

A treasured friend

When writing recently about my teen age years I was conscious of omitting mention of a particular friend in Norfolk. That was solely because I felt his story deserved special attention in its own right. This is that story at least as I know it.

For much of my time in the Women's Land Army in WWII, I worked on a farm in Weeting in Norfolk, just a couple of miles from Brandon in Suffolk. Apart from the owner's wife who helped with the cleaning of the milking equipment, I was the only woman on the farm. I knew only one other female of similar age in the village and we had absolutely nothing in common except that circumstance forced us to sleep in the same room. Yet I was never lonely. One of the realities that was so valuable in those days, was that one could have great friendships with those of opposite gender without the complications of romantic involvement. Solely by circumstance back then, all my immediate friends were male.

When we younger workers on the farm walked to the movie theatre in Brandon, which typically we did once a week, we were sometimes joined there by friend of the eldest of our group.

F... lived in Brandon. He was a rural route mail deliverer. I never saw him in General Post Office (GPO) uniform and it is probable that in that sparsely populated rural area in wartime, such a job was a contract position rather a uniformed, pensionable civil service position such as my grandfather had held for identical work in a more heavily populated rural area in Lancashire.

My friend had a significant acquired disability with which he had coped with very little support other than from his family for most of his life. As a child, fascinated by big steam rollers and steam driven trucks (who remembers those massive iron vehicles?!), he had got a little too close to the action whilst watching road work. Who knows how but he had been hit by the steam truck. In addition to minor cuts and bruises, his elbow was crushed. He came from a financially disadvantaged family and there was no national health system in those days. Today it is hard to believe it could have happened but when I first knew him in the mid forties (he would then be in his early 20s), his elbow had never healed. His non-functional arm was often in a sling and the wounded elbow had to be dressed every day.

Gentle, fun, determined and stoical in the very best sense of the word would describe my friend. Personally, although I rode a boy's bike for many years of my life, I don't think I would ever have dared to do a running mount with only one arm but he could! He was very much in control of his life despite its physical limitations. Like the rest of us in the group we were good friends. When I had to leave that job and area, we maintained contact by mail.

A few years after I left Weeting, he had a second serious accident. There had been a heavy snow storm and piles of snow sat at each side of the typically quiet rural road leaving only slightly more than a one lane wide "roadway." In those days in the UK, there

were two mail deliveries a day. He was cycling home in the dusk from his late afternoon rural delivery when he heard what sounded to him like a fast moving Army truck. He quickly threw himself and his bike into the snow bank as the truck turned the corner but he was a couple of inches short of safety. The truck ran over his heel and, virtually, chopped it off! The truck stopped, the devastated soldiers radioed their base and the Army took over and immediately accepted full responsibility – and rightly so.

Over the next few years, at Army expense, my friend received exceptional care from some of the most famous plastic surgeons of the time. Not only did they build him a new heel but they determined that because he was in for long hospital stays anyway as they built the new heel, they would also give him a new elbow.

My friend received that treatment in Hill End Hospital, a former mental institution in Saint Albans, North of London. During WWII, Hill End Hospital was taken over by Saint Bartholomew's, one of London's most noted hospitals, typically referred to as St Bart's. According to information on their site, most of St Bart's surgery in WWII was carried out at the Hill End site. That included plastic surgery, a growing practice in WWII at the time in response to the appalling injuries sustained in RAF air crashes and related accidents.

The hospital was too far from my friends's home for his family to visit regularly. At that time, I was living and working in Weybridge, Surrey, certainly not close to St Albans, but doable as a day trip via London and a "Green Line" coach to St Albans. I managed to do a Saturday trip a number of times thus witnessing various stages of the fascinating process of building a new heel and a new elbow for my friend. These wounds were not simple matters of skin grafts, they also required the much longer process of flesh transfer and growth. Not an easy process for the patient for sure! I recall a visit when my friend was in a cast pinning his inner wrist to the fleshy part of his chest for a few weeks as skin and flesh were transferred from body to wrist. The next stage, even more complicated, was to attach that flesh and skin now growing on his wrist to his foot to grow the necessary cushion for the new heel. That cast was tricky, locking his wrist to his heel, his arm outstretched and his leg folded up to reach the wrist. He was stuck in that position for weeks. I so admired his patience and acceptance of these necessary but very debilitating processes.

Those visits to my friend were such an eye opener for me, in fact, a great privilege. I met patients who as children had fallen face first into open fireplaces and suffered unbelievable facial destruction. Now, as adults, their faces were being gradually rebuilt. I met former RAF Pilots who had survived air crashes only to be severely burned in the resulting fires and various others whose damaged bodies were being rebuilt. It was an unexpected but very moving experience. I often wished that more people could see such things.

The last time I was able to visit my friend, he said that what he would really like to do that afternoon would be to go down the road to the hotel so he could enjoy a quiet beer in normal surroundings before he started the next few weeks of grafting for the final stages of rebuilding his elbow. So that is what we did. I don't remember whether he was walking or whether we used a wheelchair on that occasion. Very clearly, I remember us sitting and chatting for a couple of hours in the hotel lounge. That was in the late 40s, perhaps early

50s. I moved back North very soon afterwards. Sadly, it was too far to visit from there. Initially, we corresponded by mail but gradually, over the years, we lost touch.

That happens! In earlier internet days, I tried a few times to find contact with him but no luck. Yet, life does tend to go on, a fact for which I remain extremely thankful. If all goes well as we age, we still have our memories. I treasure the memory of my gentle and courageous friend.

Audrey D. Cole

January 12th 2021