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American Red Cross Base Hospital No. 38 in the World War - X: Nursing Division

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X

NURSING DIVISION

"There were no vessels for water or utensils of any kind; no soap, towels or cloths, no hospital clothes; the men lying in their uniforms, stiff with gore and covered with filth to a degree and of a kind no one could write about; their persons covered with vermin, which crawled about the floors and walls of the dreadful den of dirt, pestilence and death to which they were consigned."

* * * * *

"Where were they (the wounded) to go? Not an available bed. They were laid on the floor one after another, till the beds were emptied of those dying of cholera and every other disease. Many died immediately after being brought in—their moans would pierce the heart—and the look of agony on those poor dying faces will never leave my heart."

* * * * *

"It is now pouring rain, the skies are black as ink, the wind is howling over the staggering tents, the trenches are turned into dykes; in the tents the water is sometimes a foot deep; our men have not either warm or waterproof clothing; they are out for twelve hours at a time in the trenches; they are plunged into the inevitable miseries of a winter campaign—and not a soul to care for their comfort, or even for their lives. These are hard truths, but the people of England must hear them. They must know that the wretched beggar who wanders about the streets, leads the life of a prince compared with the British soldiers who are fighting out here for their country."
"The commonest accessories of a hospital are wanting; there is not the least attention paid to decency or clean linen; the stench is appalling; the fetid air can hardly struggle out to taint the atmosphere, save through the chinks in the walls and roofs; and for all I can observe, these men die without the least effort being made to save them. There they lie, just as they were let gently down on the ground by the poor fellows, their comrades, who brought them on their backs from the camp with the greatest tenderness, but who are not allowed to remain with them. The sick appear to be tended by the sick, and the dying by the dying."

* * * * *

"The snow was three feet deep on a level, and the cold so intense that many soldiers were frozen to their tents."

* * * * *

"The wounded from the battle-plain,
In dreary hospitals of pain,
The cheerless corridors,
The cold and stony floors."

The foregoing are no dreams of tragic dramatists, born not of the fertile minds of Poe, of Rider Haggard or of Maupassant, but the grave and sober pen of history, as best it can, is telling the people at home, and incidentally civilization, something of the horrors of war; men and women sweltering in the despair of so-called hospitals, are trying to tell the sad story of the care of the sick and wounded in a war which, next to that just closed, was the most cruel and barbarous in all the black and crimson record of the ages; theirs is the tale of war's inhumanity before the gentler hand of ministering woman came
“like a poultice to heal the blows” of combat. History with pen of verity is recording what care the stricken soldier received before woman brought to the scene her overflowing heart, her flagon of mercy, her tender and skilled hand and the untiring effort to smooth the paths over which passed the war-wrecked victim of strife from the “glories” of war to a forgotten grave far from the care of those whose love death leaves desolate. It is true that man moves on, that the combative male is now probably less cruel and possibly more kind but those who saw his best efforts in the world war must know that without woman the corridors of agony in hospitals once called palaces of pain would have mirrored much of man’s official indifference and stupidity with all their horrid outcome that damned to eternal infamy the records of the Crimea. Hell that it is, the unspeakable depths of hopeless despair is reached when the sick and wounded of war are left to the care of skillless untrained men; woman and she alone, could rift the darkness, bring the lamp of mercy, the anodyne of confidence and the tenderness of hope within the whitewashed walls where the dead and the dying lay.

“Singing pillow for you, smoothed; smart and ache and anguish soothed,
By the readiness of feminine invention;
Singing fever’s thirst allayed, and the bed you’ve tumbled made
With a cheerful and considerate attention.”

Through the years that are to come let woman ordain
that when man goes forth to battle with the tragedies of existence, whether in peace or war, mid civil or industrial disaster, whether flood, wreck, earthquake, fire or other calamity, or killing battle, calls him to danger and it may be to death, she, tender and skilled must do her share; all the ages have shown that such is her wish; let it be her command; there is none other who can do this labor of love and mercy.

