

Bob Metter's Story



Glorious days.

Sunshine.

Long, white beaches.

The warm Mediterranean.

Dancing every night.

Great fellows and great girls.

A spot of leave at Alexandria (Egypt).

It's 1943 and we think not of the future. 5 days later, back at base camp, outside Cairo. To bed early, all packed for tomorrow's flight to join the squadron in Italy. I wake up in hospital. It seems I made a lot of noise last night, obviously in pain, so one of the fellows called the medical officer. I remember nothing. Not even the ambulance. A lumbar puncture confirmed Polio. Placed in isolation with 24 hour nursing, completely paralysed but still able to breathe. The iron lung was waiting outside. What a comedown from the pilot of a medium bomber to a complete invalid. No particular treatment that I remember – certainly no splints. No plaster. Just sand bags to support legs and feet. The hospital ship from Port Tewfik (Suez) to Durban down the Indian Ocean took about 10 days including 1 stop at Aden and 1 day at Mombassa. The ship's crew rigged a plunge pool on the deck where, with the help of the medical officer, I had a 'swim'.

During the next 3 years in a military hospital with intensive physiotherapy and Hubbard's Tonic every day, my arms started to improve so I was then fitted with 2 full length leg braces and practised walking in the parallel bars. Then came the day with 2 underarm crutches which I would use for more than 40 years. Of course, I still had to use my wheelchair most of the day. I then read a magazine article about a medical procedure 'neurotripsy' being carried out in the USA which might, in theory, encourage nerve growth. The military authorities agreed to fly me to the USA – 5 days from Johannesburg to New York via Brazzaville, Ascension Island, Port Natal, Trinidad, and Puerto Rica. No jets in those days in 1947! I had the neurotripsy twice (6 months apart) but there was no improvement in any leg muscles. I also spent 3 months at the Warm Springs Foundation in Georgia where I really learnt to use what I **had** to walk, stand, fall, sit, stairs, etc. with 2 new full leg braces and 2 new crutches.

After my return home, I worked in an office - mostly on the telephone - for 38 years. During this time I married. We had 3 sons and 1 daughter and many friends. I did my share of charitable work (for the disabled), and participated in paraplegic games – archery and swimming. Over 36 years, I've had 6 cars with hand controls and travelled thousands of miles on holidays with the family.

Although the post-polio started to show 30 years after the initial onset, I stopped driving in 1984 when I felt I was no longer in complete control, and I also retired from the office. I now drive an electric wheelchair!

These days I need a hoist to get me in and out of bed and everything seems to take 10 times longer than before. I can't do up buttons but I still swim, talk, laugh, eat, drink and enjoy life with my friends. And my 8 grandchildren keep me on the ball. . .