

## Conversation with George Brogan, September 2011

I was a nineteen year old miner, working on a training face at Ashington Colliery in Northumberland. I had been set to do some stone work, taking material into a newly dug coal face to prop up the tunnel. I was kneeling down in this shaft and a load of stone fell behind us and it flattened us and broke me back in two places. They dug me out and carried me out on a stretcher; I was saying "Me legs is numb". I was taken to the first aid place at the pit head, and then they took me on to Ashington Hospital. I remember a nurse cutting off me clothes and then I had an emergency operation that morning; they put a plate in my back to support my spine where it was broken.

I was supposed to be sent on to Hexham Hospital to the local spinal unit, but the doctor said, "Because you're only nineteen I'm going to send you to Stoke Mandeville. They'll teach you a lot more there; they've got more resources." This was 1964; I had never travelled to the south. They took me in ambulance to Newcastle where they put me on the train. It was one of those old-fashioned carriages with a corridor down one side and then doors into the individual compartments. They had to lift me through the window on my stretcher and lay me out diagonally across the two sets of seats in the compartment at an angle and then they put this orange box that they'd found in the centre to support the stretcher. A sister from the hospital travelled down with us. When we got to Kings Cross it was an ambulance across to Marylebone, another train out to Aylesbury and then another ambulance. When I first met Dr. Guttman on the ward he asked me how I had got to Stoke Mandeville and when I told him he said, "They wouldn't transport cattle like they transported you."

I had no idea what to expect. They put me into the first bed on the right hand side of the ward, next to the sister's office. I had been on Morphine all the time I was at Ashington and as soon as I got to Stoke they stopped that altogether. First of all I was in such pain. I remember my girl-friend coming to see me and I told her, "Go and get me a gun and shoot me." The pain was that bad. But then after a while the pain started to ease off and ease off and then it disappeared. So in a way it was a good thing.

I remember there were other lads on the ward in even more pain. If they made a lot of noise the nurses would threaten to put them in the bathroom. And if they couldn't keep quiet they would do just that; turn the handle on the beds, lower the wheels and push them into the bathroom and shut the door. There was one young laddie there about 11 or 12 that wouldn't take his medicine and this elderly orderly got up on the bed and put his knee on the lad's chest and forced open his mouth to make him take his medicine. He had a few stints in the bathroom too!

Guttman was what I'd call "a proper German", straight-talking. You soon learnt that it was his way or no way at all; he was in charge and you took the orders. Whenever it was his day for the round everyone was flying around getting the ward ready. The staff would come and tell you to get ready when he was coming and we patients would all be sitting by the side of our beds waiting for him; it was like being in the Army. He would walk around stopping at each bed. Your physio would be there with him and a whole army of other people as well; we called it the Circus. Then he would ask the physio what I had done that week and how I had done and she would tell him if I had completed the task for that week.

For example one of the tasks you had to do was learn how to transfer yourself from your wheel chair on to a bench and then see if you could sit up and balance on the this bench. Once I had done that then Guttman would tell her to try me on the next task. So another was to be able to balance in your wheel chair on your back wheels; then you had to push yourself while still on the back wheels, turn around and come back to the point where you started. Then you would have to learn how to get out of your chair on to the floor; your physio would tell you to do some press ups; then you had to try and get back in your chair, that was so that if you did happen to fall out of your wheelchair at some time you would be able how to get back in.

Because of the plate they had put in me at Ashington I had no need to wear a corset and I was only in bed for two and a half months; they said I was the person who spent the shortest time on the ward. Then they put full callipers on me then I had to lift myself up on to these bars, just like the lad in the photo; once you mastered that you were given crutches, and then the fun began. I was 6ft 2ins and they didn't have any crutches long enough for me. They had them in the last hole but they were still too short, so it very awkward for me, bent over like an old man. I was like a tree in a strong wind swaying back and forth, but I got walking on them. They also had weights on pulleys and you had stretch your arms out shoulder high and pull the weights down to your side; they would tell you how many to do. This was to build up your muscles so you could get up on the crutches.

