

Headquarters,
Royal Air Force,
Palestine & Trans-Jordan,
JERUSALEM.

3rd May, 1941.

REPORT BY FLIGHT LIEUTENANT W.P. GRIFFIN, MEDICAL
BRANCH, ROYAL AIR FORCE .

After the withdrawal of the remainder of my previous unit from the Epirus front, I was attached to No.33 A.S.P. at DAFNI near Athens, on the 19th of April, 1941. Two days later orders were received confining all personnel to Camp, shortly to be followed by the order to "standby at an hour's notice to evacuate the Camp". The following day, April 23rd, at 1815 hours I was ordered by O.C. 33 A.S.P. to proceed in my ambulance to ARGOS (Peleponessos), forthwith. The unit accompanied by No.33 A.S.P. was to follow at 2050 hours.

My ambulance carried our complete medical equipment, and besides the driver, L.A.C. Henderson, medical orderly, was with us. We passed ELNUSIS aerodrome shortly after a very heavy air raid and followed the coastal road of SALAMIS BAY. As we neared MEGARA, a heavy raid took place, as a result of which the large Petrol and ammunition dumps were put on fire. We had to take cover several times on the road, on account of low-level machine gun attacks by German M.E.110 aircraft.

We passed CORINTH in darkness and were approaching ARGOS when we were stopped by Lieut.Colonel FERRIDGE (Welsh Fusiliers). I was then advised to proceed direct to the port of NAUPLION, at which place we arrived at 2300 hours that evening. On arrival, I reported to Lieut.-Commander Carr, R.N.R., the S.T.O. of the port and the only British Officer there at the time. I had known this officer previously, and he asked me to assist him in organising the port services - water, fuel, ferries, etc., with the port officials and Municipality, as he had no liaison officer with him to interpret for him. This involved a visit to the local Greek Military Headquarters, and numerous and lengthy interviews with a most obstructive and unwilling Greek port Officer. After a few hours' sleep in the ambulance we were up before dawn to arrange the piloting into the outer anchorage of H.M.T. "Santa Clara Valley", to have her cargo of 500 tons of high explosive dumped into the sea, in preparation for the embarkation of troops that evening. Small motor sailing craft were engaged to ferry out detachments of R.R. personnel to do this work, and the owners bargained with for their services.

In the meanwhile we knew that large numbers of troops were arriving in the outskirts of the town. It was wisely decided to allow no vehicles and only the minimum number of necessary personnel into the town itself. At about 0800 hours German reconnaissance aircraft passed over and reconnoitered the ARGOS area where they were engaged by heavy A.A. fire. An hour and a half later a series of heavy raids took place over that area and continued until dusk.

I decided to establish a F.A. Post near the port and off-loaded our equipment in a little tree-covered square near the port. At about 0930 hours a French Sergeant Pilot who had been wounded and had escaped from his Hurricane by parachute the previous day was brought to me, and with him came Sergeant Green of 211 Squadron who was hit in the arm during a low-level machine gun attack on Menidi the previous day. Both of these I took to the POLITIFON civil hospital in town and operated on them there.

At noon, our turn came, when eight Junkers 88 aircraft dive-bombed the port. The S.S. Santa Clara Valley got seven direct hits and went on fire. The crew and working party of R.E.s were machine gunned in the water as they tried to swim ashore.

About fifty men were carried or led up from the beach to the Municipal School where I examined them and applied first aid (shell dressing and morphia were indicated) to the wounded. Some eight of them I had to remove in my ambulance to the Politikon hospital for operation. By this time panic had spread in the town and only three very nervous nursing staff were in the hospital. The young Greek M.C. who accompanied me there and promised to give anaesthetics for me excused himself and dashed off. We had to carry in the patients ourselves, and get them to bed whilst waiting for the theatre to get ready. A few cheery words to the nurses worked wonders and their morale was soon restored. My party now consisted of the Reverend J. GILL, R.A.F. Chaplain, who had arrived that morning at the port from ARGOS, L.A.C. HENDERSON, medical orderly, and L.A.C. SURTESS, ambulance driver.

