

THE AMERICAN RED CROSS IN ROYSTON 1942 - 1946

Written by Kathleen Dodkin (Formerly Kay Wake) April 1992

When in 1942 it was announced that the arrival of the USA was imminent, the news was received with mixed emotions. The British Forces based in the town were far from happy, fearing that the American's large pay packets and smart uniforms would spoil their chances with the local girls, and mothers wondered whether they should lock up their daughters. Conversely, the girls were agog with expectation, but the people who were most alarmed were the members of the Congregational Church, whose Sunday school had been commandeered for the use as an American Red Cross GI Club. Meetings were held. Protests were made, but the Military Machine was in motion and nothing could stop it. Furniture was hastily removed and squeezed into the church, and the large oak notice board in the courtyard leading to the Schoolroom was put for safekeeping in the workshop of a neighboring undertaker. It was never to be seen again, despite intensive searches. Secretly I suspect that it may have become coffin boards during the wartime shortages. Builders moved into the building and recruitment began for staff.

This happened at a very fortuitous moment for me. I had ideas of joining the WAAF when my call-up came, but I had just come out of the hospital and it was doubtful that I would pass the medical. When I found that the A.R.C. Director needed a secretary, I was the first to apply. I was required to attend on a Tuesday morning for interview and walked through the door of the familiar building with apprehension. This was soon to be swept away by the sight of a lady, brush in hand, painting tables and chairs scarlet.

This was my first sight of the Club Director, Miss Dorothy Levy. She was a short, stocky person of 42, Jewish, with dark curly hair and a personality that enveloped everyone in sight. The place was empty apart from her, and she came forward to meet me with a brilliant, sparkling smile, which put me at ease immediately.

I was completely taken aback by the appearance of the building. It was old and had been badly in need of repair; but Church funds were not able to run to them. It was a bright hall with long windows on each side and a kitchen at the rear- a typical Victorian structure. Now, it was bright with new paint, colorful curtains and inch thick linoleum covering the bare boards. There were two classrooms on the ground floor, one of which was now the Director's office, the other fitted out as Reception. A wrought iron balcony stretched the length of the two sides and at the end were three classrooms where I had sat obediently as a child, as I received my religious instruction. These rooms were now fully equipped offices, one for the secretary, one for the accountant and the other for the housekeeper. At the front end was a large room, which had been furnished as a luxurious lounge with armchairs, thick rugs, and a pay phone. There had always been a fireplace there, which gave it a homely touch. Although, the crowning glory was a large shower room and a staff cloak closet built on land leases by the authorities from the next-door property. Previously, the sole toilet had been outside!

Seeing my amazement, Miss Levy offered to show me around after the interview, which was thorough, to say the least. I learned after that she was a stickler for neatness and no girl who showed so much as a hint of a slip below her skirt was ever considered.

A security form had to be completed which required every detail, and she found that my father was the local Postmaster and Church Secretary, and that I was the Organist, as well as being a second generation Roystonian, she declared that this would be a great advantage, as I would know everyone in town! She explained that a “physical” examination would be necessary, but as the necessary machinery was not yet in motion, my doctor’s examination would suffice, and I sent up a grateful prayer! She made me coffee, showed me around and then said to my amazement, “Can you start this afternoon? We open in ten days time and all these chairs and tables have to be painted.” She obviously had taken to me and, in fact, I to her, but throughout my time there, neither anyone else nor I would ever dare to take liberty with her. She was the Boss and must be seen to be so!

Thus began a period in my life, which I was never to forget, full of new experiences, the opportunity to get to know our American Allies, a lot of moments of sadness, and a sense of fulfillment.

That afternoon we painted every chair and table-for-four in the place, working late into the evening. Next day we set them all out and started work on recruitment. Our first arrival was a local lady, Mrs. Charter, our cleaner, followed by her neighbor, Joe Case, the porter and handyman. In quick succession came our accountant, a red-haired lady from Kent, our housekeeper, “Lev” Levin, another red head and the granddaughter of the Rabbi, and engaged to a Naval Officer. A number of cashiers joined us- Betty Drayton, Muriel Phillips, and another Londoner, Beth, evacuated and each with two children.

