The bombing of St Thomas's

Frank Cockett

During the Blitz of 1940 many of London's hospitals were damaged but none so badly as St Thomas's, just across the river from the Houses of Parliament. Although the hospital went on suffering bomb damage into 1944, the worst occurred in September and October 1940. Those weeks were described in three letters to his family in Australia by Frank Cockett, then a house surgeon and now consulting surgeon at St Thomas's.

From St Thomas's Hospital, 10 September 1940

Well! for the last three days we have been subjected to real Blitzkrieg—indiscriminate bombing of London. Let me tell you about it while it is still fresh in my memory. The air raids of the last few weeks have been just nothing—they were the Mickey Mouse before the big picture.

It was the afternoon of Sept 8th when it all began. There was an ordinary air raid alarm, so I went up to a balcony on top of St Thomas's to see what I could (I don't go up now, I go down quick). It was a very fine day, no clouds, and suddenly there was an enormous roaring of engines and there, very high, were numerous little glistening specks which were the German bombers. They were flying in formation—there were about four formations and a lot of scattered ones (presumably fighters). It was really a marvellous

sight. They then started dropping their bombs—they were aiming at the docks. The bombs were some way away and started four enormous fires over in the region of the docks. The fires got bigger and as it got dark they lit up the whole of London. . . . Every tall building looked as if it was on fire inside because all the windows reflected a red glow. The houses of parliament were well illuminated, and I expect the river looked like a winding red streak from the air. Then about 8.30 pm the night air raid started—and went on all night.

This was my first experience of bombs falling really close and it shook me not a little. It was funny in a way—I was sitting up in my room with a friend of mine trying to finish some notes. Outside about every three minutes there would be a long drawn out whistle as the bomb descended and then a cr-r-r-ump as it exploded. Well we were trying hard to be calm and take no notice, when suddenly there was a scream of a bomb descending which sounded devilish close—we both looked up and waited for it—there was a tremendous crash, my windows caved in about an inch and the things on my table gave a convulsive leap. This shook us so we jumped up very quickly and turned out the light and rushed out onto the balcony, where we were joined by another chap. We had not been there three minutes when there was a screamer just over our heads: well we dashed for the doorway like nobody's business and

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1940

9 September 2 am. A large bomb struck one of the nine blocks of St Thomas's Hospital—the nurses' home—causing six deaths.

10 September, 76 patients were evacuated to other hospitals outside London and basement wards were prepared for emergency cases.

13 September 3.15 am. Two bombs fell, damaging another block of the hospital but killing no one.

15 September 8.30 pm. The most damaging bomb of all fell, making a direct hit on the main corridor and central block. It wrecked the medical outpatients department, several wards, the resident staff quarters, the kitchen, and the dispensary and damaged several more wards, the x ray department, and the medical school. This was the raid in which two of Cockett's friends—Colin Campbell and Peter Spilsbury—were killed, trapped in a collapsed basement. For their part in trying to rescue casualties from the basement the assistant clerk of works, the resident assistant physician, and a medical student were later awarded the George Medal for their bravery.

15 October 9.15 am. A heavy bomb struck one of the blocks, wrecking a ward and the telephone exchange. Throughout that night there was incessant bombing around the hospital; two air raid shelters took direct hits, producing a stream of casualties for the hospital.

8 December 1 am. A shower of incendiary bombs fell on the hospital.

29 December 6 pm. More incendiaries fell on the hospital, causing fires.

1941

The "country" branch of St Thomas's, near Godalming, Surrey, was equipped and staffed and eventually had 360 beds. St Thomas's in London retained a small emergency unit in the basement.

6 April 10 am. Incendiaries and a landmine fell on the hospital.

10 May 11.15 am—5.15 pm. High explosive bombs and incendiary devices fell on the hospital, gutting several blocks and causing wards to be evacuated.

1944

4 July. A flying bomb that landed in Lambeth Palace Gardens caused damage to one of the blocks.

15 July. A flying bomb hit a block of the hospital, destroying it.

Despite the damage to buildings and equipment, estimated at a cost of £1.5m, and its twice being reduced from a pre-war complement of 682 beds to 12, St Thomas's never shut throughout the war.

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St Thomas's Hospital,
London SE1
Frank Cockett, FRCS,
consulting surgeon

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the bomb (luckily a small incendiary) exploded in Lambeth Palace Road not 20 yards from where we were standing (it did very little damage.) Well that was enough for us—we promptly retired to the basement. . . .

Next day, behold, all the chaps dragging their beds down to the basement. Me included. My bedchamber is now set among x ray tubes and things in the basement of the x ray dept. Well at about 7 pm the same thing happened again—bombers came over and lit fires with incendiary bombs—and then about 9 pm the night strafe commenced. I was not so frightened now, and my heart was behaving itself properly—I was becoming seasoned. I did my night rounds, and watched the bombs dropping for a bit, then wandered about having tea here, and ovaltine somewhere else, as nearly everybody else was also doing, and then about 2 am went to bed in my basement and got to sleep. The next thing was I found myself sitting up in bed—chaps were rushing here and there. St Thomas's has been hit by a bomb. I donned my dressing gown and slippers and went out into the corridor and was met by a pall of dust. I asked a few questions and found that the wing opposite Westminster Bridge—the nurses' home—had been hit. I went along and joined a party which was hunting for people who were trapped. Then from 2.30 to 3.30 am we climbed about in the ruins calling out and searching for people. The nurses' home had been demolished—was just a heap of ruins. Everybody who was near when the bomb exploded was absolutely covered in black dust—was quite unrecognisable. We found five nurses who were trapped and let them out by shifting some enormous piece of furniture and thus allowing a piece of wall to fall down. They seemed quite cheery. All the while the bombs were falling round about—but we did not take much notice of them then. The amazing thing was that only five nurses were killed, and a lot of them had cuts and bruises but nothing serious. One was pinned under the ruins for hours before she died.

