

A GP in London: 1939–1945

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Dr Marguerite Stewart MD, DPM,
MRCGP, 1896–1974**

The daughter of a Church of Scotland minister, Dr Stewart spent some of her childhood in India, where her father was a missionary. She attended school in Edinburgh, before studying medicine at Edinburgh University. After qualifying she returned to India with the London Missionary Society, but health problems brought her back and she settled as a GP in London, at 73 South Side, Clapham.

This account, of her work during the Blitz, was given to me by her niece, Dr Catriona Collins, who is an educational psychologist in Edinburgh.

Dr Collins also gave me a collection of her Aunt's case studies of a number of her patients who were characterised by their multiple symptoms in the absence of any clearly defined pathology. These case studies show an insight into the management of anxiety and depression that would be exceptional now let alone 60 years ago.

Emerging from her writing and from Dr Collins memories of her, is a picture of a doctor of exceptional skill and compassion who chose, as a single person, to devote her life to the altruistic care of others, an inspirational GP.

Gerry McPartlin



* * * * *

September 5. Tension was in the air. All who had no duties in London departed. The main roads were turned into one-way traffic as, by trams and buses, London's children left town. Then we waited. All emergency schemes came into operation.

At night, the diabolical wail of a siren started an inevitable baby on its way. There were no nursing homes, no nurses free. At last a midwife was procured. The room was dim with a shrouded light, lest blackout precautions be offended. The case was one of the most difficult and anxious. But eventually all was well. That was the last baby case for many months.

London was a city without children, and without schools, awaiting it knew not what. General practice dropped to a quarter, which meant more time for everyone. One of those to whom more time was given was a business woman, owner and director of a prosperous manufacturing firm. For 7 years she had been treated with medicine and kind words. Now she was in a panic, fears of the future, fears of insecurity paralysed her.

When 'BE', realised that God had a plan for herself and her business, and found the comfort of that security, she said, 'Why did you never tell me this before?'

Some months later, a landmine and a direct hit destroyed both home and business, and trapped her and her mother in a burning house. But BE's peace and poise did not leave her. She was a source of strength and inspiration to all who came in the succeeding days to comfort her. It seemed also perfectly natural to her that as she was homeless, she should come and share the cellar of those who had shown her how to triumph. A guest in our cellar, and the doctor felt, 'Jolly good of us!' The guest felt, 'I am only a guest, I still haven't a home,' and had the courage to say so ... and so became a part of the family.

That cellar! As a refuge it wasn't too good. It was damp, a window faced the stairs leading down. One side ran under a

glass pavement and there were shallow windows along the top of the wall. Indeed later, during flybomb episodes, two shelters were blown out of the cellar by the blast! But we put up a light Japanese screen to hide these deficiencies, and covered it with colourful pictures. We housed four with comfort and seven with crowding, and congratulated ourselves on the ventilation of the windows.

What vibrant life that cellar saw! The house faced a common with a battery of anti-aircraft guns. A mobile gun used to run up and down the street and often shelter behind the house. The blast of the guns broke many of the windows. Inside the house one's eardrums ached in the morning in spite of cotton wool plugs. But the cellar was some protection against the noise.

By day, patients and passers by sheltered there or were given a meal. By night, always after the sirens, cycling through the shrapnel, in peals of laughter, came two 'Batter sailors' — two of the Battersea team. We felt one of them, 'EN', to be almost a mascot. Had she not gone home for the weekend and thus escaped the night a bomb destroyed her previous home?

The only hope for sleep was bed soon after the sirens went. It was difficult to sleep soundly enough to defy noise, yet lightly enough to be alert to bell, telephone or firebombs.

One night, sleeping lightly, the doctor envied a carefree breathing of the sleepers as bombs came whizzing down. But EN had said she would be responsible for that night, and would ask the Lord to wake her if danger approached. Why then was she sleeping still? Crunch! ... Crunch! ... a stick of bombs. Surely one of the next would get the house? Should the watcher wake the others in time for them to protect their heads? But EN, slept on ... Crunch! ... Crunch! They had missed us! In the morning, hearing the tale, EN, shook with mirth. She had forgotten to pray!