The theatre and instruments were soon ready, and the two first major cases were done under local anaesthetic:- Sgt. BULMAN, R.E., gunshot wound of heart and left lung, and W/Opr. MERCHANT, R.N.V.R., gunshot wound of pelvis. Henderson assisted me at the table and the padre made himself most useful as theatre orderly. At about 1430 hours a messenger from Greek Headquarters arrived to inform me that the town was completely evacuated and that we were advised to clear out as soon as possible as the S.S. Santa Clara Valley which had still got 500 tons of high explosives on board, was burning fiercely and drifting towards the town, and was due to blow up at any moment! Meanwhile, somebody had ordered L.A.C. Surteess to move off with the ambulance, and so we were fairly well stranded. The Padre went off and found a deserted ambulance not far away and asked L.A.C. FLYNN, a D.F. of 84 Squadron to drive it for him.

I then asked the padre to take away our two operation cases and two or three walking cases to an agreed point about four miles North of the town and to send back the ambulance for the remaining cases. We sent a nurse with these patients and an old Greek doctor who had just turned up. In the meantime four more cases required operation and we carried on. The ambulance returned and we loaded on our patients ourselves, and three old bedridden civil cases from the hospital who would otherwise have been left unattended. Having sent these off with the remaining staff, I borrowed an empty 15-cwt army truck driven by an R.E. Staff Sergeant and returned to our P.A. Post for my medical equipment and then collected another wounded sailor whom I had been told was lying in a school house and proceeded out to our safety point North of the town. Here I found the padre with the patients and staff as comfortable as possible under the circumstances. A wounded R.A. private was brought in just then and I had to open up his foot which had a very nasty suppurating wound. We were busy with this when, with a deafening roar, the ship blew up in the harbour. Large pieces of metal and other debris were thrown many miles around it and we were pretty glad to have moved out beforehand! Then came the trek back to town with the wounded. The movement and shifting about was too much for our chest wound case who died very peacefully and without pain before we returned.

The civil hospital was still standing, but the glass in the windows was shattered. The patients were given hot tea and (those who could have it) some bully beef and biscuits. After this we returned to our P.A. Post under the trees, cleaned out and aired the ambulance and turned in, very weary, for a few hours' rest.

Meanwhile, more ships had come into port and shortly after

dawn hell was let loose:- two of the ships were hit and on fire, while the roads and surrounding hills and valleys were bombed and machine gunned incessantly.

I understood that a Staff conference was to be held near the town on the ARGOS Road at 1000 hours to arrange details of the evacuation plan and decided to attend. It was held in a cattle stable and I was able to make arrangements for the evacuation of my wounded, and to ask for 20 stretcher bearers to attend at the port at 2200 hours that evening. I met Captain J.E.S. CARMICHAEL, R.A.M.C., who offered to return with me accompanied by a colleague of his, Captain J.B. SHIEL, who had no duties to detain him.

As the bombardment was heavy, it seemed that there would be further casualties, so I decided to open up a station where casualties could be received and adequately dealt with. The civil hospital doctor told me that he was "closing down" and we had perforce to remove our wounded elsewhere.

A Greek church near the port seemed to me to be suitable and we accordingly moved the wounded there. We were right in our supposition, as very soon more cases started arriving. Rations were begged and stolen from deserted lorries, blankets were collected and stretchers arranged around the church floor - and the patients moved in.

