American Red Cross Base Hospital No. 38 in the World War - XX: Brest

2-1923

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

"American Red Cross Base Hospital No. 38 in the World War - XX: Brest" (1923). 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. Paper 7.

http://jdc.jefferson.edu/american_red_cross_base_hospital/7
WERE it possible to tie close to one's ectoplasm, obtain for it wireless connection with the lamented Dante, possess the vocabulary of the tragic dramatist, acquire the inspiration of the testy Tamas, and write with vitriolic pen on asbestos papyrus, one might be able to record the glories of war born on the field at Brest, and perpetuate a knowledge of some of the infamous conditions that abounded in and around this port of disembarkation through which passed 791,000 members of the A. E. F., and much of the 7,452,000 tons of cargo that flowed into France during the war. Vain! Vain! All is vain!

But the port was beautiful; the great arms of the land-locked harbor seemed to reach out to incoming convoys, bid them welcome to the bosom of suffering France, and to sweep about the entering vessels as with a tender motherly embrace. The hum of planes, the graceful flight of those human birds, the majestic dirigibles outlined against the sky, and the captive observation balloons looking like great, rather grotesque, socketless eyes that seemed to peer into space, Argus-
like, added to the grandeur of the scenic reception. If
the entrance was at night, or still better in the fading
twilight hour, sparkling lighthouses added to the beauty
of the entrancing view and once in the harbor blinking
lights of white, red and blue shot out messages in an un-
familiar language more alluring to the eye, probably
better comprehended through vision than the output
from the mitrailleuse French tongue when it smites the
organ of hearing. Then the interesting flotilla resting
on the peaceful surface in mid-harbor or tied up to the
few available landing points; every describable type of
craft entered into the infinite variety; great silent men-
of-war, ponderous, impressive, bristling with armament,
steadfast as a rock among graceful swells upon which
lesser craft bobbed up and down like corks; huge coaling
vessels with long arms and uplifted projecting hoists,
looking not unlike some enormous dirty spider, but laden
with diamonds more practically precious than a kohi-
noor; a few French submarines; destroyers that rolled
like puppies at play and shot about in and particularly
outside the harbor, like frightened water beetles on the
quiet bosom of a mountain pool; the "Leviathan," called
by the boys the Hebrew Transport—Levi Nathan—
with the Stars and Stripes snapping in the breeze, look-
ing secure and proud even in her humility—loaded with
restless khaki-clad men each avowedly going to slay the
makers of the gigantic craft; tenders resplendent in cos-
tume and polished brasses, bringing officers from shore,
Base Hospital No. 38
Typical Street

Base Hospital No. 38
Mess Hall

Base Hospital No. 38
Private with Marching Equipment

Base Hospital No. 38
Captain Tripp and Kazenstein

Base Hospital No. 38
Personnel Tents after Relief from Duty

St. Nazaire
U. S. A. Transport
transporting precious messages like carrier pigeons, and creeping about huge transports like gaily clad urchins playing hide and seek; great lighters, flat and often rail-less, moving slowly, usually under their own power, coyly siding up along transports from every vantage point of which hung curious boys drinking deep the beauty and wonder of it all, and straining like leashed followers of the chase for freedom from the cages in which they had braved the unfriendly sea infested by every form of marine danger known to a resourceful, cunning, conscienceless foe. Such, in brief, was part of the interesting detail encompassed by the harbor of Brest. Hanging, as on a hillside, was the quaint old City with its ruined castle, dungeon and all, its busy wharves, concealed fortifications, naval base, busy railroad terminals often filled with tiny kennel-like cars which Americans wished to wear as watch-charms, and, sweeping off to the side and around the harbor, the picturesque hills of Brittany. Altogether an entrancing scene on which hungry eyes were feasted.

But the newcomers were not tourists seeking restful picturesqueness surrounding placid harbors, and must ashore. There were the usual delays but on the whole one was promptly impressed by the speedy movement of events; a preliminary visit by some officers, a lowering of ladders, the descent of men whose legs were still manifesting traits of the inexperienced mariner, were not fully trustworthy, the crowding of transporting
lighters until it seemed they must sink, the ordinary baggage mix-up, and then slowly to a landing and “all ashore.” Some difficulty in getting organizations together, shouldering packs that seemed to weigh a ton, or piling them on great trucks, sturdy American ones that could not be overloaded, then the slow march to Pontanezen, up gradual inclines, usually splendidly paved, over the enclosing hills and then a slow descent along a rather bad road, at places sadly out of repair. In town, even to the outskirts, the populace lined up to greet and God-speed the arriving hordes; children sang “Hail, hail, the gang’s all here” and did not mind the naughty word although probably few if any of them comprehended the language uttered; they had this and other songs down pat, frequently with perfectly clear enunciation; they did not learn words nor music from their devout mothers; one can easily surmise who were their teachers. The larger boys took real delight in conversing with soldiers and Hugo’s street gamins often spoke of themselves as “professors,” bent on teaching their language to Americans many of whom wanted only “veni ici,” “allez,” “toot sweet,” “vin rouge” and other useful words and phrases.

