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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RECOLLECTIONS

BY AN OFFICER

ARMY service and Base Hospital No. 38. Preparation for war and actual service in the medical end of it. Breaking home ties and making new ones. Patriotism, eagerness to serve in the big cause and readjustment of one's previous life. What did it all mean? Where would it all lead? Where did it all lead? The answer is not an easy one. The eagerness to go; the eagerness to return; the dull dead drab of it all after we did return and were mustered out. Any formulated answer must be chaotic which means nothing but "passing the buck" to your questioning soul and relieving your distress by dwelling on some of the extensive recollections of life in the army.

Nature in her kindliness has often given us the faculty of forgetting the distressing things of life and has confined our recollections to more pleasant incidents. That is the reason that little in this will be growl directed at the army or at the war.

A first recollection is of walking into that wonderful big barn at Broad Street and Susquehanna Avenue, into
a fairly disorderly room, and of reporting to Captain Hustead, Adjutant. Expecting reprimand for a twenty-four hour delay, one was pleasantly surprised to find that orders were indulgently scanned and filed and one was told to report at such and such a time. Then, after a look around for friends, finding but one or two, a bit of chat and departure for home. Reporting regularly, groups were formed and attempts at friendliness were met in the average American way—“We’ll look you over to see how you pan out.” Nothing discouraging, but one felt he had to make an attempt to meet them halfway. Then the talk with the recently arrived Oglethorpe people who entertained us with an account of their experiences. That helped. Then Officer of the Day with the necessity of sleeping in the barn, inspecting food, receiving reports of the Sergeant when you hardly knew how to salute properly. Resounding echoes throughout the barn. Automobiles on Broad Street at night, desolation, the wish that the cruel war were over, or that you were a Major and did not have to sleep in this dismal place.

Later, growing bonds of friendship, easily formed, never abused, and soon the barn became warm; the men of all sorts; intensely human, and then the eagerness to serve was fortified and given the first place in one’s heart. Last recollections of the barn are of that night when we were all ready to depart. The easy orderliness of it all, the weirdness of night activity, the hopeless at-
tempt to sleep on hard floors, and then the march up Broad Street with faithful friends of some of us walking along while we held our heads high, filled with the idea that we were at least and at last on our way to France. The riotous night on the train with everyone on edge and unable to sleep, especially because the highest strung were too much for the more phlegmatic. The arrival in Jersey City with the surrounding trains filled with "outfits" who had been there for some hours. The snappy march of "38" down the station platform with practically everyone asking "What outfit is that?" and the flattering comments as we passed. Then pride swelled and eagerness to serve was gratified.

The long wait on the dock; the rumors that we were to go back to Philadelphia and then—the tug which carried us along the docks passed the camouflaged boats into each of which we hoped we would be admitted. The breaking up of officers from the men when the little old "Nopatin" was found to be too small for us all. The more bitter separation when down the bay officers on the great transport saw the "Nopatin" leave them while those on the "President Grant" slowly steamed back to New York. That hurt, because the officers all felt that should the "Nopatin" sink—which it seemed she would do—we could all swim out and hold her up until help arrived.

Then the final start for France and for the war. The uneventful trip across the smooth lake they call the
Atlantic Ocean. Of course the “Henderson” did catch on fire and we did run close to the shores of Iceland, if temperature indicates anything, and the cruiser did fire a lot of guns at something ahead of us, but the submarine never “subbed” and we finally did reach Brest—the watery port of moist old France. Our first inquiry was to learn if the “Nopatin” had arrived; we were greatly relieved to know that all were safe, that the real part of the outfit had preceded us by only a few days, had established a reputation for baseball, and had passed on; we knew not where.

A few days’ sojourn at “dear old Pontanezen” and we were on our way, but still not surely knowing our destination.

Arrived at 11 p.m. in a gloomy but quiet station; no applause by the populace because they were asleep and only the “cochers” were alive; no greeting; no welcome; we were not expected. The unsuccessful hunt for a hotel by Park and Hustead and the fine supper of bacon cooked on the station platform by compatriot Meng with his sterno stove. It was good. My emergency ration rotted in the can and many months later when I opened the can—in spite of the flavor—I could think of it as the thing I had believed could be used when I was floating around the Atlantic Ocean on a life raft. Secretary Daniels told us, after the war, that we were perfectly safe in crossing and that no soldier had been lost under the escort of an American convoy. That was
good campaign stuff, but when Meng supplied us with his little rashers of bacon which army preparedness had compelled him to take along, I was gratified to know that the army depended on no secretary's promises but recognized the fact that men on ocean or on land become hungry. Why my emergency ration was not offered up to the sacrifice at that time it is difficult to say—perhaps the gloom of that big station and no relief in sight induced me to believe that sometime before morning I would have to use it and I was saving it for breakfast. Anyway it was never used and when the burdensome "packs" were discarded the emergency ration paid me in full (by its odor) for not having used it as a dessert at Meng's repast.