Then our kitchen staff, Margaret Woodcock was head cook, assisted by “Andy” Anderson, Rose Gypps, and several others. The kitchen was equipped with every modern gadget, not forgetting the waffle iron. All became expert at turning out rapid “peanut butter and jelly” sandwiches. Later, another Liverpudlian, Betty, was to join the ranks an assistant housekeeper, together was a lady and her teenage daughter who had a mass of beautiful rose-blond hair. Within a few weeks, Miss levy’s assistant was installed, completely opposite in appearance to our Director. She was a tall, slim Southerner; complete with drawl, and together they kept the Club full of fun and laughter. We all got along very well, with the exception of the two redheads, who had a constant personality clash and, after a few months, the accountant felt it all too much for her and she left. A jolly Scots girl, Mary, replaced her and altogether the boys found themselves in a very happy atmosphere there.

In that week before the Club opened, I worked like a slave putting through security forms and setting up an office system, but by the appointed day, we were issued with our uniforms and the doors opened, and were to remain open twelve hours a day for the whole period we operated. I was regarded by some of the Church congregation as a traitor, but by others as useful in keeping an eye on their property!

The club was strictly for GI’s, and officers were allowed in by invitation. Miss Levy would allow no hint of racism and if any girl applied for work expecting to have a high old time with the boys, she was rapidly disillusioned. Relationships were not encouraged and we were not allowed on any of the bases. Red Cross girls were expected to set a high standard and not bring the ARC into disrepute.

What they did in their off time was, of course, their own affair and a boy wanting to see a girl home in the blackout would discreetly leave a half hour before she went off duty, and wait outside for her. However, a serious romance did blossom between the cashier, Betty and young GI. They became engaged and when they asked for permission to marry, every obstacle was put in their way. Top Brass visited the girls’ home, wrote endless letters to his parents, and it was some months before they were allowed to go ahead with their plans. They were married in Royston and by then, everyone in the club had become so involved, that it was a time for great rejoicing. They returned to America in due course, but unfortunately, the marriage did not work out. Betty never returned to Royston.

It is very difficult for anyone who has not experienced it, to understand the atmosphere in a Forces Club during the war. There was a feeling of unreality and we were all a little over the top, feeling and thinking quite differently from the normal. So many of those boys, mostly around twenty two years old, had to live for the day, living life to the full, not knowing whether there would be a tomorrow. We never knew, when we said goodnight, if we would see a boy again. I have since become very concerned that we became so desensitized at that time and the news that a boy we knew well had not returned the previous night just washed over us. In civilian life we would have been overwhelmed by the tragedy, but if it had been otherwise, we just could not have coped with the strain of so much emotion. Quite often boys would come to my office to cry on my shoulder, and most of them had confidants among the staff, not least Miss Levy and her assistant, Libby Conn. (After the war she was to marry one of the Ciro Jewelry firm of Paris).

I well remember a knock on my door one evening, and a voice outside said, "Don't let me in. I'm drunk and I don't want you to see me like this. My buddy didn't make it last night." His friend was an air gunner and had been shot on the way home. I recognized the voice- it was a boy named Bill, who was frequently at the club. He would tell me about his widowed mother, who had advanced TB and he was sending home money for gold-dust treatment. Penicillin had not been put into general use for the disease at that time. Some weeks later he was due for his medical, he was anxious because stratosphere flying was causing his breathing difficulties and he was afraid that he too was developing the disease, and he would be grounded. I was relieved and told him so, but his response was that, if he were grounded his pay would go down, and he needed the money for his mother's treatments. In fact, his fears were realized and he was shipped home. I often wondered what became of him.

There came a time when someone discovered that I was quite a useful needlewoman and constantly found myself sewing on flashes and doing repairs. One day a boy brought me a uniform jacket he had bought from a friend and wanted it altered and when I pointed out that I would need my sewing machine there was no problem. Our director promptly dispatched a jeep to collect it, and there it remained, among my files and papers, for the remainder of the Club's existence, where it was put to good use.

And then was not the end my diversifying. One Christmas a GI was offered a chicken by local woman poultry farmer provided he caught it himself. This would be a welcome treat for a family in the town who had befriended him. He sought the help of Mary, the accountant, and she agreed to go with him.

