March 2009

Jefferson nurses answer call to arms in World war II, pp. 46

Let us know how access to this document benefits you

Follow this and additional works at: http://jdc.jefferson.edu/shearer

Part of the History of Science, Technology, and Medicine Commons

Recommended Citation

http://jdc.jefferson.edu/shearer/8
THE SMOLDERING EMBERS of World War II burst into flame as German jackboots tramped across Poland. The stain of the swastika spread across continental Europe as Nazi tanks cut France in two. Dunkirk was evacuated, and the Battle of Britain began. President Roosevelt, re-elected for a third term, declared an unlimited national emergency, signed the first peacetime selective service law, and inaugurated Lend Lease and the national defense program.

Pearl Harbor was bombed on December 7, 1941, and the United States was at war with Japan, Germany, and Italy. It was formally committed to the Allies it had been assisting with weapons, munitions, and foodstuffs for almost three years. Philadelphia became a war-time boom town with military and civilian personnel working around the clock to produce and move goods for the war effort.

Jefferson Goes to War — Again

Slightly over 20 years after Jefferson Base Hospital No. 38 had returned from heroic service in World War I, it was reactivated for World War II duty. In the spring of 1940, the Surgeon General of the Army asked Baldwin L. Keyes, M.D., then Chairman of the Department of Psychiatry at Jefferson Medical College, to recruit and organize the doctors and nurses required to staff a 1,000-bed
A group of nurses are in readiness to embark on a bivouac as part of their training at Camp Bowie. Left to right are: Kay Bastian, Leah Hummel, Julie Umberger, and Charlotte Davenport; Marie Shearer is kneeling.

A gang of Arab workers hastens to complete one of the 38th General Hospital buildings in the desert near Cairo, Egypt.
The physicians and nurses of General Hospital No. 38, a Jefferson unit, are shown assembled at Camp Bowie, Texas prior to their departure overseas.

general field hospital. Ironically, Jefferson itself had only half as many beds at the time.

Keyes, now retired but still peppy in his 80's, had served with the British in World War I as an Army medical officer and held a commission in the Reserves between wars. He filled up the complement of the 38th in short order. On the afternoon of the Pearl Harbor attack, he reported to Washington that the Jefferson hospital unit was ready for active duty. On May 15, 1942, a special train pulled out of old Broad Street Station in Philadelphia for Camp Bowie, near Brownswood, Texas, with a group of about 90 volunteer nurses and 60 doctors abroad. Thirty or so additional nurses joined the contingent later in Texas.

After several weeks of training on the hot and dusty Texas plains, the 38th left Camp Bowie for an unknown destination. Speculation was rife that the unit was headed for the Pacific, then Europe. Both guesses proved to be wrong. After stops at Charlestown, S.C. and Camp Kilmer, N.J., the 38th embarked September 21, 1942, on the converted British liner, Aquitania, at Staten Island, N.Y. The accommodations were hardly luxurious with seven nurses cramped into one stateroom with one canteen of water each day for bathing and laundry.

The ship was without convoy and followed a zig-zag pattern to
foil any lurking German U-boats. After putting into Rio de Janeiro for supplies, the *Aquitania* proceeded to Capetown, South Africa. It then headed up the coast of Africa through the Indian Ocean to the Red Sea and through the Suez Canal. It crossed the Equator on October 24 and arrived at Teufik, the port of Suez, a week later. The 38th had come 16,700 miles by sea to set up a hospital in the desert outside Cairo, Egypt.

Only 30 percent of the scheduled 80 buildings (36 of them wards) had been completed when the 38th came ashore. Fortunately, the nurses' quarters had been finished and were habitable. The furniture did not arrive, however, until just before Christmas. Similarly, the supplies and equipment were delayed en route, so when the hospital opened on Armistice Day, 1942, patients were washed and fed out of tin cans, and the Army corpsmen improvised bed trays out of packing cases.

Meanwhile, Colonel F. R. Ostrander of the regular Army was made Commanding Officer of the 38th. Dr. Keyes, also a colonel, became Executive Officer and later psychiatrist for the entire Mediterranean area. Miss Willie L. Alder, '31, who was originally in charge of nurses, left to take over nursing services for the whole Mid-East Theatre. She was succeeded by Miss Edna R. Scott, '28, as chief nurse at the hospital in the encampment designated by the
After a voyage of 16,700 miles, the "Aquitania" heads into Teufik, the Port of Suez, to disembark the doctors and nurses of the 38th General Hospital contingent.

