



Belsen, a human tragedy: (left to right) a British soldier talks to an emaciated survivor; members of 11 Light Field Ambulance, wearing protective clothing, during the evacuation; the post-evacuation burning of the huts; a survivor with her child in the Hospital of the Displaced Persons camp – the child's toy was donated by the Red Cross

Four photos (left): Imperial War Museum

‘Whoever saves a single life, it is as though he saved a whole world’

This is the extraordinary story of OE, Brigadier Glyn Hughes, the medical officer who oversaw the liberation of the infamous Bergen-Belsen concentration camp and whose courage has been especially honoured this year.

OE magazine Editor Steve McCubbin reports



“There were various sizes of piles of corpses lying all over the camp, some outside the wire and some in between the huts, and the frightful scenes inside were much worse... The gutters were full and within the huts there were uncountable numbers of bodies, some even in the same bunks as the living... Some of the huts had bunks but not many, and they were filled absolutely to overflowing with prisoners in every state of emaciation and disease. There was not room for them to lie down at full length in each hut. In the most crowded there were anything from 600 to 1,000 people in accommodation which should only have taken 100.”

These are the haunting words of Brigadier Hugh Llewelyn Glyn Hughes (known as Glyn Hughes) as he gave evidence at the trial of SS guards who had worked at the infamous Bergen-Belsen concentration camp in the Second World War.

What he said is a chilling reminder of the horrors endured by Belsen's inmates and the horrifying subjugation that the Nazis meted out in concentration camps across Europe in the so-called ‘Final Solution’.

The brutal Belsen regime had no moral compass, no relationship to normality, as these quotes from survivors bear out: “When we passed through the gate of Bergen-Belsen, we dropped out of life and time.” “Anyone who came to Bergen-Belsen dropped into chaos, into nothingness.”

Glyn Hughes (Forest 1903-10), much honoured for his First World War service and later to become the most decorated British military doctor in the Second World War (see biography, page 34), came face to face with the fallout from this nightmare, this unfathomable inhumanity.

Towards the end of the war he was Deputy Director Medical Services with the Second Army and, in April 1945, found himself as the medical officer in charge of the liberation of Belsen.

Medical relief

His unstinting medical relief work in the camp helped save thousands of people's lives. He organised Belsen's evacuation and, because the camp was so disease-ridden, its burning to the ground.

Near to Belsen, at a former military school barracks, Glyn also established

a Hospital of the Displaced Persons camp that was named after him. Here, more than 2,000 children were born between 1945 and 1950. From horror came hope. From death came new life. Glyn Hughes' story is one of enormous courage, humanitarianism and outstanding dedication to duty.

An estimated 50,000 Jews, Russians, Czechs, Poles, anti-Nazi Christians, homosexuals and gypsies died at Belsen. Among them were Anne Frank, who wrote the legendary childhood ‘Diary’ about her time hiding in Amsterdam with family and friends from the German forces occupying the Netherlands. She died of typhus, aged only 15.

The average life expectancy of a Belsen inmate was just nine months.

In its early days as a prisoner of war camp, about 18,000 Soviet soldiers died of hunger, cold and disease.

By December 1944, Belsen had become a concentration camp when SS-Hauptsturmführer Josef Kramer, previously at Auschwitz-Birkenau, became the new camp commander. In 1945, large numbers of prisoners were moved to Belsen from the eastern camps as the Soviet forces advanced.

The resulting overcrowding led to a vast increase in deaths from disease, particularly typhus, and malnutrition in a camp originally designed to hold about 8,000 inmates. By the time of liberation, 40,000 people were found alive and 10,000 dead.

Glyn Hughes' organisation of the medical relief at Belsen made him a legend in the state of Israel which he visited many times. This year his 'meritorious deeds' in liberating Belsen were especially honoured at a commemoration of Yom Hashoah (Holocaust Remembrance Day) and the anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising. He received a posthumous Meritorious Award for Bravery.

The award is the first ever made to a British subject. Glyn Hughes' son-in-law, David Smart CBE, accepted the award. Six of Glyn Hughes' grandchildren were also at the ceremony. (See 'A moving tribute' next page).