They were in luck as our Director and her assistant, Libby, had decided to take a day off for Christmas shopping and would be back very late, and this was where I was drawn into the plot. Could I pluck the chicken-in my office? My experience of chicken plucking was limited and I was supposed to be in charge of the Club. They enlisted the help of Joe, the porter, who would keep watch, and they duly set off, with torches. Now, it is not easy to catch a chicken at any time, but in the blackout it was well almost an hour and half later that they appeared and started, working against time. It was a very large chicken and my fingers were sore and aching long before I was finished. (It hurt to type for days!) At last it lay, naked and, I thought, a little sad, if it could look anything with no head. One problem remained. How to dispose of the feathers, which were everywhere. We managed to get them altogether eventually, however, but where to put them? Mary came up with a bright idea. Why not burn them in the furnace cellar? This business was rapidly taking on all the major ingredients of a major crime. We crept down into the basement and quickly stuffed our bundle into the stove and shut the lid, congratulating ourselves that none of the staff had any suspicions. But our peace of mind was not to last. It was not long before an appalling smell began to creep up from the basement and invade the whole building. Mary and the GI were innocently drinking coffee, while I was upstairs, still trying to catch the

odd stray feather. Joe tried frantically to damp down the fire and our luck still held, as our bosses walked in to be met by only a faint odor hanging over the place. In answer to their queries, Joe nobly covered for us and explained that something odd had got into the furnace. The chicken was reported being enjoyed by the recipients. By the way, I did put my foot down about taking its insides out!

As things began to build up to D-Day, from time to time the boys would be confined to camp for a few days to give enemy agents the impression that we were about to invade. At these times the club was empty, and the boys so bored that they would arrange competitions as to which was the prettiest, sweetest girl etc., in the club.

We were well instructed as to recognizing the signs of a possible spy, and one day one did arrive at the club. The M.P.'s were summoned but he left before they arrived. However, they pursued him to the Railway Station, where he was caught.

Miss Levy and Libby shared a house in the town and from time to time one of us had to call if one or the other was ill, or needed papers signed. Imagine our embarrassment when, one evening, Libby opened the door to us and before our eyes was a large bare bottom protruding from the airing cupboard, where Dorothy Levy was looking for a bath towel. She was not in the least concerned!

The only gripe that we had about our really much-loved Director was that she would not give the staff leave when their husbands came home. We felt that we had been fighting all on our own, and it was a bit hard that a husband and wife and children could not be together for a few days. However, her word was law.

My family had been entertaining British Forces personnel since the commencement of the war, the married boys often bringing their wives to stay, and we often entertained them when they had a forty-eight hour leave.

Soon after the club opened, a young girl, straight from school and the daughter of local Bank Manager came to us as a receptionist. She quickly picked up the American phraseology and was very popular. Her parents sometimes entertain boys for the weekend, who were a bit surprised when she innocently inquired if they required to be "knocked up" in the morning! She was awaiting call-up into the Wrens in due course. She was a cheerful little soul and very naïve, which led to one hilarious moment. The American Army were very anxious that GI's should take every precaution when they were out with local girls, and towards the end, the porter always kept a stock of what Americans called "prophylactics" in store, to hand out to any boy requiring one. It so happened that one evening both Dorothy and Libby were out and Joe was having supper, and couldn't be found to supply the boy's needs. He asked our little receptionist, who hadn't had clue what he wanted, but supposed it was some kind of plaster, and she rang me. I replied that I would send one down and she gaily replied, "That's fine. I'll put it on for him!" The poor boy was out of the door quicker than you could say sixpence, but the story went around for weeks.

Occasionally we would have an Open Day, when the townspeople would be invited to look around. They would include the Town Council, the Bank Manager, and various other Worthies and they were royally entertained. Sometimes we would have a dance, but we had to behave with the utmost discretion, daughters of upstanding Royston citizens being the guests. Now and again we would have Bingo evenings and one very academic type started a music group in the lounge, of which I was put in charge. Dorothy did her utmost to make the boys happy, and surely succeeded. In fact, the club was a very happy place, despite the underlying fear- and the boys were frightened.