My staff had by now increased by the two medical officers who had volunteered to help me; L.A.C. MITCHAM, medical orderly 211 Squadron and A.C. MACMILLAN who joined us later. The staff was thus composed as follows :-

F/Lieut. W.P. GRIFFIN	23154	S.M.C.(self)
S/Ldr.the Rev.J.JILL, R.A.F. Chaplain.		
Capt. J.B. SHIEL,	P.123106	R.A.M.C.
Capt. J.E.S. CARMICHAEL		R.A.M.C.
Sergt. C.A. BROWN	545646	F.A.E.,32 A.S.P.
Cpl. W.H. HUTCHINSON	363032	F.A.E.,32 A.S.P.
L.A.C. L.F.HENDERSON	520132	N.O. 33 A.S.P.
L.A.C. P.W. SURTEES	540801	D.F. 33 A.S.P.
L.A.C. H.S. MITCHAM	535441	N.O. 311 Sqn.
L.A.C. H. HAYES	966176	D.F. 84 Sqn.
A.C.D. MACMILLAN	648666	F.V. 80 Sqn.

We rigged up an operation table (a stretcher on four chairs) opposite the high altar, with a huge candelabra above it, and got out the medical equipment in readiness. Several more cases came in and we were working until nearly 10 p.m. the Zero hour for evacuation. Every member of the Staff was detailed for a separate job and despite the fact that bombardment was heavy and frequent and that the plaster from the painted frescos of the ceiling was frequently coming down on us, the work continued normally and efficiently. L.A.C. HENDERSON, who had been working continuously with me during the past two heavy days, was conspicuous in his unremitting zeal in carrying out his duties in connection with the surgical work. Without his help the scheme would have fallen through. The Reverend Gill worked with us doing everything possible to help us and, indeed, was my right hand man in the organization and carrying out of the plan.

The stretcher bearers reported on time, and the wounded were moved down to the quay-side about 350 yards away. The two R.A.F. N.C.Os. were sent off in a boat to a Sunderland flying boat moored nearby. This was done in accordance with Air Commodore Greigson's wishes.. He had been to visit us that evening.

A.M.T. "UNION PRINCE" was the ship to which we had been detailed. She was then moving alongside the quay - and had the misfortune to go aground about 80 yards off (She was subsequently abandoned after desperate attempts to get her off had been made and was dive-bombed and set on fire the following morning by the enemy). Meanwhile, orderly columns of troops were being marched through the town and were embarking into Armoured Landing Craft and being taken out to ships in the bay.

Our wounded were also lowered into these craft by volunteer Australian stretcher bearers, the others having already embarked.

It was a black, moonless night, fortunately for us. I was on the last A.L.C. which left the quay side, and when we were about half a mile off there was a terrific crash ahead of us:- a corvette H.M.S. "Hyacinth" had cut in half the preceding A.L.C. The searchlights from the surrounding ships went on and lit up a scene of indescribable confusion. Out of about 60 men we were only able to pick up about 38 - the remainder being presumed drowned.

We finally made our transport - H.M.T. Glenairn and got everyone on board. The wounded totalled 27 stretcher cases and 19 walking cases. After enquiry, I reported to the Senior Medical Officer on the ship, who immediately took charge of the situation and organized three watches of staff drawn from available service medical personnel on board.

Lieut-Colonel DONALD, R.A.M.C. Surgeon specialist from the 26th General Hospital took the surgical team on the first watch ending at 6 a.m. next day. At this stage I was so exhausted that I could not keep awake and begged of the S.M.O. to excuse my small staff of men from further duty unless in case of major emergency. This he very kindly agreed to. We set out shortly after midnight and I was grateful for a few hours' sleep.

Other wounded who had sustained their injuries on the road that day were coming in at the quay side right until the end and many of them required surgical aid. I took over from Lieut. Colonel Donald at 6 a.m. and found a list of seven cases awaiting operation.

Shortly after dawn the first of two bombing attacks took place on the convoy. The ship had already suffered two direct hits in the fore-castle shortly before sunset the previous evening.

A two inch gun was mounted above the roof of the operating theatre, which made things fairly unpleasant for us doing the job down below.

Two cases died and were buried at sea :- A Cypriot Pte. G. G. NICHOLAU R.E., ruptured internal viscus, and L.A.C. TAYLOR, 113 Squadron, gun shot wound right lung.

By 3 p.m. as my work was drawing to a close, we were informed that we were making SUDA BAY, CRETE, and a total disembarkation would take place there at about 1700 hours on April 26th.

