrubbed.

When they are finally dried and dusted, they are wrapped in clean blankets and carried out through the ‘clean’ doorway to a ‘clean’ ambulance, usually driven by a Red Cross driver, and taken to hospital.

I came away filled with admiration for our Red Cross teams who are so bravely battling with the grim job they have been asked to undertake here.

From ‘The Red Cross’, July 1945
Extracts from a letter (dated July 1946) from the community at Belsen – expressing appreciation for the work of the British Red Cross Commission

The letter includes the names of Irene England, Enid Fordham Stella Reekie and Vincent Higham Helliwell

“We badly need more men and women in Belsen who are able and willing to represent democratic ideas and who do not consider us as numbers only.

“We especially appreciate and ask for staying on Miss England, Welfare Officer Camp 4, who is Mother all of us, and willing to help at every moment day and night if help is required.

“Send B.R.C.S back to Belsen!! We need them as like our daily bread!!”

Irene England

“Can we sit by our firesides and do nothing?”
Sunday Mercury, 13 September 1959

Irene England was a highly regarded British Red Cross Welfare Officer at Belsen camp. She arrived in camp only five days after liberation by Allied troops. She worked as a nurse, and despite contracting typhus she refused to be sent back to Britain. Later she opened a camp building for 150 children, and later was transferred to welfare work where she cared for 7,000 Polish Jews and Catholics.

Enid Fordham

Enid Fordham joined the British Red Cross in April 1945 and was immediately sent to Germany as a relief worker. She was posted to Belsen and remained there for 16 months.

Extracts from an article about Enid Fordham in the Kilburn Times, January 1959.

“‘We expected to be sent to Holland’ she told me when we talked at the Red Cross branch at Fulham, where she recently succeeded Miss M H Landau as divisional director. ‘It was a shock when they sent us to Belsen.’”

She arrived there on 15 April but it was 2 May before women, apart from medical staff, were allowed to go into the camp.

“There were 60,000 bodies there – living and dead. About a hundred a day were dying, and for a time they all had to be put into an empty swimming pool to be later taken away for burial.
“The people were suffering from all kinds of diseases – and starvation. They screamed like animals for food.”

Although Miss Fordham went as a driver – she can drive anything from a six-ton lorry to an Austin Seven – she soon found herself filling in with all kinds of jobs, and it was “pretty hard going” at first.

Vincent Higham Helliwell

Vincent Higham Helliwell joined the British Red Cross in February 1946 after leaving the army. He served as a driver with the Overseas Civilian Relief Board, and was based at Belsen camp.

Margaret Wyndham Ward

Margaret Wyndham Ward worked for the British Red Cross as a relief worker in a senior role supervising the feeding of both internees and relief workers at Belsen. Later in her posting she worked as a clothing officer and as a manager of a mothers and babies unit in the camp.

Extracts from letters by Miss Margaret Wyndham Ward, sent to her mother Sarah Langlands Ward

21 April 1945

We have had a day of getting our quarters into order, and I begin work tomorrow organising one of the hospital kitchens with Hungarian labour. I think there are about 500 patients who mostly have typhus and cholera, so I imagine they are fed entirely on powdered milk. These are the people most likely to live; the others are dying off at the rate of about 500 a day and they are buried in great pits dug by bulldozers, the dirty work being done by SS troops at the point of a British bayonet. I believe conditions in the Camp are too frightful for words, judging by the awful stories I hear from the officers in charge. However, by the time they get to hospital they have been well scrubbed and powdered by German nurses and just lie in emaciated condition on the beds. Our women are working in the wards and the men driving the ambulances. The organisation is marvellous, as the hospital was only opened yesterday and already over 1,000 have been put to bed. But even that is rather a pin head in 60,000 – the whole thing is absolutely horrible. We have of course had more injections and much powdering.

23 April 1945

We work from 8am to 8pm seven days a week, which is most wearing. Breakfast 7:15am, lunch 1-2:15pm, supper 8:15pm, and after supper there always seems
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to be a conference, so I rarely reach my room until 10pm. I am now in charge of three kitchens, each cooking for 800-900, and also of three canteens each feeding 100 internee staff, and talking all the languages.

The whole task of rehabilitating 60,000 people who are all suffering from starvation, typhus, dysentery etc is just so gigantic that I can’t think how it will ever come to an end. And how homes, work etc will be found for the survivors it is impossible to think.

15 May 1945

Tomorrow I have to report at the evacuation camp and organise feeding for 7,000 refugees in quarantine preparatory to being sent home.

We now have 17,000 people in hospital and they are making marvellous recoveries. The difference in the whole hospital block is quite astounding and makes me realise what a gigantic job has been done – the death cart has only a few bodies to pick up and the smells have almost subsided.

19 August 1945

I dare not tell the camp inhabitants that I may be leaving here, until the last moment as they are all so emotional and I could not bear being wept over for more than is necessary.

Destruction of the camp

Bergen-Belsen concentration camp was burned to the ground on 21 May 1945 by flame-throwing ‘Bren gun’ carriers and Churchill Crocodile tanks because of the typhus epidemic and louse infestation.