In the morning what a spectacle! I can't describe it

but it must have been a high explosive bomb to do all that damage.

Then last night the whole hospital, doctors, nurses, maids, pundits and pinkies all slept together in the basement! A most incredible sight—one could hardly move without stumbling over a sleeping form. We all slept very well, partly because we were so tired and partly because we were now getting used to bombs. . . . Today we evacuated the hospital—there is only one patient in it now—an acute appendix which was brought in just now. Another bomb came down in the road outside the hospital last night by the way.

From Richmond 20 September 1940

Well how would you feel if you came back home and there was no home left! That's how I feel at the moment. I came back . . . yesterday expecting to do a little work at Thomas's for my exam, and I find that while I have been away St Thomas's has evaporated. . . . Thomas's took two more very devastating direct hits while I was away, and these have reduced it to little more than a ruin. I felt incredibly depressed as I walked through the deserted and debris ridden halls which so lately had teemed with life. I visited the ruined operating theatre, where only one short week ago I had done my last operation—the nurse who assisted me at it was killed by one of the bombs. My successor—P B Spilsbury to whom I handed over all my patients a short while back—was killed; he was a very good friend of mine. J C K Campbell also killed. He was my brother house surgeon for the last three months, also a very good friend. Two other doctors badly injured.

It's this sort of thing that makes one feel absolutely livid with Hitler. If he thinks that he is striking a blow at the morale of the British by this indiscriminate bombing of London—he never made a bigger mistake. These pleasant little joy rides over London at night are doing more to knit England together, and more to strengthen our determination than anything else would. . . .

Edward VI Square, St Thomas's, immediately opposite Big Ben, showing the damage after the bomb of 9th September 1940

This menagerie, painted on to a corridor wall in the basement where most of St Thomas's activities retreated to after the bombs of October 1940, was probably to prevent the unwary from walking into the wall during the blackout. It is carefully preserved

It is nothing like as bad here (Richmond) as it was in London. Anywhere near the river in London is unsafe because the river is the only thing they can see at night, flying at the height they do, and they just pepper along both sides. . . . The Houses of Parl have escaped completely so far—but Big Ben has three large holes in the clock face facing us—due to pieces of shrapnel I suppose. The days are now a bit less dangerous—thanks to the RAF.

From St Thomas's Hospital 21 October 1940

Well a lot has happened since I wrote to you last. Soon after this St Thomas's called me up and said would I go back as they wanted a house surgeon. I arrived back about October 3rd, and for the past three weeks I have been in the centre of things—which is really very satisfactory.

St Thomas's is now the central casualty clearing station of the sector. We have a casualty capacity of about 80 beds, and more if pressed. . . . But the big news now is about the London Blitzkrieg. Every night with the most unfailing regularity the bombers come over and drop their little surprise packets. Let me tell you about "Black Tuesday" (14th Oct—the day before my exam).

It started up in the usual way by my going across to breakfast in the club. I was just finishing at 9.15 am when there was without any warning—whistle—crump—whistle crump—whistle—CRUMP.

The last one shook everything. About half a second after the crump a mixed shower of glass, pieces of

ceiling, and electric light bulbs descended on us: none of us were hurt because by that time we were all underneath the table. We all climbed out rather shaken and went out to see what had happened and found that one had fallen on the hospital exactly opposite (about 20 yards away—my closest yet). Luckily it did not kill anybody; but it severed the gas and hot water mains and we went for the next week without these two commodities.

Well after we had recovered from this the day passed off without incident. But that night will live long in my memory. The whole night long they concentrated round us, and it was awful. We received 60 casualties (many very bad) in the space of three hours. Everybody in the hospital turned to and helped deal with them. I was in the theatre from 10.30 pm to 2.30 am operating and assisting on those cases which were fit for operation. Then the next day I had to go and sit my exam, but operating went on all that day, and I assisted again when I came back.

Those were a bad lot of casualties, most caused by falling masonry and severe crushes and lacerations. This was my first big experience of air raid surgery. We got two cases of gas gangrene out of this lot!

The following Saturday we had another rush—about 32 were admitted. A rather different type of injury in this lot—the small penetrating wound caused by flying bits of metal and glass and masonry was predominant. All these needed surgery—and I was in the theatre from 11.30 pm until 8.30 am the next morning, without a break. I did quite a bit of the minor surgery myself this time. This air raid surgery is quite different from the run of ordinary civilian traumatic stuff. What strikes one most is the prevalence of the condition known as "secondary wound shock." People with quite trivial injuries are so ill that it is impossible to operate as early as one would like to. We operated all through "Black Tuesday's" night air raid and it was really extraordinary, the intensity of the bombing—if we had not had a job to do we would have been much more frightened than we were. Actually we are all well snug at Thomas's now, the basement is our living quarters, sleeping quarters, wards, and theatre. We have to do all our sterilising with a primus stove which takes about 20' to get going. However we manage to do about three operations a day (excluding air raid rushes).

We are a small but select company here at Thomas's. About seven doctors, and about 40 nurses, and a few odd people. The whole of the medical school, nursing school, and massage school have been evacuated to various places in the sector. We all get on very well together and there is a very good and cheerful spirit here. The occasion has grown so big that petty enmities and dislikes have been forgotten.

The "band of ten" who kept the hospital functioning. Frank Cockett is seated on the right