The event, held at the Institute of Education in London, was organised by the Yad Vashem UK Foundation with the Board of Deputies of British Jews, Polish Jewish Ex-Servicemen and the Association of Jewish Ex-Servicemen and Women.

At the ceremony, Jeffrey Pinnick, Chairman of the Yad Vashem UK Foundation, paid tribute to those whose efforts had made the recognition of Brigadier Glyn Hughes possible. They included John Higgs, Secretary of the Royal Medical Foundation at Epsom College, "without whose powers of investigation and persuasion, dogged determination and organisational skills, today's ceremony could not have taken place".

“A man of strength of character, courage and true humility, his compassion towards the inmates at Belsen enabled many thousands to survive”

Mr Pinnick told the audience: "April 15 marks the anniversary of the actual day that Brigadier Glyn Hughes entered the concentration camp and decided on a course of action which is universally accepted as having helped save the lives of many thousands of surviving inmates who otherwise would certainly have perished through sickness."

Chief Rabbi Sir Jonathan Sacks told the ceremony: "Whoever saves a single life', our Sages say, 'it is as though he saved a whole world'. There can be no more apt description of the life and service of Brigadier Glyn Hughes. A man of strength of character, courage and true humility, his compassion towards the inmates at Belsen enabled many thousands to survive. Brigadier Glyn Hughes' saintly acts were not performed with a view to receiving public recognition, but I am moved that his humility and his example of the triumph of the human spirit will be acknowledged today."

Messages in the ceremony programme came from Her Majesty

the Queen and the then Prime Minister, Tony Blair, saluting his crucial work, skill and dedication in saving so many lives.

These extracts from Glyn Hughes' own testimony to the Inter-Allied Conference in June 1945 reveal the monumental task faced by the Brigadier and his team, including young medical students from England.

"The whole camp was originally built to contain 8,000 and on our arrival were found 40,000 living, whilst on the ground were 10,000 corpses, and it was further reported that in addition, 17,000 had died during the previous month of March.

"After a quick survey of the whole camp area an appreciation was made that 25,000 required immediate hospitalisation and of this number 10,000 would probably die, despite all efforts. These figures proved to be very near the mark, although the number of deaths after liberation was higher, approximately 13,000.

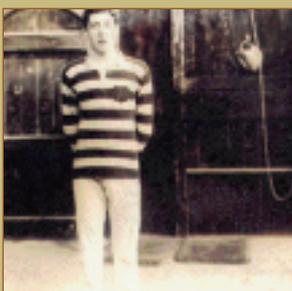
Appalling conditions

"In the camp there was no sign of hygiene at all. Huts which should have contained, at the most, 80 to 100 prisoners, in some cases had as many as 1,000. Some huts had a lavatory, but this had long ceased to function and the authorities had made no provision outside, so that conditions on the ground and in the huts themselves were appalling, especially when it is realised that starvation, diarrhoea and dysentery were rife.

"Apart from the frightful conditions in compounds and huts there were many other horrors – the enormous piles of dead lying everywhere, a crematorium, a gallows in the centre of the camp, and signs of mass burial, one enormous grave open and half filled on our arrival.

"This is a broad picture of Belsen. The magnitude of the task was not really apparent until one got into the huts, and one was faced with the appalling stench and the sight of countless numbers of miserable skeletons herded together on the floor or in bunks, often four to a bed, and the living sharing with the dead. In one hut were counted 20 women in 35 square feet; the bare minimum of ▶

The life of an extraordinary man in pictures



A life's journey: Glyn Hughes at Epsom, a school he loved (above); a portrait during the Second World War (middle) and in retirement (right)



A moving tribute

■ **A moment of remembrance, which included members of Epsom's CCF, at the Yad Vashem event. Among the guests were HRH the Duke of Gloucester, Colonel in Chief of the Royal Army Medical Corps, and, from Epsom, President of Council, Professor The Lord McColl of Dulwich, Chairman of Council, George Pincus, OE Club President, Andrew Pianca, Senior Chaplain at Epsom, Rev Paul Thompson, and Headmaster, Stephen Borthwick**

◀ space allotted to one British soldier in the most crowded conditions. There were few blankets and many were without clothing at all; there was no straw and few rooms had bunks.

