

# The Wounded Come Home

By Martha Gellhorn

Radioed from London

There was nothing to do now but wait. The big ship felt empty and strange. There were 422 beds covered with new blankets; and a bright, clean, well-equipped operating room, never before used; great cans marked "Whole Blood" stood on the decks; plasma bottles and supplies of drugs and bales of bandages were stored in handy places. Everything was ready, and any moment we would be leaving for France.

The endless varied ships in this invasion port were grey or camouflaged, and they seemed to have the right idea. We, on the other hand, were all fixed up like a sitting pigeon. Our ship was snowy white, with a green line running along the sides below the deck rail, and with many bright new red crosses painted on the hull and painted flat on the boat deck.

We were to travel alone. There was not so much as a pistol on board in the way of armament, and neither the English crew nor the American medical personnel had any notion of what happened to large, conspicuous white ships when they appeared in war, though everyone knew the Geneva agreement concerning such ships, and everyone hoped the Germans would take the said agreement seriously.

There were six nurses aboard, and they were fine girls. They came from Texas and Michigan and California and Wisconsin, and three weeks ago they were in the USA completing their training for this overseas assignment. They had been prepared to work on a hospital train, which would mean caring for wounded in sensible, steady railway carriages. Now they found themselves on a ship, about to move across the dark water of the Channel.

The nurses had worked day and night for two weeks to get this ship ready to receive wounded. They had scrubbed floors and walls, made beds, prepared supplies, and now their work was finished. They went on working, inventing odd jobs to keep busy during these final empty hours before the real work began. But two tired, brave, tough girls sat on a bench inside the hall of the ship, and painted their fingernails with bright red varnish and talked about wanting their mail and worried about their missing footlockers, their valuable footlockers which had in them the vital comfortable shoes and the unvital, probably never-to-be-worn evening dresses.

One of the ship's British officers, who had been in the Merchant Marine since the beginning of the war but had never yet set forth in a white ship, came to talk with the girls. He looked tired, and he was vastly amused by their nail polish. "It would be nice," he said, "if we could take that nail polish to London tonight, instead of where we're going."

The tall, pretty nurse held her hands out to see whether the job was well done. "No," she said. She was from Texas and spoke in a soft, slow voice. "'No. I'm glad to be going just where I'm going. Don't you know how happy those little old boys are going to be when they see us coming?'"

Pulling out of the harbour that night, we passed a Liberty ship going the same way. The ship was grey against the grey water and the grey sky, and standing on her decks, packed solidly together, khaki, silent and unmoving, were American troops. No one waved and no one called. The crowded grey ship and the empty white ship sailed slowly out of the harbour towards France.

We crossed by daylight, and the morning seemed longer than other mornings. The captain never left the bridge and, all alone and beautifully white, we made our way through the mine-swept channel.

Then we saw the coast of France. As we closed in, there was one LCT [landing craft, tank] near us, with washing hung up on a line, and between the loud explosions of mines being detonated on the beach, one could hear dance music coming from its radio. There were barrage balloons, looking like comic toy elephants, bouncing in the high wind above the massed ships, and you could hear invisible planes flying behind the grey ceiling of cloud. Troops were unloading from big ships to heavy barges or to light craft, and on the shore, moving up brown roads that scarred the hillside, our tanks clanked slowly and steadily forward.

Then we stopped noticing the invasion, the ships, the ominous beach, because the first wounded had arrived. An LCT drew alongside our ship, pitching in the waves. A boy in a steel helmet shouted up to the crew at the aft rail, and a wooden box looking like a lidless coffin was lowered on a pulley, and with the greatest difficulty, bracing themselves against the movement of their boat, the men on the LCT laid a stretcher inside the box. The box was raised to our deck, and out of it was lifted someone who was closer to being a child than a man, dead-white and seemingly dying. The first wounded man to be brought to that ship for safety and care was a German prisoner.

Everything happened at once. We had six water ambulances - light motor launches that swung down from the ship's side and could be raised the same way when full of wounded. They carried six litter cases apiece, or as many walking wounded as could be crowded into them. Now they were being lowered, with shouted orders: "That beach over there where they've got streamers up."