A kindly, wise Colonel sometimes ordered a “halt,” an “at ease” on or near the top of the hill, where ranks could “break,” men could de-pack for a moment’s rest and glance backward toward and over the old town or forward upon rural Brittany with its quaint houses, fence-
less fields and farms, and roadsides often mounded up and overgrown by ferns the long, rather crisp and sometimes yellow or frayed fronds of which had been disordered and occasionally devastated by our predecessors. In the distance could be seen the fields where, under "pup tents," thousands of American soldiers had spent their first night on French soil.

After a brief rest, on to unforgettable Pontanezen, with its rather impressive entrance, the old stone barracks, probably much the same though no doubt worse than when "The Little Corporal" last saw them. Of course they were interesting, with forbidding floors, usually of flag stone, not clean, old doors, little windows, thick stone walls, stuccoed exteriors, and huddled together with neglected uneven, sandy or pebbly clay ground between; a few fragmentary stone walks, pools of water around which, at one side, were circular and rectangular tents, parts of which often extended into the muddy repulsive pools.

The officer commanding an organization reported to the Pontanezen Adjutant, was given a flood of misinformation by a snappy, roughneck, typical army sergeant, was assigned space, sometimes several groups to the same allotment, and began foraging for possible prospects of "chow" and something whereon to rest. The available cots were of iron, and the bed part formed by flat steel straps or bars about six inches apart, and as elastic and resilient as a concrete sidewalk. The Chap-
lain or Frank Eaves would have fallen through between the almost rigid supports; Majors Coplin and Nassau, and Crosby Smith viewed from beneath, no doubt would have resembled huge steaks securely grasped by the compressing bars of a gigantic broiler. However, the cots or beds had altitude and that was important for the dry ground, if such there chanced to be, was not clean and water came and after a time disappeared on the floors of the tents almost like a tide. Enlisted men fared less well; they usually were assigned outside the walls where, because of frequent rains, the ground was softer, the stench less permeating and the flies certainly no more numerous nor pestiferous. The fly plague was beyond words, sacred or profane; the accessible mess uninviting, occasionally positively repulsive and the average not good. The latrine and sewerage system, such as existed, was of the "overhead" variety, neglected, filthy, and necessarily unsanitary. The Adjutant informed inquirers that the C. O. was ill; that could be no surprise; later it was also gratifying. Concerning the Adjutant himself, at that time on duty, and who in some respects, appeared to be alive, one would like to use trenchant language but its most versatile exponent would soon recognize how puny his effort and how futile the attempt. The head of this important individual was of the "sorrel top" species, his temper of the "hair trigger" variety, his veracity appeared multiform, and his conceit, ignorance and discourtesy were colossal to an extent incomprehen-
sible and unbelievable. Of course, he was an accident, no doubt a temporary affair, and there was none other just like him encountered in all France. An officer who approached him was fairly sure of an insult, if of lower rank it amounted to a certainty; sometimes the officer was accused of being drunk— that appeared to be a favorite starting point, which, if one recalls how, to a jaundiced man everything looks yellow, becomes readily comprehensible.

Incoming officers often wished to learn something of their baggage and occasionally were indiscreet or brazen enough to inquire; such unpardonable presumption sent up sky rockets, exploded mines, and lighted flares; if, as was the case with the officers of "38," any one wished to visit the port to seek clothing rolls or trunks, or to get a traveler's check cashed, he was treated as though he contemplated sinking the navy, robbing the banks of Brest, betraying important military secrets that he could not possess, or of disrupting the two Republics; knowing the purpose for which he would visit Brest the leave-granting despot naturally assigned to all proponents similar motives and when, after many futile attempts, Captains Hustead and Owen obtained permission to hunt up baggage, it was felt by comrades that dire things must occur and H. Q. acted as though two desertions should be reported. Nevertheless they got our clothing and many things sadly needed, and, no doubt, salvaged stuff that, otherwise, would have been lost.
Welfare organizations helped cheerfully and greatly; they furnished facilities for correspondence, exchanged money, supplied or replaced toilet articles such as shaving cream, tooth paste, etc., and did many things well. They could not do everything, that was obvious, though some seemed to expect at least that much of them; the workers were usually swamped by detail, supplies frequently exhausted, and the newcomers probably not always patient or reasonable. Nevertheless the Red Cross Hut was a God-send.

