

War is the very stuff of history. What would history be without '1066', the Spanish Armada and the trenches of the first world war? It seems a little odd that our own history doesn't have much to say about war. Indeed, paediatric nursing seems such a peaceful discipline that the whole notion of paediatric nurses at war seems implausible. In truth, however, our discipline possesses many heroes, and war has shaped its history.

Nursing must have looked unchangeable during the years between the first and second world wars. The impact of behaviourism and the increasing professionalisation of nursing had limited the degree to which it was able to provide either holistic or individualised care.

The ways of nursing were well known and rarely challenged; respect for nursing's hierarchy effectively prevented questioning of its established working methods. For example, early attempts to introduce parents onto the wards (Stevens 1949), had been quickly extinguished. So it is interesting to note the effect of war on such a system.

Here is an account from a hospitalised child who, in 1938, had come to the conclusion that the nursing staff did not care about her; no one cuddled her, no one listened to her – she felt simply that she was just one of many patients all being treated in the same way. In fact, the nurses did care about her, but their professionalism forbade them from showing emotions. Later, the daily threat of bombing changed everything:

'One of my happiest memories is about the air raid shelter. There was a feeling of solidarity then – that we were all in it together. The nurses were seen at their best in that moment. I remember when we were being taken off to the shelter. There was very much the feeling that they wanted us to be safe [and that] they did care about us' (Jolley 2004, Participant V).

This account reveals a tender moment in time when a young patient and nurse shared the same humanity and really got to know each other, if only briefly.

Nursing heroes

In the early days of the second world war, a student nurse had her accommodation changed as part of a scheme to spread bedrooms around hospital so that all the nurses would not be bombed at the same time.

Subsequently, her room was hit by a bomb while she was at breakfast on the



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morning of her preliminary exam. The nurse, who had put her uniform inside a bedroom wardrobe, recalled that to retrieve the uniform, she had to push past firemen as they hosed down her fire-ravaged room. She added: 'I [then] went over to the nurses' home and [found that] a bomb had landed behind [the baby ward], which was where I was supposed to take my preliminary state exam. Very helpful, wasn't it?'

On November 10 1940, her own ward was bombed, although all the children survived. The nurse recalled: 'So I had some wonderful escapes really, when you think I was still only in my 20s. We coped somehow didn't we?' (Jolley 2004, Participant E).

Yes, she coped somehow, with the courage of a soldier in battle.

War and social change

War is associated with heroism but also with social change. Baly (1995) observed that 'when it comes to change, war is the sorcerer's apprentice, and once released from the peacetime pot the genii are reluctant to return'.

Baly was right. Here, Participant O recalls the profound effect that the second world war had on paediatric nursing: 'People started to be more aware of the

needs of children... the post-war generation saw life in a different light. Children themselves were given more of a free reign and allowed to speak more. Parents started to do more things with their children because a generation of fathers had missed their children growing up, and so they became more involved with them' (Jolley 2004, Participant O).

From heroism to social change, war – particularly the second world war which created the social environment that allowed nursing to change – is part of the history of paediatric nursing. Textbooks were rewritten, training programmes revised and, when Bowlby spoke of children's need for their parents, everyone listened.

References

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Jeremy Jolley PhD, RSCN
senior tutor, University of Hull
Email Jeremy.jolley@hull.ac.uk