## **"Watch Out For Mines"**

"Take her in slow ... Those double round things that look like flat spools are mines ... You won't clear any submerged tanks, so look sharp ... Ready? ... Lower her!"

The stretcher-bearers, who were part of the American medical personnel, now started on their long, back-breaking job. By the end of that trip, their hands were padded with blisters and they were practically hospital cases themselves. For the wounded had to be got from the shore into our own water ambulances or into other craft, raised over the side, and then transported down the winding stairs of this converted pleasure ship to the wards. The ship's crew became volunteer stretcher-bearers instantly.

Below stairs, for three decks, the inside of the ship was a vast ward with double tiers of bunks. The routine of the ship ran marvellously, though four doctors, six nurses and about 14 medical orderlies had to be great people to care for 400 wounded men. From two o'clock one afternoon, until the ship docked in England again the next evening at seven, none of the medical personnel stopped work. And besides plasma and blood transfusions, re-dressing of wounds, examinations, administering of sedatives or opiates or oxygen and all the rest, operations were performed all night long. Only one soldier died on that ship, and he had come aboard a hopeless case.

## **No Time for Interviews**

It will be hard to tell you of the wounded, there were so many of them. There was no time to talk; there was too much else to do. They had to be fed as most of them had not eaten for two days; their shoes had to be cut off; they needed help to get out of their jackets; they wanted water; the nurses and orderlies, working like demons, had to be found and called quickly to a bunk where a man suddenly and desperately needed attention; plasma bottles had to be watched; cigarettes had to be lighted and held for those who could not use their hands; it seemed to take hours to pour hot coffee from the spout of a teapot into a mouth that just showed through bandages.

But the wounded talked among themselves, and as time went on you got to know them, by their faces and their wounds, not by their names. They were a magnificent, enduring bunch of men. Men smiled who were in such pain that all they really can have wanted to do was turn their heads away and cry, and men made jokes when they needed their strength just to survive.

All of them looked after one another, saying, "Give that boy a drink of water," or "Miss, see that ranger over there; he's in bad shape. Could you go to him?" All through the ship, men were asking after other men by name, anxiously, wondering if they were on board and how they were doing.

On a deck, in a bunk by the wall, lay a very young lieutenant. He had a bad chest wound, his face was white, and he lay too still. Suddenly he raised himself on his elbow and looked straight ahead of him, as if he did not know where he was. He had a gentle oval face and wide blue eyes and his eyes were full of horror and he did not speak. He had been wounded the first day, had lain out in a field for two days and then crawled back to our lines, sniped at by the Germans. He realised now that a German, badly wounded also in the chest, shoulder and legs, lay in the bunk behind him. The gentle-faced boy

said very softly, because it was hard to speak, "I'd kill him if I could move." After that he did not speak for a long time; he was given oxygen and later operated on so that he could breathe.

The man behind him was a 19-year-old Austrian. He had fought for a year in Russia and half a year in France; he had been home for six days during this time. I thought he would die when he first came on board, but he got better. In the early morning hours he asked whether wounded prisoners were exchanged; would he ever get home again? I told him that I did not know about these arrangements, but that he had nothing to fear. I was not trying to be kind, but only trying to be as decent as the nurses and doctors were. The Austrian said, "Yes, yes." Then he added, "So many men, all wounded, want to get home. Why have we ever fought one another?" Perhaps because he came from a gentler race, his eyes filled up with tears. He was the only wounded prisoner on board who was grateful or polite, who said "Please" or "Thank you", or showed any normal human reaction.

There was an American soldier on that same deck with a head wound so horrible that he was not moved. Nothing could be done for him, and anything, any touch, would have made him worse. The next morning he was drinking coffee. His eyes looked very dark and strange, as if he had been a long way away, so far away that he almost could not get back. His face was set in lines of weariness and pain, but when asked how he felt, he said he was OK. He was never to say anything more; he asked for nothing and made no complaint.

On the next deck, there were many odd and wonderful men, who were less badly wounded and talked more. They talked even when they could not see one another's faces. It was all professional talk: Where they had landed, at what time, what opposition they had met, how they had got out, when they were wounded.

