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.

American Red Cross Base Hospital No. 38

2-1923

American Red Cross Base Hospital No. 38 in the World War - XVII: Thoughts from the Chaplain's Pen

Let us know how access to this document benefits you

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

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

Recommended Citation

It is embarrassing for one who preaches to place his report among those who practice, for the "preacher" seldom sees results, while the surgeon often knows definitely before his patient is removed from the operating table. If there are certain advantages possessed by the physician and surgeon in knowing the conclusion of the matter, the Chaplain may at least comfort himself with the thought that he is not concerned with the results—if his procedure for today is correct, Some One else will care for tomorrow.

Well, "today" in France was never stupid or dull for one moment. Our Allies may have found a measure of monotony from longer service but we were fresher and when the fracture and gas wards and the muddy roads to the cemetery seemed too often repeated, the enthusiastic idealism of the men, their apparent willingness to stand and do anything, came as a reviving breath from our younger and happier land. Then the lighter side was constantly recurring possibly just because it was so
incongruous. The walks to nearby villages, dinners with newly made French friends, the discovery of a good cook where the omelette was particularly appetizing and the wine of moderate price and still more moderate quality. The exchange of information on these new “finds” and then the rapid deterioration of the “find” under the strain of popularity.

Under such conditions men made good friendships that endured, learned one another’s strength and weakness, admired the one and forgave the other, found life interesting and everything worth while. It was exhilarating to venture, to abandon many present satisfactions for the sake of a distant good, to hold true to our traditions amidst the novel and often enticing attractions of a foreign land.

One recognized that the men of our unit were above the average in intelligence and character and naturally made a creditable showing, but it also may be said of our patients that the great majority were mindful of the fact that they represented the country and gave as good an account of themselves in our back area as they had already done at the front. It is to be hoped that a more conventional life has not erased from the minds of comrades how greatly they were and are admired for their conscientious work and cheerful fellowship; if we were ever peevish and dealt in trenchant English it was all owing to the state of the liver, and our hearts now warm at the memory of our few slight discomforts and many
pleasures shared together. Those of our family who died under the pressure of service we shall ever recall as high examples of faithfulness and feel a strengthening of hearts as we salute their memory.

To recover something of the atmosphere of the time, the Chaplain may be permitted to quote from a letter which he sent to his home parish on October 27, 1918:

This is Sunday afternoon—visiting day at the hospital—and French families for miles around are walking through our "streets," looking in windows and doors, inspecting everything, but chiefly inspecting the American soldiers, who are not averse to the inspection. In spite of the fact that the girls are generally chaperoned by their entire families, new acquaintances are being made among our boys and friendships of some standing are being bettered.

This afternoon we expect a regimental band to play for the patients and the French visitors will have the benefit of the concert.

In the distance someone is using a piano, others are singing, the convalescent patients are walking about or being wheeled in chairs and there is laughter and talking. The sun is out at times and the men are revelling in its warmth. You would certainly think this a holiday if you walked along our streets, and maybe you would if you went into some of the wards; but if you would retain the impression you must not enter others, and it would be well to keep away from all when the wounds
are being dressed. The rheumatism, grippe, and pneumonia wards might not distress you, though the patients look very sorry for themselves.

Maybe you would like to know what I have been doing today. Well I arose about five o'clock and after dressing in the dark, arranged the officers' mess hall for the early Communion. We had two altar lights, and the men like them because they are a promise of light that is to come out of our present darkness when the King brings peace again to the world. There were not many at so early a service because the men love to sleep when they have an opportunity and because the place of our meeting is so often moved; but they were earnest and deeply appreciative of the opportunity.

At 9.30 there was the more popular morning service, here we had about two hundred men and they sang the hymns in a way that would have shaken the roof of St. Paul's. They are good listeners too and one feels the great responsibility and the great privilege of speaking to them. This evening at seven o'clock we have the third service and at this there will probably be about three hundred men and the singing will be with a greater will because the men select the hymns.

After the morning service I visited a few of the wards to distribute fruit that I bought yesterday with some of your money; chiefly grapes, with a few peaches and apples. In one ward of about 54 beds I was able to give every man a small bunch of grapes; you should have
seen their smiles, forgetting for a moment amputations, severe fractures, deep holes and long gashes with ugly irrigation tubes protruding. They have to cry out at times, especially when wounds are being dressed, but they are wonderfully gritty. The peaches and apples went to men who found it difficult in their wasted condition to eat army fare. One man held his apple close to his face with half-shut eyes, enjoying the perfume; I left him still smelling it.

In another ward I visited there were three men to whom I could only give flowers. One is holding on to this world by a very slender thread, after having passed through terrible experiences; he was five days in a shell hole unattended, with both legs mangled, and his condition when he reached our hospital was such that you would not read the account should I write it. He is a Russian Jew surrounded by people whose ideas are different from his own; he would like to have seen a Rabbi but consented to let me act as his Rabbi, and seemed comforted when I gave him the old Hebrew blessing.

The two others have fractured jaws, one having had most of the lower jaw shot away and must be fed through his nose. When I first saw him he was in great agony and gripping the frame of his bed to hold himself together. I offered my hand instead and he grasped it eagerly, while I told him of my gratitude and your gratitude for all the anguish he was bearing for us. Of course he could not speak to me but his big brown eyes
looked into mine as I told him of the Christ who had suffered so for him; and he seemed to understand better through his own pain. As I was leaving he reached the other hand from under the cover and stroked and petted mine between his. The responsive pressure of his hand was as grateful to me as mine could have been to him. When I recall some of these poor mangled, disfigured men, some of the ache is taken away that came with the golden stars on our parish flag.

They might have been disfigured, instead they are transfigured. The parish has made the supreme gift with its very best and we claim the privilege of making, with those who loved them closest, a thanksgiving to God for their lives—served faithfully—crowned gloriously. At the Holy Communion we shall ever remember them as part of that “Company of Heaven” with whom we sing, and whose sacrifice has saved our idealism. They lived because they were willing to die.