The wounded were as comfortable as possible; all had fully completed Field Medical cards, and were disembarked into A.L.Cs and then ashore by our excellent Australian volunteer stretcher bearers.

I left H.M.T. GLENNAIRN with the last party of stretcher cases at 2300 hours.

I must take this opportunity to express my warmest gratitude to Surgeon Lieut-Commander JOHNSTON, P.M.O. of H.M.T. GLENNAIRN, for his highly efficient and well trained organization and sick

The operating theatre and sick bay were wonderfully equipped and well run -- making our job as easy as was possible under the circumstances.

Disembarkation at Crete was carried out efficiently and without incident.

All wounded, medical stores and staff were put ashore in safety.

6th May, 1941.

Flight Lieutenant
Medical Branch.

ENCLOSURE "A" TO
REPORT BY FLIGHT LIEUTENANT W.P. GRIFFIN, MEDICAL BRANCH
ROYAL AIR FORCE.

Lieut. Colonel KERRIDGE, Royal Welsh Fusiliers.

This officer stopped my ambulance two miles North of ARGOS and asked who was on board. I gave my rank and name - to which he replied :-

"Oh, it's some more of you Royal Air Force Bastards! I'm fed up to the teeth with the whole bloody bunch of you!" (This state,emt can be verified by my driver and orderly.)

I got out of the behicle and told him that as far as I knwe we were to report to Air Commodore GREGGSON near ARGOS, to which he replied :-

" I've heard of your bloody Air Commodore or whatever he calls himself - but he hasn't done anything except have a good dinner and go to bed, leaving the Army to do the dirty work - as usual!"

After some further similar offensive remarks against the Service he then suggested that I should stay there on the road and direct further traffic, to the encampment near ARGOS, to which I protested that it was not my duty as a medical officer to direct traffic. Hereupon he told me to go to Hell, and walked away in a towering temper.

6th May, 1941.

Flight Lieutenant
Medical Branch

ENCLOSURE "B" TO
REPORT BY FLIGHT LIEUTENANT W.P. GRIFFIN, MEDICAL BRANCH
ROYAL AIR FORCE.

COPY OF LETTER SENT TO THE P.M.D., H.Q., M.E.

Headquarters,
Royal Air Force,
Palestine & Trans-Jordan,
JERUSALEM.

1st May, 1941.

To:- The P.M.D.,
H.Q., M.E.

No. 520130 L.A.C. HENDERSON, L.F.
MEDICAL ORDERLY

I have the honour to draw to your notice the excellent manner in which the above mentioned medical orderly carried out his duties on the 24th and 25th of April, 1941, during the evacuation of the B.E.F. and B.A.F. from Greece, at Nauplion. His untiring hard work and devotion to his duty were in accordance with the best traditions of the Service, and are worthy of record and recognition.

(Signed) W.P. GRIFFIN

Flight Lieutenant
Medical Branch

ENCLOSURE "C" TO
REPORT BY FLIGHT LIEUTENANT W.P. GRIFFIN, MEDICAL
BRANCH, ROYAL AIR FORCE.

COPY OF LETTER TO O.C. No. 84 SQUADRON.

Headquarters,
Royal Air Force,
Palestine & Trans-Jordan,
JERUSALEM.

6th May, 1941.

To:- O.C.,
No. 84 Squadron,
R. A. F.

No. 966176 L.A.C. HAYES, H. D.P. 84 SQN.

I have the honour to draw to your attention that the above mentioned airman of your Unit volunteered to drive an ambulance for us on the 24th of April, 1941, during the evacuation of the B.E.F. and B.A.F. from Greece at Nauplion.

This man carried out his work tirelessly and cheerfully for two days with little food or rest. Not only did he drive the ambulance but he helped carry the wounded all day and made himself most helpful in every possible way. His courage under bombardment, his cheerfulness and his kindness to the wounded are well worthy of record and, if possible, recognition.

(Signed) W.P. GRIFFIN

Flight Lieutenant
Medical Branch.