They spoke of the snipers, and there was endless talk about the women snipers, none of the talk very clear, but everyone believed it. There had been no French officers with these boys, who could have interpreted, and the Americans never knew what the villagers were saying.

Two men who thought they were being invited into an old woman's house to eat dinner were actually being warned of snipers in the attic; they somehow caught on to this fact in time. They were all baffled by the French and surprised by how much food there was in Normandy, forgetting that Normandy is one of the great food-producing areas of France. They thought the girls in the villages were amazingly well dressed. Everything was confused and astounding: first, there were the deadly bleak beaches, and then the villages where they were greeted with flowers and cookies - and often by snipers and booby traps.

## **A True Soldier of France**

A French boy of 17 lay in one of the bunks; he had been wounded in the back by a shell fragment. He lived and worked on his father's land, but he said the Germans had burned their chateau as they left. Two of the American boys in bunks alongside were worried about him. They were afraid he would be scared, a civilian kid all alone and in pain and not knowing any English and going to a strange country. But the French boy was very much a man and very tight-lipped. He kept his anxiety inside himself, though it showed in his eyes. His family was still there in the battle zone, and he did not know what had happened to them or how he would ever get back. The American soldiers said, "You tell that kid he's a better soldier than that Boche in the bunk next to him."

We did not like this Boche, who was 18 and blond and the most demanding of the "master" race aboard. Finally there was a crisp little scene when he told the orderly to move him, as he was uncomfortable, and the orderly said no, he would bleed if moved.

When I explained, the German said angrily, "How long, then, am I to lie here in pain in this miserable position?"

I asked the orderly what to say, and the orderly answered, "Tell him there are a lot of fine boys on this ship lying in worse pain in worse positions."

The American soldiers in the bunks around said, "What a Heinie!" wearily, and then they began wondering how they would find their old units again and how soon they would get mail.

When night came, the water ambulances were still churning in to the beach looking for wounded. Someone on an LCT had shouted out that there were maybe a hundred scattered along there

somewhere. It was essential to try to get them aboard before the nightly air raid and before the dangerous dark cold could get into their hurt bodies.

Going in to shore, unable to see, and not knowing this tricky strip of water, was slow work. Two of the launch crew, armed with boathooks, hung over the side of the boat and stared at the black water, looking for obstacles, sunken vehicles or mines, and they kept the hooks ready to push us off the sand as we came closer in. For the tides were a nasty business, too. Part of the time, wounded had to be ferried out to the water ambulances on men's shoulders, and part of the time the water ambulances grounded and stuck on the beach together with other craft, stranded by the fast-moving sea.

We finally got on to a barge near the beach. The motor ambulance could not come inshore near enough to be of any use at this point, so we looked for a likelier anchorage farther down. We waded ashore, in water to our waists, having agreed that we would assemble the wounded from this area on board a beach LCT and wait until the tide allowed the motor ambulance to come back and call for us. It was almost dark by now, and one had a terrible feeling of working against time.

Everyone was violently busy on that crowded, dangerous shore. The pebbles were the size of apples and several feet deep, and we stumbled up a road that a huge road shovel was scooping out. We walked with the utmost care between the narrowly placed white tape lines that marked the mine-cleared path, and headed for a tent marked with a red cross.

Ducks and tanks and trucks were moving down this narrow rocky road, and one stepped just a little out of their way, but not beyond the tapes. The dust that rose in the grey night light seemed like the fog of war itself. Then we got off on to the grass, and it was perhaps the most surprising of all the day's surprises to smell the sweet smell of summer grass, a smell of cattle and peace and the sun that had warmed the earth some other time, when summer was real.

Inside the Red Cross tent there were two tired, unshaven, dirty, polite young men who said that the trucks were coming in here with the wounded, and where did we want to have them unloaded. We explained the problem of the tides and said the best thing was to run the trucks down to that LCT there and carry the wounded aboard, under the canvas roof covering, and we would get them off as soon as anything floated.