The cellar overflowed. Two more were harboured, a mother and daughter, in two

corners of the consulting room. The girl, a jolly schoolgirl of 16, laughed at bombs. They were strangers, but lived a few doors down, four flights up. They left us to share a home on the outskirts, were unhappy there, and returned to their top floor flat. A few nights later that house and five others came crashing down. The girl was killed, and the mother lost her reason. Where had we failed them?

The blackout in the streets was complete. At first, when the siren wailed, car headlights were not allowed, and sidelights, blacked to one inch aperture, had to be further dimmed with paper. It was like driving in thick fog through deserted streets. The kerb was invisible. The only way was to pick up direction and to steer a course by gun flashes.

First of all by day, and then by night and day the raids intensified. It grew impossible to shelter all the time. Shopping was difficult. All social life stopped. Had one paid attention to every siren or to overhead dog fights and machine gunning, work would never have been undertaken. But it was disconcerting, on arriving at a patient's house to find they were snugly in the garden shelter, and could not hear the bell. Thus, we were dependent more than ever on inspiration when to shop, when to cook, and when to go out.

We grew used to a strange black world. At night, through the darkness, one's torch limited to one inch aperture and covered with paper, we groped our way from communal shelter to shelter on official medical inspection. Many of these cellars were the strengthened cellars of shops. Some were burrowed under the earth. One large one was under an old brewery, now a garage, and when the atmosphere grew too fetid, compressed air was ingeniously pumped in through a hole.

Each shelter had its own distinctive character. The tubes, too, housed many from little houses who sought sleep for work. Gunfire was largely muffled down there.

What are the pictures that remain of that



Sleeping in a West End Shelter

time? The long hurrying trek at dusk, all the hurrying world, hurrying to get home or out of London before the siren went. Hordes of people walking across the common: buses of many hues, on loan from many towns to relieve traffic dislocation. The incredible courage of youth, walking home through the barrage night by night, and every morning punctually, fresh as paint, streaming back to work, finding familiar landmarks gone each day, and further changes at night. The courage of transport, punctual arrival of milk, mail and newspapers. Walking through noisy streets wearing a soldier escort's helmet, (M.O.'s at the time did not have one), trundling an oxygen cylinder from the nearest hospital (no private practitioner could keep one, they were needed for the RAF). Crouching in doorways, hearing the shrapnel pattering between me and shelter. Being irritable on being called after dusk to see a woman who had been ill all day, and being shamed by the apology of her friend who

called me, 'I'm so sorry, I never thought about it, I walked home every night and so have got used to it'.

What remains a vivid memory too, is the courage of old women, and mothers and children, apologetic, yes, apologetic at being nervy through loss of sleep. The sense of rural community life that descended when a large unexploded bomb, awaiting removal, blocked all traffic and movement in the neighbourhood for days: cooking for seven on a picnic stove with no gas or electricity and sometimes no water, and afraid to light a fire. No telephone.

There was a daily battle to keep up standards of cleanliness, as gun blasts brought down plaster. How quickly we accepted our routine as almost normal, and felt safer with the balloons and the guns than the brave people in the country who had neither.

One brief spell in the country for sleep, but every night the bombers droned overhead and fires lit up in distant London.

It was far too harrowing to be out of it all, knowing what was happening, and after 3 nights one was glad to get back to the warm fellowship of the front line, the cellar and the noise.

At last a brief holiday. It was then one realised the tension that had been. By day there was the scanning of clouds, 'Will they give cover for Jerry? Do I need a helmet and first aid kit?' By night there had been the query, 'Have I left all business in perfect order to make things easy if ... ?' Now one could sleep and relax in a town hardly touched by war. But one missed the fellowship of those who have suffered together. Here were empty cars going past not offering lifts to pedestrians. People were enjoying themselves in a carefree manner, going to parties in evening dress. What a strange, different world.

