

The Reconstruction of Warriors:

*The Ordeal by Fire of World
War II's Airmen*

By E R Mayhew

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Reviewed by Gp Capt Neville Parton

It has been described as the most exclusive Club in the world, but the entrance fee is something most men would not care to pay and the conditions of membership are arduous in the extreme.

Whilst the story of the Guinea Pig Club may be known to some of the current generation of airmen, it is probably not as widely recognized as it should be. This remarkable book goes some way to ensuring that not only the Club and its members are commemorated appropriately, but also puts their achievements into a far broader context. For those readers who may not be aware, the Guinea Pig Club consisted of those individuals, predominantly (although not exclusively) from the Royal Air Force and Allied Air Forces, who as a result of their severe burns injuries were treated at East Grinstead hospital by the remarkable surgeon Archibald McIndoe.

Written by a historian who is also the granddaughter of one of the nurses at East Grinstead who worked with Sir Archibald McIndoe, the book takes us from the care of burns patients in the 1930s, where those seriously burnt were simply dosed with morphine and sent home to die, through to the post-war history of the 647 members of the Guinea Pig Club. It begins by considering the unique set of threats posed to aircrew in particular during World War II, when aircraft had begun to carry large quantities of aviation fuel as well as other explosive substances such as gaseous oxygen and of course ammunition and bombs. The problems that this cocktail posed to aircrew survivability had been recognised by the Air Staff before the war, but the limitations of materials in the 1930s meant that self-sealing petrol-tanks were not available for fighter aircraft until around 1940.

It then moves on to consider actual incidents during the Battle of Britain, seen through the eyes of survivors, and explores a particular problem experienced by Hurricane pilots – the so-called ‘Hurricane Fire’. However, this section simply acts as an introduction, explaining how these individuals ended up at East Grinstead before moving into arguably the less well known elements of the story, examining how the treatment of burns developed during the war, and especially the role of McIndoe in this field. Early treatment consisted of tannic acid which provided a chemical dressing over the wounded area, but whilst this worked acceptably

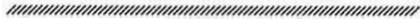
on small burns, it was completely unsuitable for the large areas of burns resulting from exposure to intense fires which aircrew tended to suffer from. Not only did it leave the skin in a condition that was unsuitable for further reconstructive work (plastic surgery), it also severely affected an individual’s chances of survival, and one of McIndoe’s earliest battles was to persuade the medical establishment that alternative treatment methods were urgently required. The description of the medical procedures is fascinating in its own right, but McIndoe’s vision that it was treatment of the whole person that was required stands out in terms of the factors for overall success. And of course this meant more than just having the right medical staff and environment — the response of the local community was also of fundamental importance.

The book then moves on from the Battle of Britain to the rest of the war, and into the world of the bomber crews, who in the end made up 80% of the Guinea Pig’s numbers. The special case of the Canadians is considered, who ended up building their own wing at East Grinstead, together with the experience of Guinea Pigs in POW camps, and the role of Major David Charters of the RAMC who performed minor miracles in looking after seriously injured POWs with frequently the most rudimentary of facilities. Another largely unknown part of the story is that of the then Chief of the Air Staff, Air Chief Marshal Portal, who provided tremendous support to McIndoe in his battles with authority — whether regarding the right of patients to wear uniform, or ensuring that they were entitled to full pay and allowances until either they could be returned to service or their treatment was completed.

The finale is provided by an exploration of the experiences of a number of Guinea Pigs since the war, from which it is clear that whilst their bodies were so injured during the war, their indomitable spirit most definitely was not. The courage and resilience amongst these individuals was truly remarkable: a significant number of them returned to flying duties after their treatment had finished, although even here the remarkable sense of humour evident amongst those who had passed

through East Grinstead left its mark, as many of them would carry a card with the instructions that 'In case of further trouble deliver the bits to Ward III, East Grinstead'.

There are few enough books around dealing with this remarkable story, and most of those that do are out of print. As a book which covers this particular area in great detail and with such authority, yet remains thoroughly readable, it is difficult to recommend it too highly to anyone who has an interest in the story of Second World War airmen beyond the public image. Dr Mayhew has done justice to all those represented in her book, be they airmen, doctors, nurses or even just the inhabitants of East Grinstead — do take the time to learn from their experiences.



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