“That first night the priorities were food, water, and more troops. Despite the evidence of ample stocks of food in the neighbourhood, there had been no food or water issued for 7-10 days. The task of cleansing the area seemed at first insuperable, and the first essential was supervision by more troops, particularly directed to administration. What were we to do straightaway? It was first decided to give the best chance of survival to the greatest number and therefore to move out at once into the barrack area the supposedly fit and well, thereby making more room in the huts and supervision of feeding easier.

“For many reasons it was not possible to implement these ideals in full, which included the careful selection of the next cases to be moved in order of priority, and it eventually came to a question of evacuating hut by hut. The fact that there was a good barrack area which could be converted into a hospital undoubtedly saved the situation and, in addition, adjoining this area, was a beautiful military hospital of 500 beds, and a large officers' mess, in which the dining room alone could take 200 beds.

“The main difficulty of course was equipment for the barrack area and it was obvious that this could not come from British Army sources in the number required. Eventually, 14,000 beds were equipped from every conceivable source by combing out

to a very wide area of country.

“The other cry, and the most important, was for more help. We made use of what German doctors and nurses were available from those who had been made prisoners, and asked at once for the help of the Red Cross, UNRRA [United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration] and any other available source.”

Knowledge and enthusiasm

“The arrival of 97 medical students [which included seven OEs] from the London Teaching Hospital proved the greatest help, and with their advent the death rate, which in the earliest days had been 500 per day, began to drop appreciably. With their knowledge and enthusiasm we were able to exercise much better supervision in each hut; they worked splendidly.”

At the Yad Vashem event honouring Glyn Hughes in April, Menachem Rosensaft, Founding

Chairman, International Network of Children of Jewish Holocaust Survivors, and one of the children born in the Glyn Hughes Hospital of the Displaced Persons camp, said: “We were given life and placed on earth with a solemn obligation. Our parents survived to bear witness. We in turn must ensure that their memories, which we have absorbed into ours, will remain as a permanent warning to humanity.”

In 2005, at a commemorative ceremony to mark the 60th anniversary of the liberation of Belsen, Jochi Ritz-Olewski, from Israel, who was also born in the Displaced Persons Camp, recalled a key passage from Glyn Hughes' testimony after the liberation: “Belsen is an experience which should never be forgotten. In Belsen we've learned what tolerance and helping other human beings mean. In Belsen we have seen the meaning of the moral spirit and the power of ideals, which give people the ability to go through the most terrible conditions, and lend the necessary help to those who suffer. *Only the people of the camps could understand the meaning of suffering. We were witnesses only afterwards.*”

■ **Special thanks to John Higgs, Secretary of the Royal Medical Foundation, for his invaluable help with this article.**

■ **Testimony from Belsen survivor Mala Tribich at the Yad Vashem event can be read by clicking on the 'Alumni' link, then 'OE News', on www.epsomcollege.org.uk**

Glyn Hughes: a life of dedication

Glyn Hughes was born in South Africa in 1892. In 1903 he came to Forest as a Foundation Scholar. In later life he said he owed everything to Epsom where he was supremely happy. He was captain of the rugby 1st XV. He studied medicine at London's UCH. His distinguished military career began in the First World War where, as a medical officer with the 1st Battalion Wiltshire Regiment and the Grenadier Guards, he won the DSO and Bar and the MC (Military Cross). He was described by a fellow soldier as the most courageous doctor he had served with.

He was twice recommended for the Victoria Cross. In the Second World War he won a third DSO for his actions in Operation Market Garden at Arnhem. As senior surviving officer he took over command of the tanks. His other awards included the CBE, the Legion of Merit from US President, Harry Truman, and the Croix de Guerre from France. He died in 1973 aged 81. Epsom awards an annual science prize in his memory.