## **A Truck Load of Casualties**

The Red Cross men said they didn't know whether wounded would be coming in all night or not; it was tough to transport them by road in the dark; anyway, they would send everything down to our agreed meeting place, and everyone said, "Well, good luck, fella," and we left. No one wasted time talking around here. You had a feeling of fierce and driven activity.

We returned to our small, unattractive piece of the beach and directed the unloading of a truck. The tide was coming in, and there was a narrow strip of water between the landing ramp of the LCT and the shore. The wounded were carried carefully and laid on the deck inside the great whale's-mouth cavern of the LCT. After that, there was a pause, with nothing to do.

Some American soldiers came up and began to talk. This had been an ugly piece of beach from the beginning, and they were still here, living in foxholes and supervising the uploading of supplies. They spoke of snipers in the hills a hundred yards or so behind the beach, and no one lighted a cigarette. They spoke of not having slept at all, but they seemed curiously pleased by the discovery that you could go without sleep and food and still function all right. Everyone agreed that the beach was a stinker, and that it would be a great pleasure to get the hell out of here some time.

Then there was our favourite American conversation: "Where're you from?" An American always has time to look for someone who knows his home town. We talked about Pittsburgh and Rosemont, Pennsylvania, Chicago and Cheyenne, not saying much except that they were swell places and had this beach licked every way for Sunday. Then one of the soldiers remarked that they had a nice foxhole about 50 yards inland and we were very welcome there, when the air raid started, if we didn't mind eating sand.

My companion, one of the stretcher-bearers from the ship, thanked them for their kind invitation and said that, on the other hand, we had guests aboard the LCT and we would have to stay home this

evening. I wish I had known his name, because I would like to write it down here. He was one of the best and jolliest boys I've met any place, any time. He joked, no matter what happened, and toward the end of that night, we really began to enjoy ourselves. There is a point where you feel yourself so small and helpless in such an enormous, insane nightmare of a world, that you cease to give a hoot about anything and you renounce care and start laughing. He was lovely company, that boy was, and he was brave and competent, and I wish I had known his name.

He went off to search for the water ambulances and returned to say that there wasn't a sign of them, which meant that they couldn't get inshore yet and we would just have to wait and hope they could find this spot when it was black night. If they never found this place, the LCT would float later, and the British captain said he would run our wounded out to the hospital ship, though it would not be for hours.

## **Fireworks for the Occasion**

Suddenly our flak started going up at the far end of the beach, and it was very beautiful, twinkling as it burst in the sky, and the tracers were as lovely as they always are; and no one took pleasure from the beauty of the scene. "We've had it now," said the stretcher-bearer. "There isn't any place we can put those wounded." I asked one of the soldiers, just for interest's sake, what they did in case of air raids, and he said well, you could go to a foxhole if you had time, but on the other hand, there really wasn't much to do. So we stood and watched, and there was altogether too much flak for comfort. We could not hear the planes or any bomb explosions, but, as everyone knows, flak is a bad thing to have fall on your head.

The soldiers now drifted off on their own business, and we boarded the LCT to keep the wounded company. The stretcher-bearer and I said to each other gloomily that, as an air-raid shelter, far better things than the hold of an LCT had been devised, and we went inside, not liking any of it, and feeling miserably worried about our wounded.

The wounded looked pretty bad and lay very still. In the light of one bare bulb, which hung from a girder, one could not see them well. Then one of them began to moan, and he said something. He was evidently conscious enough to notice this ghastly racket that was going on above us. The Oerlikons of our LCT now opened fire, and the noise inside the steel hold was as if they were driving rivets into your eardrums. The wounded man called out again, and I realised that he was speaking German.

We checked up, then, and found that we had an LCT full of wounded Germans, and the stretcher-bearer said, "Well, that's just dandy! By golly, if that isn't the pay-off!" Then he said, "If anything hits this ship, dammit, they deserve it." However, there were still the English crew and ourselves aboard and it seemed a rather expensive poetic justice.

The ack-ack lifted a bit, and the stretcher-bearer climbed up to the upper deck, like Sister Anne on the tower, to see where those water ambulances were. I clambered like a very awkward monkey up a ladder to the galley to get some coffee and so missed the spectacle of two German planes falling like fiery comets from the sky. They hit the beach to the right and left of us and burned in huge bonfires which lighted up the shore.

