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 - XXI: Brest to Nantes

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 - XXI: Brest to Nantes" (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 6.
http://jdc.jefferson.edu/american_red_cross_base_hospital/6

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Jefferson Digital Commons. The Jefferson Digital Commons is a service of Thomas Jefferson University’s Center for Teaching and Learning (CTL). The Commons is a showcase for Jefferson books and journals, peer-reviewed scholarly publications, unique historical collections from the University archives, and teaching tools. The Jefferson Digital Commons allows researchers and interested readers anywhere in the world to learn about and keep up to date with Jefferson scholarship. This article has been accepted for inclusion in 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
BREST TO NANTES

FROM a warm fireside in Philadelphia to the chill and damp of Brest is a long journey with many changing scenes, kaleidoscopic, rather than transitional. Cheerful embers crackling into myriads of sparks, a comfortable chair, pictures and other objects one knows so well, all combined to make that day of departure extremely remote, the memory vivid, and new scenes, strange ones indeed, become more striking. But, however distant home may have been, the journey from Brest to Nantes made an enduring and deep impression, marking as it did a first invasion of French soil; and, alas for many of us, the last. Thus the individual may look upon this part of the great adventure as fortunate or unfortunate according to the point of view, and the individual’s desire to get nearer the Front and into the seething whirlpool of activities.

It will be a long time before one forgets the hike from Pontanezen Barracks to the train. The day being typically French, great grey clouds were banked against the horizon and a cold drifting rain soaked through shoes and slickers and permeated all equipment. On mounting
a hill the long column was visible far in the rear, slowly, surely advancing, following the undulation of the road like a huge dripping serpent; the long somewhat straggling rearguard was hazily distant and finally blended and disappeared in the mists of the valley a mile or more away. Curious little details are recalled to mind, mere trifles, which seemed forgotten long ago; Colonel Lambie’s short coat; Dunkerley’s right puttee dragging in the mud; the disconcerting manner in which the rain trickled down from cap to neck and then beneath clothing, following the spine. The townspeople watched the passing with attentive glances and much comment among themselves. They paid absolutely no heed to the rain; raining here 300 days of the year was their idea of normal climate; dry weather that threatens growing crops may well arouse anxiety. If there was a downpour every day one is quite sure their spirits would not be dampened, so great is their ardour and love for the patrie, and so little do they note peculiar or objectionable climatic variability. The tricolor was much in evidence, hanging from many houses whose design seemed so quaint to unaccustomed eyes. Here and there the Stars and Stripes, and occasionally “Vive l’Amerique” greeted the passing column of friendly invaders.

It had been a long wet hike to the train and some were a bit fagged. In this condition men tested the much discussed potency of a cake of chocolate of which precious article many had three or more accessibly stored
about their equipment. One cake often yielded an almost miraculous result; never had a cocktail produced better effect, not even when mixed by a master or an accomplished amateur, for example, Walter Bald. Up came spirits with a rush; the rain appeared to slacken; the dampness seemed less chill and men were able to inquire with some display of courage, "Where do we go from here?"