“We finished work early today for the great ceremony of blowing up Belsen Concentration Camp, which was really a very interesting entertainment. The camp is some miles from here, so at 5:30 we all set forth in ambulances, jeeps, trucks, motorbikes etc – a real bank holiday crowd. The whole garrison left the present camp and I think there must have been about 1,500 troops on the scene. A platform had been erected and the Brigadier made a speech in which all parties were thanked, and then the Union Jack was unfurled, after which all the leading colonels got into flame throwers and the whole place was set ablaze.

The Brigadier said that we had saved the lives of 27,000 refugees, about 50 per cent of the original masses.”

Miss Margaret Wyndham Ward
Bergen-Belsen

Sources:

> Sixth Annual Report of the British Red Cross Society and the Order of St John, 1944-1945

> ‘The Red Cross’ Journal, July 1945


Archive material:

Acc X104  Letters from Miss Enid Fernandes to Lady Oliver regarding Belsen, 1945

Acc X278  Papers regarding Margaret Wyndham who served with the BRCS

Acc X287  including Belsen, 1945

T2 WAR  Belsen letters : Letters sent from Miss Margaret Wyndham Ward MBE to her mother Sarah Langlands Ward from 24 February 1945 - 14 August 1945.

Acc X298  Extract from the diary of Adelaide Lubbock, 1946, regarding civilian relief at Belsen

Acc X304  Article from RAMC Journal, 1984, ‘Belsen, Medical Aspects of a World War Two Concentration Camp’ by Col E E Vella

Acc 0413  Notes re work of Stella Reekie in Belsen Camp, 1945, by G A Binkowski

Acc 1594/4  Diaries of Angela, Countess of Limerick (includes a visit to Belsen in May 1945)

Acc 1626/1-5  A collection of newspaper cuttings, greeting cards, pamphlets, photographs and badges relating to Miss Enid Fordham and her work after the Second World War at Belsen, 1945-1973

Acc 2267  Papers of Vincent Helliwell, driver with the Overseas Civilian Relief Board 1945-1946

Acc 554/1-11  Papers relating to the Polish school at Belsen Camp, including paper on Belsen Camp School by Miss Lewkovicz Sala (later Mme Cymerman), 15 October 1945

Acc 750/5/22  Loose press cuttings. Includes appointment of Miss Enid Fordham as Divisional Director, Fulham, with info re her work at Belsen 1945.
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Acc 1064/1(14) Personnel file of ENGLAND Miss Edna Irene  [CRO incl Belsen]

Acc 2267/21 Copy letter of appreciation for the work of the British Red Cross Commission from the community at Belsen Camp, 1946

JWO/9/4 Civilian Relief 1944-1946. Black and white photographs of relief work, with handwritten notes. Includes photographs of Belsen concentration camp, welfare workers, visits of officials and patrons, etc. Also contains correspondence and telegrams.

G62 Pfirter, Anny, Memories of a Red Cross Mission. Describes the work of the British Red Cross relief mission in Belsen-Bergen camp in 1945, including the work of British medical students.

G62 Hargrave, Michael, Gonin, Mervin Willett, Glanville, Jo, On arriving at the concentration camp: Extracts from letters and diaries. Extracts from the diary of volunteer medical student Dr Michael Hargrave and Lt-Col. Mervin Willett Gonin on their experiences at the relief of the Bergen – Belsen concentration camp, April – May 1945.


**Museum items:**

Acc 0012/4 ‘The Burning of Belsen camp 1945’: oil painting by Doris Zinkeisen, official war artist of the Joint War Organisation

Acc 1446/7 Model of a Red Cross nurse believed to have been made by a former inmate of Belsen for a Joint War Organisation Welfare Officer, 1940s

Acc 1535 Five dolls made by a Belsen survivor and given to Miss Enid Fordham of the British Red Cross

Acc 2267/4 Sleeping bag used by Vincent Helliwell whilst at Belsen

We also hold a number of photographs taken at Belsen showing the relief operation after liberation by the Joint War Organisation.
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Published accounts (available in the Historic Reference Library):

> Cambray, P G and G G B Briggs, Red Cross and St John: the official record of the humanitarian services of the War Organisation of the British Red Cross Society and Order of St John of Jerusalem, published 1949.

> Progress at Belsen Camp, extracts from The British Red Cross Quarterly Review, e.g. Vol 32, No.3, July 1945, p.103.


> Collis R and Hogerzeil H, Straight on: journey to Belsen and the road home, 1947

> Bowden, J, Grey touched with scarlet: the war experiences of the Army Nursing Sisters, 1959

> Kolb, E, Bergen-Belsen: from “detention camp” to concentration camp 1943-1945, 1988

> Bark, E, No Time to Kill, 1960


> Skimming, S, Sand in my shoes: The tale of a British Red Cross Welfare Officer with British Hospitals overseas in the Second World War, 1948

> MacAuslan A, Darling, Darling Meg: Belsen? Where’s that? 1996

> Faber D and Kitchen J D, Because of Romek: A holocaust survivor’s memoir, 1997

> Hargrave, M, Gonin, M W, Glanville J, On arriving at the concentration camp: Extracts from letters and diaries, 1998