

Fifty years on: Colin Davis, OBE, FDS interviews

Eric Cooper, FDS RCS (Eng)

Just over 50 years ago, Eric Cooper was released from the gloomy fortress castle of Colditz after almost 4 years as a prisoner of war. He recently retired to a small village near Yarmouth on the Isle of Wight where his garden looks out over a great sweep of cornland with the long line of the chalk downs in the distance. It is impossible to imagine two more contrasted pictures and I was eager to find out about the old warrior's odyssey as we sat sipping sherry and looking out to that incomparable view.

I suppose we should start at the beginning, tell me a bit about your early life and how you got into dentistry.

I lived for the first 18 years of my life in Rotherham and there, at the age of 16, the school dentist, Ronnie Heald, inspired me with the idea of becoming a dentist. Two years later I was awarded a West Riding County Major Scholarship which enabled me to take a university degree course. On the advice of our GP (a Bart's man!), I applied to Guy's and entered there in 1931.

So I was just 2 years ahead of you. Who were your chief mentors in those now legendary days of the old dental school?

Many names come to mind — Walter Herbert, Freddie Doubleday, George Tregarthen, Martin Rushton, Alan Thompson — but above all, Sir William Kelsey Fry, all of whose words seemed to me wisdom indeed. I spent 6 magical months as his house surgeon in 1936-7.

After your house job, the world was really your oyster. What did you do next?

I went as assistant to Harvey Kenshole, a part-time member of the dental school staff, who was opening a branch practice at Chislehurst. I got £300 a year and free accommodation in the Chislehurst flat which housed the practice — quite something in those days. Occasionally I would do a 'locum' session at the Greenwich Hospital for George Exner. These amounted to 2 hours of out-patient treatment — treatment confined to extraction under general anaesthetic. I don't suppose I ever removed fewer than 200 teeth in any of these sessions.



Eric Cooper at his home near Yarmouth on the Isle of Wight.

Harvey was a territorial of long standing, a Lieutenant-Colonel in the Royal Army Medical Corps (he was doubly qualified) and accordingly he was called up shortly before the war began. Not being a territorial, it took me a little longer to escape but by November 1939 I was in a dental centre in York military hospital — now a housing estate. Three months later, I joined No. 26 General Hospital which

was being assembled at the Exam Schools in Oxford, and in June we left from Gourock in the Queen Mary.

Where did you finish up?

By way of Cape Town, Sri Lanka and Bombay we reached Palestine and stayed there until November 1940 when Mussolini, already in Albania, invaded Greece. By way of Alexandria we moved to Greece and estab-

lished our 600-bed hospital at Kifissia, an inland resort some 12 km north of Athens.

A very pleasant life there ended when the German army came down through the Balkans in the spring. Their Italian friends were in serious trouble. Most of the No. 26 General Hospital staff, including the 50 sisters, were evacuated to Crete and thence, a few days later, to Egypt.

For me, however, Crete was the end of the road. The dental officer of No. 7 (tented) General Hospital had sprained his ankle and I joined them, on the north coast of Crete, on a temporary basis. But early one morning the blue sky was filled, silently, with gliders and with parachutes of all colours. It was rather beautiful really, but then there was gunfire and nasty whining bullets flying around. The battle for the vital Maleme airfield, a few miles to the west, had begun.

It must have been a pretty nightmarish experience. Tell me about it in detail.

Well, happily there was a slit trench, dug only the previous evening, and there I stayed for the next 3 hours or so until a New Zealand infantryman assured me we were still on the right side of the battle line, but the tents were all badly damaged, and the hospital as an organised unit was no more.

What on earth did you do next?

There were several caves nearby and somehow we lived in one of these with such patients as had survived, emerging at night to bury any dead. I found an abandoned truck and became a hearse driver. When the Germans finally secured Maleme, we were told to leave, to make for Chora Sfakion on the south coast, where we would be evacuated by the Navy. We were to follow the coast road eastwards to beyond Chania and then turn south, always walking in the dark and hiding during the day. I suppose it would be about midnight on the second night of the walk that I passed through the village of Vryses. It had been bombed that day, was badly damaged by fire

and explosives and its inhabitants had clearly fled. It was still glowing red but incongruously, singing in the surrounding trees, were the first nightingales I had ever heard.

That must have made your heart ache. Go on.

Towards the end of the third night, after 24 hours without water, a few of us found our way into a walled monastery garden where there was a well. I filled my tin hat with water and drank it all. We had had no food since we began the walk and almost no sleep.



Eric Cooper, Greece 1941.

During the fourth night we found many soldiers asleep by the roadside. Many of them were too weary to be awakened and of those we did rouse, most could no longer appreciate the situation and wanted only to go to sleep again.

But what I most remember about that last night's walk is a place of magnificent buildings, tall houses, columns, stairs, a theatre, all of marble — all, as I learnt later, a hallucination from lack of sleep. There was no such place.

Then the road ended and we had to climb down a steep gully, a rocky ravine which led, far below, to the sea and our destination. It was covered with scrub and carpeted, like much of Crete, by thyme.

Next morning, at the village, we were told to go back into the ravine and wait for our turn to embark that night. We found a cave and waited. Three days we waited, enlivened only by some stew provided by an Australian ex-butcher who had captured a wretched donkey.