With the gruesome story of the Crimea still ringing in our ears, while not yet forgotten the suffering of our civil war and with the awful tragedy of fly-borne typhoid and dysentery and their holocaust of suffering and death during the Spanish-American war, the American people had not provided adequate nursing facilities even for a small flare-up and much less for a conflagration such as swept the world during the fateful years of 1914 to 1918. In civil life, even to this day, the number of trained or only partially trained nurses is totally unequal to the urgent demands of peace time; how much less efficiently could be met a hospital expansion which by December 1, 1919, reached 399,510 beds of which 287,290 were overseas, and practically all were over and above any previously occupied, in other words were new beds and the necessary result of war-time exigencies. [Ayers.]

Minds with vision saw, foretold, and early began a movement to meet, at least in some small way, this threatening and shocking situation. The army authori-
ties had been provided with no adequate means, no "official" avenue properly financed through which might be brought to action anything like the number of trained women that all realized must be provided; it is doubtful whether, if the most accurate estimate of need could have been approached, the number would have been available. Even had some prophetic mind foretold the number, the nursing resources of the country could not have filled the requisition. Had every graduate nurse volunteered the deficiency would have remained deplorable, hospitals and training schools would have been stripped of much needed skill, departments of institutions would have been deprived of experienced supervision, training of pupils interrupted and made difficult or impossible, the civilian sick left unattended and the army shortage no more than shifted to civil life where existing demands were equally urgent and, during the influenza epidemic, the entire country felt, as never before, the totally inadequate supply of qualified nurses. Again, all active nurses could not serve; some were unfit for or physically unequal to the hardships of war; others were widows with loved ones entirely dependent upon them, many had mothers who must be supported, and had responsibilities that could not be set aside. A very considerable number were, to varying degrees, unfit for the trying, multitudinous and varied responsibilities of military service.

The Army Nursing Corps, efficient as it was, could be
but a small factor, scarcely adequate to the restricted demands of peace time and of course wholly and hopelessly too small for the enormous bed expansion now impending. The American Red Cross again turned its helpful activities to the situation. Miss Margaret Delano—quiet, resourceful, efficient organizer that she was, took charge of a movement that did all humanly possible to meet the inevitable. In the early months following the declaration of war every effort was made to enroll a large number of trained women who thereby became Red Cross nurses, subject to call and ready for service.

When the organization of “38” began there had already been provided in Philadelphia, nursing staffs of three Base Hospitals (Numbers 10, 20, and 34) and several Navy Bases and smaller units, consequently the supply at one time available, was depleted. Miss Clara Melville, Directress of Nurses in the Jefferson Hospital, volunteered to obtain the requisite number of trained nurses—one hundred; after great effort and many difficulties the number was enrolled and the Director was able to report a completed personnel. For many reasons some withdrew, illness befell others, so that from time to time many changes were made; even on the day of sailing, as already stated, one of this heroic band closed life’s conflict and her living sisters sailed away with this sad reminder held close to their hearts. The names of the nurses who finally shared in the ad-
venture are given with the personnel, in Appendix "A."

The Nursing Corps was mustered into service March 2, 1918, and on March 4th proceeded to Lakewood, N. J. The nurses remained in Lakewood two weeks and then proceeded to New York for final equipment. It required four weeks for completing preparations. On May 18, 1918, they boarded the "Saturnia," bound for somewhere, perhaps France. After nearly two weeks' voyage, with all the thrills of a submarine scare, and, at times low steam due to bad coal, they disembarked at Liverpool; this was June 1, 1918. In Liverpool the nurses were met by a representative of the King, given a few words of welcome, and immediately placed on board a train for Southampton. After traveling all day through a beautiful section of England with its artistic stone walls, pretty green hills and picturesque mustard fields, the journey ended in the quaint old City of Southampton; there they rested until the following evening when the journey was resumed, crossing the treacherous English Channel and arriving at LeHarve, France, 5 a.m.; they did not disembark until the morning was at its height. The stay in LeHarve was two days; from this port the group proceeded to Paris where, after three hours the nurses again entrained on the last bit of their journey to Nantes, the location of the Base Hospital. They reached their destination about 4 a.m. June 6, 1918, some three weeks after leaving New York. At Nantes the group was broken up and, as the
Chauteau-Thierry drive was being planned, as many nurses as could be spared from the Center were sent nearer the front; the Corps was divided into smaller groups and detailed to advanced stations where more urgent needs existed or it was known that trained nursing skill would soon be necessary. By the time the other personnel of "38" arrived and the hospital began its activities, only seven nurses remained.