When the Americans arrived at Bassingbourn, a few RAF personnel who manned the Radio Station were left behind to be liaisons with the new staff. Amongst these was a boy from Bassingbourn, Lesely Reasey, the son of friends of my family. He was a 6'2" blond boy, twenty-two years old, was a great wit and a splendid musician-we even made a record together. He made our house his second home. He palled up with a handsome young American, John Ewald, who was engaged to a girl back home. He had a quirky sense of humor and there was a great deal of laughter when the two were about. Sadly, after his marriage upon his return home, his young wife developed Hodgkin's Disease and died, leaving a lovely baby girl.

Thanksgiving Day was always a great occasion in the club and Dorothy spared no effort. Margaret and the kitchen staff would spend two days preparing the feast, and she excelled herself with the pumpkin pie. GI's were allowed to host girls from the staff at dinner, and one year I was John's guest, and was treated like royalty!

From time to time the Chaplain on the bases visited our club, and became very close to my parents, as my father, being the Church Secretary, was able to gain their services to help at the Congregational Church, whilst the Minister was away with the RAF. They would frequently drop in at our house and one particular, Harry Gommell, was in training for the ministry, but at that time a physiotherapist at the Base hospital, gave my mother a great deal of assistance with the women's meeting she ran. On one occasion a Chaplain's wife gave a flannel graph talk- something quite new to our people.

D-day was an unforgettable occasion. There was a deep hush over the Club as everyone listened continually to the radio, the boys gathering around in little groups, hanging on every word. That morning we had watched we had watched that Fortresses, Wellington's and Landcasters from the East Anglian bases grouping overhead and flying out trailing their gliders and we had guessed what was on it. Margaret and the kitchen staff were run off their feet supplying endless cups of coffee and few realized that history was being made. Our hearts were all with the boys taking their lives in their hands on the fateful journey for which they had prepared so long.

From time to time, Dorothy Levy, who was very generous and thoughtful of her Staff, and their ability to produce dresses and coats from blackout curtains and blankets, would surprise us with a special treat. On one occasion she sent to America for dress lengths for us all, going to the trouble of finding out our favorite colors first. On another, she asked her friends back home to send us spare dresses, carefully telling the required sizes and I was the lucky recipient of a beautiful evening dress, black velvet and gray chiffon, which did the rounds of concerts and parties for long after the was over. Only those who had made-do-and-mend fore years could imagine the delight these gifts gave us.

About six months before the war in Europe came to an end, Dorothy and Libby were posted to prepare for opening Clubs in France and Holland. Before Dorothy left she invited Lev and myself to meet her brother and sister-in-law at Claridges Hotel in London. They were a wealthy family who had homes on Park Avenue in New York, and Scranton, Penn. We were sad to see her go. She always treated us fairly and her lively personality, allied with Libby's ebullience, made the Club a lively and friendly place indeed. I would love to know what fate had in store for her, but whatever it was, it would surely leave its mark and she will always be remembered.

Our new Director was a lady of great charm. "Mac" McHenry was the complete antitheses of Dorothy Levy. She was warm and gentle yet managed to keep discipline just the same. I would dearly like to know what became of her, too.

A long last, and sadly for us, the day came for the boys' departure. On the previous evening there was a party and they could scarcely contain their excitement at the prospect of going home. Next morning endless convoys of lorries delivered the boys from Bassingbourn, Steeple Morden, Nuthampstead and Meesdon to the Railway Station yard, and the Red Cross really excelled themselves that day. The weather was perfect as though adding its benediction to the return of peace. Every one of the Staff had been slaving making literally thousands of sandwiched, which were transported to the Station. The boys were assembled in the Goods Yard and waited patiently for hours for the trains to arrive. We worked straight through for twenty-four hours feeding them and replenishing their coffee cups, and nearby residents wandered down, together with the local press, to watch this spectacle. When the last train pulled out the next morning we went back to the Club with mixed feelings. It looked so sad and empty and even the large pictured of Churchill and Eisenhower over the counter seemed to be saying goodbye. Soon it would become my Sunday school again, and many years late, a splendid town museum.

We all had a lump in our throats when we closed the doors for the last time. The old building had become very dear to us who had spent three years of our lives there.

But I had not seen the last of the GI's. From out of the blue came my next assignment. Would I go to Steeple Morden to act as Accompanist for the Eagle Squadron Choir, recently posted there? Would I??? I surely must be the luckiest British girl in the A.R.C. But that is another story.

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