On the evening of the third day, we were told that all resistance had ended and the island was surrendered to the Germans. It is now known, of course, that the Germans were about to give up themselves. That night I slept, on a bed of rocks, the deepest sleep of my life.

The next morning German soldiers appeared at the head of the ravine and began shooting at us with a mortar. I remember sitting outside the cave and watching the shells exploding closer and closer. The Germans told us to make our own way back to Galatos, on the north of the island, more or less back to where we had started. There, they said, we would find some food. Then they passed on down to the harbour where, we learned afterwards, the German aircraft bombed them by mistake. It was Whit Sunday, June 1, 1941.

It took us — two or three medical officers, a few soldiers and myself — several trips to get the injured back up the ravine to the road, by which time we were all more dead than alive and it was mid-afternoon. Mercifully, a soldier managed to revive an abandoned truck and we all rode back to the north.

A few days later we were back at the sad and shredded remains of the hospital, and there, with scant possessions or shelter, we stayed until October, eating little but boiled rice. But at least the Cretan summers are hot and the sea warm.

By Jove, you certainly had your 'beaker full of the warm south,' but what a dispiriting end to your active service. What happened next?

We left Crete, shut in a ship's hold, bound for Salonica, via one intermediate night in a barracks on a hill above Athens. The geography of Athens makes it a trap now for the fumes from

car exhausts, but the morning I awoke there the city lay buried in a pure white mist on which the Parthenon, high on the Acropolis, and Mount Lykabettus, seemed magically to float.

It must have been as moving as hearing the nightingales on Crete.

After a few days we left Salonika by train for Germany. The officers were sealed in an erstwhile dining car, the other ranks in cattle trucks. We each had a loaf of bread. It took 10 days to reach Stalag VIII B at Lamsdorf in Upper Silesia (it is now in Poland and has a different name). On arrival someone gave me a baked potato. Nothing ever tasted better. Less pleasant was the mirror on the wall which reflected the bloated face of protein deficiency.

What sort of a place was it? One tends to imagine they were all like Belsen.

This was a well-established camp with a hospital, a dental centre and regular Red Cross parcels. My own opportunity to resume dentistry came early in the new year (1942), when I was moved to a prisoner of war camp near Berlin. The men worked on the railway tracks and I shared a room with the medical officer (a New Zealander) and the padre. The dental surgery was reasonably equipped and a few extra items could be obtained, unofficially, with the help of cigarettes or coffee from the Red Cross parcels.

After a year or so, the camp was destroyed in an RAF raid on Berlin. No one was hurt and we moved to another camp, where in the autumn we read leaflets dropped by the RAF by the light of Berlin burning 6 miles away. We were moved again 'to a holiday camp in the Black Forest', they said. Maybe they all got there but I was diverted to be dental officer of Oflag IV C — Colditz. I'd never heard of it.

Of course Colditz has become a legend, a sort of élitist escape club, an endless cat and mouse relationship with the Germans, tremendous camaraderie. Did you get involved in any of the ingenious plans for escape?

I never actually tried to escape myself, but I was involved with other people's efforts both directly and indirectly.

The full sized dental chair was easily accommodated in a window em-



Colditz castle, Germany

brasure of the thick stone walls and the equipment was adequate. The pendant-type drill, however, gave me a small electric shock every time I let go of the handpiece. It proved to be many weeks after I returned to England before I let go a handpiece without a little apprehension.

One morning a German officer and two men entered the surgery and slid the chair sideways. Surprisingly(!) there was a hole in the floor which led down to a tunnel. The hole was filled in and no retribution followed. It was a fairly routine affair at Colditz.

What about the famous glider?

The famous glider was made in a secluded end of the attic space beneath the steeply sloping roof. My only contribution to it was to make two spars. It was never discovered by the Germans but I wonder how it would have fared, launched down that sloping roof and gliding away over the river far below.

But at last it was all over. Did the Russians release you?

No. The Americans advanced to us along a narrow corridor and fought a day- and night-long battle for Colditz town. For a short time, until they correctly identified the castle, we were under US artillery fire. Fortunately no one was hurt, but the thick walls were not proof against armour-piercing shells. We were liberated on April 16, 1945.

Colditz was no concentration camp. There were dangers but there

was food, thanks to the Red Cross. At the end there was danger indeed, perhaps more than we realised at the time, but we were all fit and illness in the camp had been rare.

It must have been a marvellous moment when you touched down in England.

Yes indeed. Back home we were given 6 weeks leave and double rations. I spent part of my leave near the shores of Loch Etive, and the over-shadowing bulk of Ben Cruachan remained in my memory until I finally climbed it when I was 75.

My experience of hunger and of the ease with which a country can run short of food told me I ought to become, as far as possible, self-sufficient. I married and with my wife's enthusiastic help we bought a Jersey cow. It lived in a field looking westward over Morecambe bay to the Lake District hills and eastward to Ingleborough mountain. We had poultry, an occasional pig and a large fruit and vegetable garden. I was so fortunate as to hold a hospital consultantship in that wonderful countryside. There our three children grew up and only a few months ago, after 43 years, did we leave. Life just could not have been kinder to me.

Well perhaps not all the time. You must be a very compassionate man.

Thank you for giving up your time to me and my thanks to your wife for a delicious lunch. Now, back to your garden.... ■