Overview of Camp Huckstep, where the 38th General Hospital unit was quartered, shows the buildings silhouetted against the sand dunes.
Army as Camp Huckstep.

At about the time the 38th was called up, General Erwin Rommel and his Afrika Corps were racing across the desert toward Cairo. But, at the Battle of El Alamein (October 25-November 5, 1942), General Bernard Montgomery's tanks outgunned the German panzers and put the "Desert Fox" on the run. For a time the 38th was quite busy with casualties from the 9th Air Force raids on the Ploesti oil fields in Romania and other engagements, plus a stream of victims of sandfly fever and other desert maladies. Then, as the fighting swept north into Italy and Sicily, the workload eased up somewhat.

On their days off, the nurses visited the Sphinx, the Pyramids, and made trips to Cairo, Alexandria, the Holy Land, and other points of interest. The Arab merchants thanked Allah for sending these "rich" and beautiful American ladies to their shops and jacked up prices accordingly. One Army lieutenant escorting a group of nurses was cordially invited by one merchant to bring all of his "seven wives" into his bazaar to examine the wares.

The 38th gradually shrank to a 500-bed hospital as the number of casualties in its area diminished. Toward the end of the war, the hospital moved to Casablanca in North Africa. By early...
December, 1945, the last of the original nurses had returned to the states. Before it was disbanded, the 38th General Hospital was awarded the Meritorious Service Plaque, the highest award that can be bestowed on a noncombat unit of the Army Services Forces. The citation read: "For the accomplishment of exceptionally difficult tasks and for maintenance of a high standard of discipline."

However, the 38th's final chapter had not yet been written. In 1949, it was reactivated as a reserve unit. The nursing service was placed under Miss Mabel C. Prevost, '29, who was a member of this unit and later its chief nurse. She had been a member of the Army Nurse Corps in the Pacific during World War II, one of many other Jefferson nurses who served in the armed forces in every theatre of the war. Special recognition was accorded Madeline Ullom, '38, who was captured in the fall of Corregidor in May, 1942 and spent 30 months in a Japanese prisoner-of-war camp.

Back on the Home Front

The war had far-reaching effects on Jefferson Hospital and the School of Nursing. Since so many graduate nurses were in uniform, the bulk of the nursing care fell on the shoulders of the students under the supervision of the limited number of graduates left. During this trying period, the school had three separate directors. Miss Nora Shoemaker, who had replaced the late Clara Melville in 1937, resigned in June, 1943. Her position was filled by Miss Ethel Hopkins, formerly educational director, until November, 1944. She was succeeded by Miss Margaret Jackson, who held the post until May, 1947. Despite these frequent executive shifts, student enrollment had swelled to 347 by 1945. The number of faculty members also increased to a total of 14, some of whom had nursing service responsibilities as well.

A major factor behind the upsurge in student enrollment at Jefferson was the creation of the Cadet Nurse Corps by Congress in June, 1943. It was designed to relieve the acute shortage of nurses brought about by the demands of the armed forces. Students admitted to the corps attended 1,125 nursing schools with all their educational expenses paid for a period of 30 months instead of the usual 36 months so that senior cadets could be
Food for hospital patients was transported to individual wards on trolleys from the main kitchen. Serving is nurse Mildred Fromtling, '42 and Sgt. William Plunkett, ward attendant.

Off duty and enjoying a spot of tea on the porch of the famous Shepheard's Hotel in Cairo are nurses Gertrude Frie, '41 (left) and Beatrice Raymann, '42.
Nurse Doris E. Bowman, '42 (right), and classmate Jane Miller set off on a camel-back tour around the Sphinx and the Great Pyramids of Egypt.

Back on the Home Front
Two members of the Jefferson unit of the Cadet Nurse Corps model the winter (left) and summer (right) uniforms of the contingent.
released for military service for the last six months, if necessary. On-duty cadets wore the uniforms of the schools they attended and were treated the same as other students, insofar as admission and graduation standards were concerned.

