

The Friends' Ambulance Unit

Tony Reynolds (Stourbridge Quaker Meetig)

I came from an old established Quaker family in Dorset. There were eight of us, brothers and sisters altogether. I was twenty at the time of 1939 when the first conscription act came in. I had been fairly active in Quakers and I had taken the decision that, yes I would register as a conscientious objector (C.O.).

In the summer of 1939, before the outbreak of war, I came up to a tribunal in Bristol and stated my case. I was a Friend, had taken part in Quaker activities and been to a Quaker school. I felt it was wrong to fight and wished to uphold the testimony of Friends.

I was given absolute exemption.

Agricultural Work

That meant that I did not have to do anything towards war service or alternative service, but I decided I would undertake some agricultural work. I got a job with a local farming contractor and worked with a plough and a tractor. That came to an end in January, 1940. This was the time of the phony war when nothing was really happening in France.

Joining the Friends' Ambulance Unit

I decided that joining the FAU (Friends' Ambulance Unit) was the thing to do. It was a great relief to be in company with a lot of other young men from different backgrounds, not all Quaker by a long way, who had taken the same decision to be conscientious objectors.

I went to the training camp at Manor Farm in Northfield, Birmingham. In that camp there was group camaraderie. We learnt various things such as marching, which was necessary because if you are going to do ambulance relief work with an army you need to move as an army does. Actually marching is a very efficient way of moving people around and making sure you arrive with the same number you left with.

Because I had been trained in various manual crafts I stayed on at Manor Farm in a work squad doing jobs like putting up blackout entrances to the bunkrooms and repairing all the bunk beds which were falling to pieces.

The Friends' Ambulance Unit in the London Blitz

After that there was need for the work to be done in London where the Blitz had begun. I moved down to London and was helping with the work squad. Our main job was putting up blackouts in the rest centres where bombed out people came to live, putting up bunks in air raid shelters and so on. We had a nice cellar underneath the London Hospital Students' Hostel.

We set up a fire watching station on the flat roof of the hostel. We hauled up sandbags with block and tackle from the ground below. We could look out over the roofs of east London and see where incendiary bombs had landed. It was also a good place to watch the daylight raids on London. There were spectacular night raids when sometimes one saw a gasometer go up with a great "whoosh" over on the south bank.

The China Unit of the Friends' Ambulance Unit

The Background

Then the opportunity came to work in China. Japan had started invading northeast China in 1937. By 1940 the Japanese had occupied all of the coast of China so that the only land routes into China were from

Russia and from Burma. Chinese labourers, working by hand, had built the Burma Road. That was the only life line.

Beginnings

The British government agreed to a Friends' Ambulance Unit convoy going to China to ferry medical supplies into China and to do medical work with Chinese army hospitals. The ambulances and the mobile theatre came from the States. We met those in Rangoon. The ambulances were impractical for China because they were too wide to go through the narrow gates of the Chinese walled cities. Bob McClure, a Canadian surgeon who had been born in China and who had been appointed as our manager to swap these ambulances for standard Chevrolet trucks with the British Army. So we got these trucks and had bodies built on them and started ferrying supplies up the Burma Road.

Bob McClure spoke very fluent Chinese. On the way back from an early convoy he saw a notice written up in Chinese saying the Japanese had bombed Pearl Harbour. That was December 8th, 1941. Bob's remark was that Japan has committed national suicide, but that took some time to occur.

The Last Burma Convoy

Our job was to get as many supplies as we could up into China before Japan captured and closed the port at Rangoon. In fact the last group drove for 20 hours non-stop down to Rangoon and got permission to collect everything they wanted off the docks, load it on their trucks and get away. They just got away. There was a gap of maybe 400 or 500 yards between the pincer movements of the Japanese and there were blazing British tanks on either side of the road. Those supplies were the last to reach China from Burma.

Work in China

There we were. Basically we had got most of our trucks, but not all of our petrol, up into China, but we were cut off. The problems were, how do you run a transport system without any petrol? Well, there was such a thing as running petrol engines on methane gas. There was a French invention which helped you to convert charcoal or any form of pure carbon into methane gas which you could then use in the engine. We built one or two of these units and modified others and we ran a lot of our trucks on charcoal gas. We also took some pretty well wrecked Ford chassis, got hold of six new diesel engines, and installed those. We ran those on rape seed and other vegetable oils.

Thus we did start setting up a transport system in China.

On the medical side we had groups of eight men working with the Chinese army and also a civilian hospital. The Chinese army hospitals were basically places to die because the Chinese army medical core was very poorly manned. They lost a lot of their doctors in earlier battles.

By the end of 1942 we had got a transport system running which moved all the medical supplies used by the Chinese ministry of health and the mission hospitals and the Red Cross. Our main job was moving medical supplies to hospitals. There was no ambulance work in the sense of bringing wounded back because there were no roads where there was fighting.

The medical work was in fact endeavoring to cure soldiers who were suffering from malnutrition and dysentery. We discovered that when those two get beyond a certain point and the gut becomes really inflamed even with antibiotics there was nothing you could do.

We also did quite a lot of surgical work on road accidents. Often the victims had been three or four days on the road so the wounds were horrible. Helping on one operation they needed someone on the "dirty" side of the table, so I helped. I remember that patient had badly crushed lower legs together other injuries. He later died. These things happened.

The Development of the China FAU

By the end of 1946 we had about 150 different people in the unit. We worked together well as a team. We had to take decisions on our own because it took three months for a letter to get to England or to get a reply. You couldn't get through on a phone so we were very much on our own.

It is very interesting that the China unit developed a cohesion which has lasted. The members are very much in touch and we meet at least once a year. Some members moved into international relief work. One became international director for Oxfam and another was Far East field manager for Oxfam.

Working in China after the War's End

When Japan sued for peace after the atom bombs, the unit in China shifted gear so that in the summer of 1946 we changed from transport work in west China to relief and reconstruction work in central and north China. We tried to rebuild villages, set up clinics and so on in areas which had been devastated by war, by floods, by famine. We tried to really help get life going again.

Problems with being a conscientious objector

In one hospital once a man said, "You're one of these conchies. I don't want anything to do with you." But I continued to empty his bedpans.

While I was doing farming work, someone said, "Well, you belong to the country. You must fight for it."

If a Chinese soldier tried to take a pacifist stance, he would be shot. There is the very strong feeling that one must defend the motherland, just as the Japanese had the very strong feeling of service to the emperor.

Would I do it again?

Would I do it again? I think my reply would be yes, but I know now war is a complex problem. The only way to solve many wars is starting with grass roots understanding. The real struggle has to be lived at the grass roots; then gradually peace can go upward. Bringing people together at the top can mean that peace doesn't happen at the bottom, because some people find war exciting and profitable and don't want it to end. We have to recognize the limitations. But, yes, I think I would do it again.

The work we did in China simply wouldn't have been done if we had not done it. And a lot of the work in England simply would not have been done. In China I came face to face with the horror of war. The Chinese army lost hundreds of thousands of men to dysentery and so on. The Chinese army knew that if it moved 500 men 400 kilometers, they would arrive with 200, the other 300 dying on the way. In the trucks we passed columns of men staggering along. It was awful, but there was nothing you could do. There was no hospital to take them to. They were all conscripted, beaten into submission.