The beach, in this light, looked empty of human life, cluttered with dark square shapes of tanks and trucks and jeeps and ammunition boxes and all the motley equipment of war. It looked like a vast, uncanny black-and-red-flaring salvage dump.

Our LCT crew was delighted because they believed they had brought down one of the German planes, and everyone felt cheerful about the success of the ack-ack. A soldier shouted from shore that we had shot down four planes in all and it was nice work. The wounded were very silent, and those few who had their eyes open had very frightened eyes. They seemed to be listening with their eyes, and fearing what they could hear.

The night, too, went on longer than other nights. Our water ambulances found us, and there was a lot of incomprehensible cockney talk among the boatmen while the wounded were loaded from the now floating LCT to the small, bucking launch. We set out, happy because we were off the beach and because the wounded would be taken where they belonged.

The trip across that obstacle-studded piece of water was a chatty affair, due to the boat crew. "Crikey, mate, wot yer trying ter do? Ram a destroyer?" And, "By God, man, keep an eye in yer head! That's a tank radio pole." To which another answered, "Ye expect me to see a bloody piece of grass in this dark?" So, full of conversation, we zigzagged back to the ship and were at last swung aboard.

The American medical personnel, most of whom had never been in an air raid, tranquilly continued their work, asked no questions, showed no sign of even interest in this uproar, and handed out confidence as if it were a solid thing like bread. If I seem to insist too much in my admiration for these people, understand that one cannot insist too much. There is a kind of devotion, coupled with competence, which is almost too admirable to talk about; and they had all of it that can be had.

If anyone had come fresh to that ship in the night, someone unwounded, not attached to the ship, he would probably have been appalled. It began to look very Black Hole of Calcutta, because it was airless and ill-lit. Piles of bloody clothing had been cut off and dumped out of the way in corners; coffee cups and cigarette stubs littered the decks, plasma bottles hung from cords, and all the fearful surgical apparatus for holding broken bones made shadows on the walls.

There were wounded who groaned in their sleep or called out, and there was the soft, steady hum of conversation among the wounded who could not sleep. That is the way it would have looked to anyone seeing it fresh; a ship carrying a load of pain, with everyone waiting for daylight, everyone longing for England.

It was that, but it was something else, too; it was a safe ship, no matter what happened to it. We were together and we counted on one another. We knew that from the British captain to the pink-cheeked London messboy, every one of the ship's company did his job tirelessly and well. The wounded knew that the doctors and nurses and orderlies belonged to them utterly and would not fail them. And all of us knew that our wounded men were good men, and with their amazing help, their selflessness and self-control, we would get through all right.

There is very little more to write. The wounded looked much better in the morning. The human machine is the most delicate and rare of all, and it is obviously built to survive, if given half the chance. The ship moved steadily across the Channel, and we could feel England coming nearer. Then the coast came into sight, and the green of England looked quite different from how it had looked only two days ago: it looked cooler and clearer and wonderfully safe.

## **The Good Air of England**

The air of England flowed down through the wards, and the wounded seemed to feel it. The sound of their voices brightened and sharpened, and they began making dates with one another for when they would be on convalescent leave in London. The captain shouted down from the bridge, "Look at it! Just look at it!" He was too proud of the navy - his navy and ours - to say more. But he had spoken, in his pride, for all of us.

American ambulance companies were waiting on the pier, the same efficient, swift troops I had seen on the piers and landing ramps before we left. There were conferences on the quay between important shore personages and our captain and chief medical officer; and a few of us, old-timers by now, leaned over the rail and joked about being back in the paperwork department again. Everyone felt very happy and fine, and you could see it in their faces. The head nurse, smiling though grey with weariness, said, "We'll do it better next time," which seemed to me to be a very elegant thing to say. As the first wounded were carried from the ship, the chief medical officer watching them said, "Made it." That was the great thing. Now they would restock their supplies, clean the ship, cover the beds with fresh blankets, sleep whatever hours they could, and then they would go back to France. But this trip was done; this much was to the good; they had made it.

The End