When active duty began Miss Melville and this small group of seven of the original command were left to organize and operate a hospital which started on a basis of 500 beds and later reached a daily census exceeding 2400. Thirty-eight was the first barrack hospital of the developing center, the first in the open field to receive patients and, as usual under such conditions, started out with many handicaps none of which, however, was more disconcerting, discouraging and crippling than the numerically inadequate supply of nurses. What was lacking in number, however, was compensated for, at least so far as was humanly possible, by the energy, efficiency and devotion of the overworked but loyal little band; they did wonders. Finally, a Chicago Base Hospital, No. 11, came in to occupy an adjacent group of buildings and to constitute another unit in the Center; they shared their nurses and helped out greatly, although at no time during the period of military activity, nor indeed for some time afterward, did any hospital in the Center approach a proper quota of nurses. Men helped
out and did splendid work but the loss of our nurses was the one hampering fact constantly and obtrusively evident, appallingly so during the busy days following the arrival of trains almost direct from the front, bringing many acutely wounded and badly gassed sufferers.

Nursing in military hospitals, far from any ready source of supply, in temporary buildings, surrounded by mud, crowded, often cold and dark, with 40 to 100 patients under one nurse, is as different from home nursing as pole from pole. In addition to the insurmountable difficulties inherent to the situation rest hours were often, for days, impossible; the meals become movable feasts; were never alluring, usually adequate, often badly prepared, commonly reached cold and eaten hurriedly. Even yet one smiles when nurses at home complain of long hours, unsatisfactory food, unattractive quarters, bad laundry service and poor beds. Nurses in the A. E. F. had all of these and as a general rule had them altogether, for the most part, all the time. Overwork was the constant rule; baths and changes were snatched here and there and it is one of the wonders that encompassed man, how these overworked women kept so clean, so well, so fit, and stood the strain. I have seen tired, almost exhausted nurses sleeping on the floor, in the corridors of heatless trains with cautious men stepping over them and striving not to disturb their perilous, uncertain and often short repose that fancy might term rest. They nursed every form of illness, encountered
danger in all its varied manifestations, knew as none other the horrors of war, saw and sometimes shared in romance and met death with calm confidence. I find in the Journal of the American Medical Association that 284 nurses “fell on the field of honor.” During epidemics, especially in the influenza outbreak, nurses, fearlessly and without a complaint or hesitation worked on undaunted when many strong men faltered. I recall a nurse who had been attending two soldiers having cerebrospinal fever; one died, the other was ill for weeks, suffered severe complications, one of which was a suppurating eyeball, but finally recovered. The tired nurse was relieved at 4 p.m., went to the Nurses’ Barracks, complained of headache and laid down for a brief rest; at 6 p.m. another nurse, passing the room, heard the sick girl apparently struggling and, on entering the room, found her in convulsions; the unfortunate nurse developed hemorrhagic eruption, lapsed into unconsciousness and died in less than 12 hours after the initial symptom of headache. The clinical diagnosis of cerebrospinal fever was verified by bacteriologic examination; obviously she had contracted the singularly crippling and frequently fatal malady from her patient; she saved his life but gave her own!

This personal observation was, no doubt, a not very infrequent incident. Both nurses of “38” who fell while in the service died of transmitted infection. Such was the usual history but it must also be recalled that hos-
pitals were shelled and that heroic women shared the dangers of the advanced sector and of the zone of combat, suffered wounds, mutilation and death, and that Edith Cavell knew the glory of martyrdom.

At the Base work never dropped to anything like the normal of peace time. The hours were long, the duties trying, the gravity of many cases discouraging, the whole experience was nerve-racking—and still these indefatigable women kept "carrying on." Mrs. Gibson stood by them, "foursquare, a tower of strength;" she always brought encouragement and her death weighed upon them—their loss was greatest and they felt it most keenly. Some weeks after the Armistice the stress lightened up a bit; influenza for a time added to their labors but finally that too passed into history and life became less strenuous.