Eight in each compartment of the train. This was the order. Six is the usual capacity for day travel; but "c'est la guerre," eight, including equipment and superfluous moisture, were now stowed in space normally holding six; here also they must sleep. Some say there are advantages in being tall; this was not one of the occasions. Please note the long and short of the crowd in one compartment—McWilliams, Goodley, Eaves, Fred Marvil, Dunkerley, McCoy, Casey, and G. A. Smith. McCoy was picked on because it was obviously impossible for another long one to squeeze in. As it was, Bob McCoy crawled up onto a baggage shelf and, in some indescribable manner, there he stayed and actually slept. Of course he felt rather heavy in the morning. Throughout the long night the car jolted, knocked, swerved, rolled and bumped as only the French four-wheeler can. The pressure of war made all French roadbeds bad and those leading out of Brest were indescribably vicious. Then after a long delay the engineer apparently decided to return to Brest and there ensued
a long tedious backing. That engineer could not decide which way he wished to go—more starts, more stops—there were times when indications led those awake to believe he meant to try going both ways simultaneously! Towards midnight a cold wind arose. Outside there was nothing but dense blackness, the low-lying leaden clouds obscuring even the faintest glimmer of a star. Ah, a scene that a Russian novelist would have been delighted to describe. The small oil lantern on the roof shone with a fitful wavering glow on eight bedraggled forms, huddled in grotesque positions, striving for warmth and sleep. It will be recalled that McWilliams was stretched flat on his back in the aisle with someone's muddy boot dangling an inch or so above his nose, but that worried him not at all; he had the choice bed; he and McCoy—one on a shelf up near the roof, the other on the floor; one could not fall upward nor the other downward; the rest of the detail from time to time, boxed the compass of possible directional temporary displacement. From a strap fastened to the roof hung a huge loaf of bread placed there out of the grime; it swung to and fro with every lurch of the car, like a great time-keeping mechanism; one recalled Poe's Pit and Pendulum. The windows of the train, loose in their sashes, rattled continuously in the gusts which blew down from the hills or up from the sea or valley. It brought to mind an old attic in Moscow where, in the evening, Marie Ivan—often came to listen through the icy silence to the chilling wind
from the vast solitudes of the steppes, which rattled the windows in just the same way. And on a night such as this, just after Trenchard had lit the samovar, she had come rushing up those rickety stairs and, with much agitation, announced the growing rebellion of the people, and that they must soon hear "shots in the street at night." Such digression must be punished or pardoned—it is "forwarded in duplicate, through military channels, for such action as may be judged appropriate."

The next morning, as if at the wave of a conjurer's wand, the clouds suddenly dissolved and the travelers were treated to a warmth of sun and blueness of sky, such as only France can bestow. It was doubly welcome after the night's wild despairful orgy. The countryside was dotted with quaint little windmills waving their awkward arms bravely in the light breeze, a charming sight against the green background of Lombardy poplars; and the different fields, neatly laid out in multicolored squares and elongated rectangles, afforded a picture not unlike an enormous patchwork quilt. With this before one's eyes it was difficult to believe that here was a country crushed by war; far more did the landscape resemble the peace and color of a Maxfield Parrish print. But the lurching train and the indecisive or vacillating engineer were ever bringing it closer. Quimper, birthplace of the immortal Laennec, was traversed unheeded and unknown. An express rushed past, drawn by two American locomotives carrying a huge 14-inch
naval gun and great piles of ammunition. At last the outfit pulled into a long shed and detrained with all equipment. Across the wall of the station was inscribed, in large letters, "Nantes." This meant little to us at the time, but later men were to learn much about the rather quaint old City.

A short march brought the organization to Base Hospital No. 34 which was quartered in a seminary; the worn and hungry men were treated to a wonderful repast—never did food taste better and here many found acquaintances and friends whom it was good to see. Many thanks to good neighbors for their splendid hospitality—but "38" must push on to its unfinished camp on the Loire. Often the line passed and noted with interest groups of young French girls whose sombre black garb could in no way suppress their spontaneous vivacity or gay spirit. Many a quick glance from sparkling eyes lightened the burden of packs, many a merry smile cheered the marching column. Many fell for them, of course, nor could heart-hungry aliens be blamed for the fall; some recalled an isle in the South Seas and reminded one for all the world of Herman Melville's lovable little sprite Fayaway.

There is an old French poem called "The Bells of Nantes," a delightful bit of verse, but after hearing the bells one often thought that the poem did not describe their beauty; had he known them Poe would have written another verse in his undying poem. On Sunday their
message comes from every point of the warm sunlit countryside, and the air is filled with their varied tones. Some are large and deep throated, ancient ones of bronze no doubt, others peal forth a light musical tinkle—surely they must be made of silver. It is a perfect ensemble, some loud and near, some faint and distant. Alas for the mad rush of the United States. To many of us France will be remembered as the pleasant land of art, of music, of beauty, of tradition, of valor and romance; but none must forget brave, torn, suffering France—that memory will always be tender.
Disarmament is the only road to safety for the human race.—*Lloyd George.*

From the standpoint of labor, it is more constructive to destroy a battleship than to build one.—*Samuel Gompers.*