

# Midwife in the hell zone

Life in London was a dull routine for nurse Zelda Jeffers. Then she saw an ad that changed her life...

Zelda Jeffers had just turned 40 the day she saw the advert. Her two sons were grown up and had flown the nest. Now divorced, she faced the second half of her life alone.

She kept herself cheerful in her work as a midwife in Enfield, north London, but it was when she returned to her empty home in the evenings that her spirits sank.

Then, one morning in the baby unit, her eyes peered over another nurse's shoulder. They fell upon a magazine. 'Wanted,' it said, 'nurse for mission hospital in Central America.'

'Please let me see that,' said Zelda. Moments later she was writing down the details from the *Nursing Times*. And next day she fired off her application.

That's why today you won't find Zelda in Enfield. Instead she's in the Central American republic of Nicaragua, devoting every waking hour to caring for victims of war and poverty.

She's had worms, dysentery and scabies — but says she's never felt better.

A look of satisfaction

floods her face as she talks about the challenge. The orphanage where she now works, in the capital of Managua, holds 110 children. Alongside stands the infirmary — a mere three rooms with cots, two bathrooms, a kitchen, a treatment room and a meals room. 'Adequate just about describes it,' says Zelda.

The big problems here are malnutrition and skin diseases. We had one nine-month-old baby who weighed only 8lb. Another family have just adopted one at 4lb.'

She peers into a cot containing a five-year-old boy, his face terribly scarred. He is a victim of the long-

running war. Then she turns towards a tiny baby. 'This is Christopher,' she says. 'He was a few weeks old when his mother brought him here because he had malnutrition and diarrhoea. When he's better, he'll go back to her.'

Next she treads softly towards another small bundle fighting for life. 'Here is Starling,' she says, leaning over him. 'He has hydrocephalus — fluid on the brain. We've not been able to operate yet because of limited resources.' Her voice drops a note. 'Sadly, he seems brain-damaged already.'

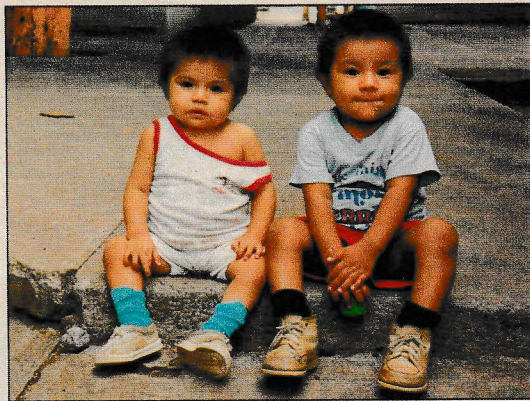
Nearly a beaming smile fills the face of a six-year-old girl struggling happily on the floor. 'Look, Karla's doing her exercises,' says Zelda. 'Bravo, bravo, Karla. She was born with spina bifida and had an operation. Then she was abandoned a year ago. She couldn't walk — she had movement in her legs but no sensation, so got hurt and didn't know it.'

'Now she's had an operation on her feet and has started walking with support. But we have to work hard at getting her better.'

'Here you're willing to put up with problems and discomfort if you feel



*With a youngster who has never known anything except war*



*Two young brothers at the Managua orphanage where Zelda Jeffers has found fulfilment*

progress is being made,' she says. 'No child has died while I've been here. You see results for your efforts. Once the children eat and get a chance to play and relax, they blossom. That's very rewarding. This isn't so different from the NHS except *we* have more toys.'

Zelda, now half-way through her two-year contract, is kept in touch with England through regular letters from her sons. Soon she must decide whether to stay on, sharing the poverty of the Third World and its deeper satisfactions...

Or return to the creature comforts — and predictable routine — of dear old Enfield.

**Anthony Hayward**