Miss Melville and those who remained with her are to be highly commended for their achievement under many difficulties; they spent many long hours of trying toil, commonly from early until late and often far into the night; if, by chance the labors of a day lessened the preparations for tomorrow called them. Operations, emergencies, the arrival of hospital trains, the departure of convalescents and of those patients who might travel, the bringing of cheer to the despondent and the tying up of loose threads meant an endless stream of opportunity on which conscience must continuously cast its crumbs of aid and comfort. They made the best of conditions
that were often beyond improvement and they bettered anything that could be helped.

The absent ones were at various posts of duty; some were with operating teams at the front; with mobile units following the Army over fields still crimson and desolate, living like nomads, tenting in devastated towns, knowing hunger and filth, wretchedness and despair by a contact better than by name, living where death’s cold visage leered at them from stretcher, operating table, shock ward and bed. They heard the screech of shell, the hum of bombing planes, the explosion of projectiles and saw and felt the soul-racking horror of it all. Trying times these. Thrills, horrors that forever and a day will haunt memory’s chambers when other things have fled.

Some of these workers crossed the trenches, past shell-torn fields and razed villages of France and Belgium, leaving behind the pale anxious, grief-stricken often hungry faces of sadness and sorrow that had known the supreme agony of war for four long years, and entered beautiful, untouched Germany, a hive of industry, the fields verdant, even in December, the people still eating the lotus and not dreaming that the wolves of hunger and cold, panic, monetary collapse and want were even then growling outside the homes that later were to know how bitter defeat may be. Here I saw our nurses, tired but cheerful, serving at Prum, Trier, Mayen, Neuenahr, Coblentz and elsewhere through a winter when pneu-
monia—that captain of the men of death, stilled forever many a heroic heart not yet peacefully rythmed after the palpitating joy of triumph. They saw spring bloom forth, the glories of the Mosel and Rhine and, often with smiling eyes aswim with tears saw joyous boys in khaki entrain for port and home. They too were dreaming of the homeland. To them it seemed that the slogan “Get the boys home, toot sweet” was forgetting somebody, somebody just as anxious to get back. Finally, however, some came back as casualties, or with other organizations, a few returned to Nantes, rejoined the little band of home-stayers and, in charge of Captain Hustead on March 10, 1919, boarded ship and said farewell to the country of their adventure. The unsentimental Atlantic was not in a kindly mood, its ruffled surging bosom offered no encradling kindness, so the 28 voyagers on March 19, 1919, found still another reason why the Statue of Liberty could become the grandest sight of all time and of all ages, and how life’s dreams and its joys could all be encompassed by four letters—H O M E.
* * * The torches of understanding have been lighted, and they ought to glow and encircle the globe.—President Harding.

Armed peace has proved itself inevitable war.—Dr. A. J. McDonald in Toronto Globe.
CLARA MELVILLE, R.N.
Chief Nurse
Base Hospital No. 38

ANNA W. PARSONS, R.N.
Operating-Room Nurse

MYRA BADORF, R.N.
ANNA M. DAY, R.N.

FLORA DEXTER, R.N.

IRENE HAAG, R.N.
MARTHA L. HENDERSON, R.N.

FLORENCE JONES, R.N.

EMILY A. JUMMELE, R.N.
MARGARET A. KANE, R.N.

ADELE M. LEWIS, R.N.

SARAH A. McCONNELL, R.N.
EDA K. OHLAND, R.N.

MARY A. OWENS, R.N.

MERYL G. PHILLIPS, R.N.

Died in Service.
MARGARET L. SHOEBOTTOM, R.N.

ELLA M. SHOEMAKER, R.N.

MARY E. STAFFORD, R.N.
ESTHER F. TIPTON, R.N.

GERTRUDE VAN PELT, R.N.

MARY VAN PELT, R.N.
GERTRUDE M. WILSON, R.N.

CAROLINE GILTINGAN
Civilian Personnel

ANNA D. MEGARY
Civilian Personnel