Once I was a bit mobile I used to help out i did not have to help out. The nurses' were busy getting other patients up and I could get myself up, so when i was ready I would go and give the three lads in the beds opposite me a cig. They all smoked, I didn't, but I would go across and light each of their cigs, and then go back and knock the ash off for them, each in turn. We used to get up to all sorts of tricks. We used to throw things across the ward at each other. And the nurse used to have these great big syringes which we used to get hold of and fill with water and squirt each other across the ward. The Sister in charge of the ward was Sister Mears and she was real fierce and old school and I remember she walked in once just after one of these and there was a great big wet patch on the wall behind my bed. So she looked up at this and she said, "There seems to be an awful lot of condensation around the windows." And I just said, "Oh yes." There was a snooker table just down from ward 2 and me and another lad used to go down and play snooker at night or when he had no visitors.

I remember being amazed at the size of the hospital. My then-girlfriend bought a post card from the hospital shop that was taken from an aeroplane. She asked me where on it I thought the hospital was. I was amazed when she told me the whole lot was the hospital; it looked huge. Later on when I was in the wheel chair, a friend from hospital and I went and had a look around we must have pushed ourselves for miles around the corridors!

You also had workshops there that you used as part of OT (Occupational Therapy). I made a shoulder bag for my wife from real leather in one of the workshops. I think the making of things was just to keep you busy; you started at 9am and finished about 4pm each day and you were expected to take part just as an exercise in keeping you going all the time you were in hospital. One of the things I helped with was to make the medals for the disabled games. They were cut out of a big round bar of brass. They would cut these slices off the bar and then I would put them into a lathe and then turn the handle to mill the rim of the medal and create the indent. This was prior to the engraving that someone else did. I think these were the medals they gave out at the National

Wheelchair Games at Stoke Mandeville. I didn't mind making things; I have never been a one to sit still and watch the grass grow, so doing things like making the bag and medals and some engraving was fine by me.

I had one run in with Guttman. After I had got onto the crutches he said I could go home. But just before that happened I was getting up on my crutches in physiotherapy when one of the crutches slipped and I fell back in to my chair and caught the chair side and knocked skin off my hip. Now there were some other lads on the ward who didn't want to leave the hospital and when the time came they would deliberately injure themselves so they could stay on longer. Well, when Guttman saw my arm he said, "You're not another one of these are you, deliberately injuring yourself?" I was angry at that and I said to him, "As soon as it's healed enough make the travel arrangements and I'm out of here."

When lads left the ward they would always hold a bit of a party for them. I remember Margot Fonteyn's husband was in Ward 2, on a side ward, and she was at some of the parties

I was lucky, my Ma had a downstairs flat and because of my job I got the Coal Board welfare and the Social welfare which paid for all the equipment in me home – putting hooks into the joists with a handle on so I could pull myself up. I've still got them here. And then they used to take you away to Butlins for two weeks; Filey first of all and then for a change we went to Skegness and then to Ayr, but always to Butlins.

At Stoke Mandeville one part of the OT was archery; it had taken place in the main hall; it. You had to attend there as well as part of your task. I think it was also to help to build up your arms pulling the string back. But it also got me interested in archery and when I got home I joined a disabled club and did archery there, and travelled all over the country to different disabled clubs, and became friends with people all over the country, so the archery was a big help to me. It gave me a new lease of life when I left hospital.

I used to go down the local Miners' Welfare Social Club; then I helped set up the Wansbeck District Disabled Sports Club at Newbiggin by the Sea. We used to run our own disabled games there. Each summer we would take over the school across the road. People would come from all over; we would beds in some of the classrooms. And on the Friday night of the games in the big hall we would a long table right down the centre of the room and have home-cooked stuff for tea; this was in the 1970s and 1980s.