Nevertheless, the nurses were hard put to cope with a growing civilian patient load in the hospital. Such trained volunteers as the Gray Ladies, nurses' aides, and canteen workers were welcomed with open arms. Not until 1944 did the eight-hour day become a reality. A special sort of camaraderie developed among the students during those long days and nights of sheer drudgery. One girl secretly married her GI boyfriend before he went overseas and became pregnant. Her friends managed to keep her covered with large aprons as the months progressed, and she made it through school without being discovered and dismissed.

Student government at Jefferson was organized early in 1945 under the able guidance of the assistant to the dean of women at the University of Pennsylvania. A student council was elected and

The 1945 Christmas pageant of the Student Nurses' Choral Club had special significance because peace had returned to earth after four years of war.
gained immediate favor by persuading the school administration to grant more time off ("A late pass, allowing the girls to be out until 12:00 midnight one night each week is given to those whose conduct in general nursing work is approved by the nursing school office and over-nights, consisting of an afternoon and morning, is given to those who have obtained the permission of their families to be out of the nurses' residence over night") to students whose conduct was exemplary. Another progressive step initiated by the Class of 1946 was permission to don white shoes and stockings in place of the traditional and rather dowdy black ones.

The "Curriculum Guide for Schools of Nursing," published in 1937 by the National League of Nursing Education (now National League for Nursing), was an update of a similar manual produced ten years previously and became the "Bible" for curriculum changes in the 1940's. It emphasized the social, economic, and public health aspects of nursing as well as the physical side. More attention was paid to the nursing care of patients suffering from nervous and mental diseases. Such subjects as personal hygiene, hospital housekeeping, bandaging, and drugs and solutions were integrated into a more closely knit teaching program rather than being treated as separate topics. A firmer correlation between ward and classroom teaching was also advocated. As part of its compliance with these recommendations, Jefferson added two full-time instructors in 1941, and instituted a course in physiology and social problems.

Peace and Readjustment

The grief which swept the country at the death of President Franklin D. Roosevelt on April 12, 1945, was mitigated by the surrender of Germany on May 7 and Japan on August 15. During the greatest conflict the world has ever known, hundreds of Jefferson physicians and nurses had served with distinction on every battlefront. The returning veterans were given a rousing welcome home by those who had kept the hospital and nursing school going in their absence.

Miss Katherine Childs was appointed Director of Nurses in July, 1947. During her administration, classes were divided into two sections. While one group was on clinical practice, the other was in class. Four days of the week were spent in clinical, two days
Faculty member Sarah Saunders (at blackboard) reviews the fine points of Pre-Operative Nursing Care with student class in 1946.

A cartoon from the 1948 yearbook depicts the harried life of a student nurse.
were devoted to classroom work, and one day off was granted. In 1947, the Jefferson basketball team, which was one of the most popular student activities for over 30 years and won many championships, was organized. The scope of extra-curricular interests also expanded under the aegis of the Student Council, which sponsored dances, parties, and other social functions.

Jefferson emerged in a strong position from the postwar shakedown. In mid-December, 1946, it opened its new Barton Memorial Division on South Broad Street in Philadelphia to treat all types of chronic diseases of the chest, and students received clinical experience there rather than at Pine Street, which for many years was affectionately called "Little Jeff". That same year (1946), the White Haven (Pennsylvania) Sanitorium for tuberculosis patients merged with Jefferson. Meanwhile, the affiliation with Pennsylvania Hospital for Mental and Nervous Diseases continued, and a second link with Sheppard and Enoch Pratt Hospital in Towson, Maryland was formed to meet student needs for exposure to nursing care of emotionally disturbed patients.

Throughout the 1940's, the Nurses' Home Department of the Women's Board of the hospital continued to provide generous amenities to the Spruce Street residences. A lounge in one home was refurbished, and a modern library was installed. Reception rooms in two other residences were redecorated. These improved inner facilities, plus enhanced outside landscaping, provided a fine backdrop for such social events as monthly teas and semi-annual formal dances.

Rightfully proud of the service it had rendered to the nation during the critical years of World War II, Jefferson stood poised to meet the demands of the Fifties. As things turned out, it was to be a decade of sweeping changes in the social order, to which Jefferson would adjust as it always had.