Blankets were issued on “mem” and, in sufficient numbers, they made the inquisitional beds inhabitable to both man and insect life. Fighting through clouds of flies was a preliminary to entering the mess and constituted a sort of “setting up” exercise during meals; any attempt to record the number of these pests would wreck the world’s output of mechanical counting devices and to put it in figures would pie and scrap all the Mergenthalers ever manufactured. Travelers through Brest must have fallen in thousands before such well-known fly-borne diseases as typhoid, dysentery and possibly cholera, had it not been for the envisaging wisdom of the Army Medical Corps that made imperative universal immunization; that saved the day and protected soldiers from unspeakably filthy conditions that, nevertheless should have been impossible.

Then the attempts to get orders; surely they also served who only stood to wait; Bulletin Boards gave
notice to everybody else, at least often it so appeared, and days dragged by like geologic periods. During this apparently endless stay men of "38" won baseball honors, beat all comers, left behind a precious glory and took with them a cherished memory the satisfying balm of which they were to need so badly during their early athletic contests with "34." All of that, however, is set forth in the article on Athletics.

Finally, orders came through, packs and baggages were hurriedly assembled, some impatient waiting, and then on to the train and away to new fields.

Brest can never fade—few memories of it can be pleasant; camaraderie, unity of amusement, annoyance and experience, tightened bonds and later good fellowship smiled at the pettiness of many an unpleasant incident. After all were not conditions unavoidable, just part of war's disgusting filthiness and perilous unsanitary life, even far in the rear of actual combat lines? When, from a greater height and better perspective, born of the years, we look back over the days at Pontanezen, can't it be seen that the horrible facts are just part of war—really very insignificant when compared with the many worse conditions observed later and elsewhere? While war smears the soil of the footstool with its grimy, barbarous talons, conditions such as here found or even worse, and possibly irremediable as those observed in and about Pontanezen, will be repeated thousands of times. Such C. O.'s and Adjutants accompany all
armies; the patriot Washington and the traitor Arnold were both present in 1776; the bloody, destroying, des­
olating Sherman, and the gentle, humane Grant and Lee, were participants in the sixties; beside the angelic sisterhoods and not far distant from the noble Nighting­
gale, slunk the camp Pompadours and DuBarrys; martial splendor and squalor, neither beatify nor bru­
talize save that the potential angel or demon be present as must ever be the case where humanity is gathered, be it peace or war, it matters not which; though war un­
chains and mobilizes the latent Jekylls and Hydes, the noble and the true stand out like beacons against the Stygian background of the ignoble and false. So it is the same old story of ancient and medieval wars, of the crusades, of the Crimea, of our Civil War, of the Spanish-American War, of all war; the lurid flames vary in form and color; the pestilence may be plague, cholera, typhus, typhoid, dysentery, influenza, gas gan­
grene, or what not; the barbaric cruelty may be born of tomahawk and scalping knife, bludgeon or bayonet, boiling pitch or flame-throwers, torpedoes, mines, aerial bomb, high explosive, or the crowning infamy of the inferno—chemical warfare—it’s all in the game.

Now that man has harnessed nature’s forces, speeds messages through space, rides the air, travels under the sea and calls the universe his own, is it not possible to possess his very soul, encourage humane creative thought and strangle the demons that have grown great and inso-
lent within him? Is this faculty that he calls reason so puny that baser things cast it aside and the brute snarls and snaps, poisons and energizes around firesides and in council chambers? Dare not the still small voices of conscience rise to thunder tones that shall awaken nations from the lethargy of myth and tradition that makes war glorious and calls warriors heroes? Can't its needless horrors be impressed upon mankind and its pettiness and futility be made obvious? If, through the aeons man has failed, and apparently he has, then "Woman, where art thou?" Page woman.

"Mankind is lethargic, easily pledged to routine, timid, suspicious of innovation. * * * * * He has spent almost his whole existence as a savage hunter, and in that state of ignorance he illustrated on a magnificent scale all the inherent weaknesses of the human mind."
The more I study the world, the more am I convinced of the inability of brute force to create anything durable.

Napoleon Bonaparte.