Office Buildings destroyed in Blitz



© Hulton-Deutsch Collection/CORBIS

Jerry had given up the fight for the moment, and gradually life on return became normal. The reward of the citizens of London was work, and yet more work. Part-time wardens, ambulance women, firemen and home guards. How could people work so hard by day and night with so little sleep? Fire guards, a gallant band of the less fit, for the last reserves of man power were needed. We were alert and prepared.

June 1944. Up the street they came, those sinister fly bombs. At first we watched with interest, for we were a bomb alley. By now a street shelter had been built.

A patient was on the examining couch. The malignant drone drew nearer. 'Perhaps you had better put some clothes on ... just get into that corner away from glass.' Next moment, and every room was chaos, glass and plaster everywhere. That was 6.30 pm. In half an hour, 10 friendly folk arrived, unasked, with brooms and shovels, and by 11 pm all debris had been shovelled out of the house. The neighbours wondered at such help, beyond value, for help could not be bought. That was the beginning. For nearly a year we lived shut away from daylight, and five more times were our temporary past board windows blown out. Cleaning seemed endless.

The next few months were incredible. The borough — as large as Cardiff city — could not house the

homeless. Eventually new bigger shelters were opened for these.

Those with a roof that didn't leak and one whole room counted themselves lucky and only slightly blasted. Many slept in the street shelters. A further evacuation of mothers and children took place. Many were escapes. How breathlessly we waited as the evil drone drew near the playground full of evacuees, or seemed to follow a bus full that had left. Car driving had its perils for the drone was drowned by the engine. (Transport workers paid a heavy toll in lives). We judged danger by seeing people running for cover. Sometimes they had already taken cover and there was no one to be seen on turning a corner. Once, of two routes home after a visit to a nursing home in a neutral area, the decision was taken to turn right along the common. There were no signs of life. The alert had sounded. On turning the corner there was a lady standing on a curb. That seemed reassuring. But 100 yards down two workmen were peering up in a misty sky. Stopping the car dead beside the woman the drone was heard low, and danger seemed imminent. There was just time to take her by the hand, run through the gate, and flatten ourselves in a porch, as we were blown through the door. She was a German refugee, and had been standing paralysed with fear. She said, 'I never knew you could take shelter in any house.' Outside even the trees had been stripped of branches. Greenery, bricks and debris covered the road. Of the two men, one was killed and one had his eye destroyed.

What stands out of all this time is the courage of the ordinary man. Go to an 'incident', see the shells of houses, the piles of masonry. Hundreds must be homeless. It seems impossible that human throats can stand the dust as patiently and tirelessly. Bit by bit the rescue workers remove tons of rubble, and, at last, uncover the cellar of a house and the occupants step out alive. While deaths are few, discomfort is great. This borough's



© CORBIS

St Paul's Cathedral during London Blitz in 1940

proud boast is that they have never yet failed to uncover the trapped or the dead. Follow to the rest centre. There, with skeleton staff, they are always ready to clean, re-clothe and feed any number from two to 200 without notice.

There were no more homes for the people. Many houses were being repaired. Meantime the big shelters filled up. All here had suffered loss — many great loss, but they did not talk about it. All needed a gentle touch and the warmth of friendliness. We saw that to have efficiency was not enough. There must be a soul to our life down there, and teamwork which could create the atmosphere we longed to see. To some, the music, the activities of cinema, lecture or discussion group, and supper prepared by others, made the shelter seem like heaven.

On one of the last visits there a woman said, 'We shall miss it. It has seemed to draw the best out of people and to make them more neighbourly.' A policeman

talked of the sunshine of human fellowship down there. He had been 11 years on patrol in that neighbourhood, and not once before had anyone smiled at him. Another policeman confided that he had kept a little book in his pocket, and sometimes in the Blitz when bombing was fierce and he was shaking, he would go into a shelter and read it, and feel steadied. 'The name of the book', he said, 'was "Come Wind, Come Weather"!'.

These are the pictures that remain — the tragedies, the horrors seen will pass. They need not be recorded. But the people — their patient endurance, their courage, their undaunted and unwitting heroism, the family spirit and teamwork which developed — everyone pulling together, grimly determined to see it through — the privilege of belonging to such a family — these must endure.

Marguerite Stewart