

Stretchers Not Available: The Wartime Story of Dr. Jim Rickett

John Rickett

AuthorHouseUK (Jan 20, 2012)

Softcover \$21.29 (284pp)

978-1-4670-0898-3

“Stretchers not available—repeat not available. To what use would they be put?” Such is the answer an incredulous Dr. Jim Rickett received when he asked British army headquarters for equipment to aid the wounded in a makeshift field hospital he set up on a partisan-held island off the coast of Yugoslavia. This reply serves as more than just an appropriate title for Rickett’s experiences as compiled from the doctor’s wartime letters and diaries by his son, John. It also sets the tone for a story of the Second World War that is unique, touching, and at times humorous.

Rickett has done a loving job ordering and annotating his father’s writings. He intersperses chapters in which his father recounts the terror of the Blitz on Portsmouth, where the doctor lived and worked as a general practitioner, with passages of his military service in North Africa, Italy, and the Adriatic island of Vis. There Rickett provides medical support for the colorful Lieutenant Colonel “Mad Jack” Churchill (no relation to the famous prime minister), who often leads his commandos into battle playing a bagpipe or carrying a bow and arrows.

Captain “Pissy” Parker, “jack-of-all-trades” orderly Dawson, and a gruff female partisan named Zena are just some of the many memorable characters the doctor describes, and not always in a complimentary fashion. In scenes akin to those from *M*A*S*H*, Rickett has to rise above the challenges of war and the short-sightedness of his own superiors to do his duty to save lives, even if it means bartering goats for light bulbs and scrounging wiring from a downed aircraft to cobble together a generator to power them.

No less interesting are the doctor’s daily missives describing how the now famously unflappable British public got along during the ceaseless bombing of their cities by the Luftwaffe. John Rickett has selected poignant and poetic scenes from his father’s writings and has added in some amusing family anecdotes, notably one involving his mother setting mousetraps to guard her canned fruit from German soldiers should they invade her kitchen.

John Rickett has organized his father’s writings to present an in-depth look at a man, a doctor, and a people engaged in war, both at home and on the front. He has annotated these selections with asides on the history and progress of the war to better help those not familiar with the events of 1939-1945, especially as they relate to the theaters of combat in which his father served. The background he provides on the various factions and infighting among the Yugoslavian partisans helps explain not only what his father had to deal with but also why the Balkans is still very much a powder keg.

Rickett lost his father in 1968, but was fortunate enough to not only read his letters and diaries but also talk with him at length about what he wrote in them. It has taken the son nearly forty-five years to put his father’s story together, but for those who remember the war or who hunger for true stories of those who experienced it, *Stretchers Not Available* is worth the wait.

MARK MCLAUGHLIN (February 21, 2013)

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