American Red Cross base hospital no. 38 in the world war. United States army base hospital no. 38, organized under the auspices of the Jefferson Medical College and Hospital, stationed at Nantes, France, 1918-1919, by W. M. L. Coplin.

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SURELY in the 4,800,000 men inducted as soldiers, sailors and marines nothing to which medical or physical attention could be given was more important than that delicate, complicated and highly efficient organ—the human eye. Of the approximately 10,000,000 eyes nearly 9,000,000 were in the Army, and some 4,000,000 of these in the A. E. F., saw “Old Glory” proudly waving in the breeze under friendly alien skies and triumphantly victorious in occupied domain of once proud Germany. Of the 2,084,000 pairs of eyes that reached France, 1,390,000 saw active service in the front line, saw the “glories” of war, did look-out duty on transports, watched for periscopes on the restless bosom of the Atlantic, where failure to see meant death and disaster; they and others gazed out over “no man’s land” where snipers sought every moving thing, took observations from captive balloons and, from perilous heights in speeding planes, peered down on the desolation and wreckage of devastated field and ruined town wherein, like vermin crept hostile destroying foes; those
eyes also directed charges, led rescuers, and always served. In war some may sleep but always there must be the ever-seeing eye that divines and directs, that guards and guides where a thousand dangers are assailing from heaven and earth, from land and sea, under noon-day's glare or silver moon, and when impenetrable gloom wraps all in its cloak of sodden night. A sightless army is unthinkable!

So important an instrument of defense and offense, a weapon so necessary, such a delicate and vulnerable organ must be the objective of many dangers, incidental, accidental, intentional and sometimes fiendishly contrived. In years that were, enemies darkened these windows of the soul by using red-hot iron; they drove in spikes, perchance, merely picked them out. No more of such gentle tenderness; man has advanced; civilization grown lusty and wise, now uses the high explosive and poison gas, thrusts in fragments of exploding shell and boring bullet, ruptures the ball by mere force of concussion, blinds with flying sand or other secondary projectile, or slowly burns the cornea to opacity, crimsons the ball to scarlet, tortures through hours, days or weeks of suffering and finally pulls down the darkening curtain by means of what we now euphoniously call “chemical warfare,” “poison gas” but for which the creators of language have as yet given us no word that, from the humanitarian standpoint, may be designated as even remotely accurate or mildly descriptive.
Soldiers having trustworthy eyes must be chosen; discriminations must be made as to doubtful eyes; handicapped would-be heroes must be restrained, and trembling, cowardly malingerers must not be allowed to escape conscription. When made a defender of his flag, the nation's duty, obviously, is to afford the soldier every care and attention, that the highest skill affords. Consequently every hospital, especially one performing the important function of a Base, must have a highly trained and experienced ophthalmologist in its professional personnel. In this regard the Director found himself particularly fortunate in securing such an officer in Captain John R. Forst, a man of large and mature experience, for many years a teacher and connected with several important eye clinics in such prominent hospitals as the Pennsylvania and the University; the selection proved most fortunate.

The history of the Eye Department of “38” must, in a large measure follow this one man; whatever he was able to do was greatly aided by the support given him by the organization of which he was a part. He always held and insists that I say that the support gave him recognition and a position without which he might have been left a casual on the uncertain sea of the United States Army and the A. E. F.

Captain Forst came to “38” in May, 1917. In the army that meant very much so, when, in September, 1917, the ophthalmologist was ordered to Camp Green-
leaf, we did not know what was happening to him except that he was finally "going to war," and there was a fear that, like some others, he might be lost. Arriving at Camp Greenleaf orders were awaiting sending him to Camp Upton, N. Y. To Captain Forst "38" seemed to fade further in the distance, the attachment appeared to become less strong, and to the parent organization came the sense of impending separation, permanent detachment, which, fortunately, was escaped.

Six months were spent at Upton with "38" almost out of mind. In October the Base Hospital was mobilized, but no orders for the officer to return came through; however, finally, on February 28, 1915, he was sent back to the parent organization.

His record at Upton was the examination of 3300 men, specially referred for the condition of their eyes, out of a draft of 55,000 from New York City, and the rejection of about 35 per cent. of these 3300 for visual defect. The standard U. S. Army regulations, at that time in force, were not adhered to or the percentage of rejections would have been greater. Later the revised standard of the army was much more liberal than the "38" eye department had ever dared to put into effect.

On March 1, 1915, Captain Forst reported to the Armory at Broad Street and Susquehanna Avenue, began getting acquainted with us and also participated in the current amusement of "preparing" on every rumor. By June 21, 1918, he had become inured to rumors and
had spent considerable time principally in working in the Philadelphia hospitals and in efforts to avoid the trying battles of Stenton Field and Chadd's Ford; as usual he was very successful in escaping the pleasant services mentioned.

The journey across gave no material for work and not until about July 25th was there any ophthalmologic activity. The first active duty came with the arrival of a group of convalescents sent over from "34."

However, in a few days, came the first real "from the front" crowd of wounded soldiers who ever thereafter poured upon us in a fairly steady stream.

The initial group of wounded who came to "38" included many gassed men and as their eyes were the most obvious of their troubles they were first sent to the Eye Ward, No. 18. That ward was soon filled and the overflow was assigned to No. 17 and No. 19, and anywhere along the line where a very sick American soldier could find a bed and help. Soon it was found that in many cases, the eyes were the least of their injuries, and that the severe body burns were more important. They then became "surgical" patients and the eyes assumed a position of secondary importance. Later came the real eye conditions and while they were in many instances severe, there was, proportionately, very little serious eye work to be done.

Things went along until September 10th when Captain Forst was ordered to report to Mobile Hospital No.
2, attached to the First Army Corps, and immediately in the advanced sector, where the "great show" was on. Here the work was much more serious when it came in, but the number of cases, compared with the general work in the hospital, so small that it seemed a waste of special training to maintain a detached ophthalmologist separated from his organization. Mobile Hospital No. 2 operated throughout the St. Mihiel and Argonne offensives. While the work in this hospital was largely general, the eye activities not great, it was nevertheless, a very important station because it was placed as close to the front as was safe for important operations on the wounded. This class of hospital took only what were called "non-transportable" cases; these included those wounded soldiers who must be given the earliest and most complete attention possible; it was a very necessary and valuable service. In common with the other teams sent out from "38" to this kind of hospital, the detailed officer felt he was serving to the fullest extent, and this was the purpose for which "38" was organized; in this way the American people were striving to secure for their wounded the best that could be given. It was much more distressing than the work at the Base, but the satisfaction of knowing that one was giving the best that could be given, was working in and nearest to the field of strife, was helping those who offered their bodies to the hail of iron and steel, served to maintain morale, encourage, and ease the horror of it all.
On October 28, 1918, Captain Forst, promoted to Major, was ordered back to "38;" later he became Commanding Officer, remained with the organization during the remaining months and, while still in command, was demobilized with the boys at Camp Dix, May 8, 1919.
I once believed in armed preparedness, I advocated it. But I have come now to believe there is a better preparedness in a public mind and a world opinion made ready to grant justice precisely as it exacts it.—President Harding.

“Germany believed in preparedness.”