After a few hours ambulances from "34" reached the station—as always when needed "34" turned up to help us out—and we were whisked off to our billet. Through rain, of course, for was this not France; and between stone walls; I have never yet decided where those stone walls were, but I think it was the road from the end of the trolley line to the Doulon Church. How well we were to know it later. We were finally landed at the hospital about 3 A.M. Once there the welcome was warm and the surprise at our appearance, great. Did we ever thank "34" for the help out? If not, they will understand—c'est la guerre. Greetings, questions, much else, and supper. Then mattresses on the concrete floor, sleep, and the awakening, and then the grand reunion.
I think there was much disappointment that there were not many wounded, and that the "C in C" of the A. E. F. was not waiting for us, but we soon got over that and began the next morning to arrange ourselves comfortably.

Then the days of waiting for something to do. The visits to town, the actual work beginning with the convalescents from "34." Later that distressing group of gassed patients from the Vesle River. Principally did it affect us because the 28th Division sent many to us and the terribly gassed group from the 30th Infantry gave us our first real idea of what modern warfare means. These were practically the first cases to die with us and we had our first taste of the horrors of war. To the writer who saw them intimately it seems fitting here to pay tribute to the patient courage of Moran who lived a little more than 24 hours, and the cheerful fight for his life against overwhelming odds made by Chadwick, the sergeant of the group from the 30th Infantry who even in the throes of death still felt—in his delirium—the responsibility for his fighting men. He did not know that most of them were getting well alongside of him and in the adjoining wards. We knew, but ardently wished for his recovery. It was denied us, and him. The only gratification granted any one connected with this case was his noble heroism and the feeling that all that could be done had been done.

It has suited some member of this great big army to
write a book about three soldiers. The story centers around three men who went into—or were forced into—this army. The analysis of their characters discloses them as follows: One naturally vicious by temperament; another easily offended and nursing a grudge until he could satisfy it by the murder of his superior officer, and the third a neurotic who was extremely sensitive. They despised the salute and felt it a disgrace to return it. That writer apparently asks us to believe these three composed the U. S. Army. He either lies or does not know. He never saw a Moran or a Chadwick die or if he did, he failed to understand what they meant. He never saw a Maguire—as I did—seek a return to his command and go with it through the Argonne and up with the Army of Occupation when his physician who thought he knew better, would have “S. C. D’d” him to the United States had he been there to do it. Other observations of the American soldier, at close range, disclosed several things; he was always cheerful; he despised the salute as much as the officer; he never was very sure of what he was fighting for, but he was sure he did not know anything much about fighting to save Democracy, and he was sure he was not a Crusader. His chief concern seemed to be that he was in the war because the United States needed him; that was sufficient reason, beyond that he had little interest except that in the distant future, there would come a time when he could eat beefsteak instead of “corn-willy” or “mon-
key meat.” Above all he had one idea and that was that Uncle Sam was at war and that he needed him. Nothing else mattered. The “frog” was amusing, sometimes it may have seemed that he did not walk up to the scratch “like he should,” but then he had been fighting our battles for three years, he knew dangers, had acquired caution, and so he could be excused. Fritz should be sent back to the Vaterland, and if the doughboy did happen to catch him, he would give him a package of Camels in exchange for his little round cap and wish him bon voyage on his way to the rear. A best girl had to have that little round cap for her collection—so what was a package of Camels more or less. That was the American soldier. Against three neurotic soldiers of fiction I will present our Moran dying cheerfully because he felt he had done his best; our Chadwick, fighting hard against death, but only because in his delirium he saw the men under him for whom he was responsible, and our Maguire who felt the game was still going on and he had to be in it. Our three soldiers typified more truly the American soldier whether he was in Base Hospitals, combat divisions or quartermasters corps, than those of the novelist. This gentleman’s three soldiers reached, rested and remained in Ward 12—the “nut ward,” but our three soldiers went on to the end, and that type comprised 99.9 per cent. of the United States Army. Neurotic descriptions of “Life in the Army” can have no influence with the members of “38”
who saw real men die, who saw them give up lives or limbs for their country, with courage and cheerfulness, and who, furthermore, tenderly gave to those heroes the attention which seemed to be a part of everybody's duty to Uncle Sam.

There was little we could do at this time or later, but everyone who had to do with the men who had "fought the fight" did things cheerfully and willingly.

Following this taste of real war came the hospital trains with their equally distressing burdens and never were there any slackers, everyone stayed up and none dodged his work; carrying to the wards, talking with the wounded, giving cigarettes and looking after their comfort. Of course, it became more or less routine, but never was there neglect. Their distress was our interest and we took care of it. Hospital trains continued to arrive after 11 p.m., surely before 6 a.m., and of course every time a train arrived it had to rain. Has any one any recollection of a hospital train arriving in daylight or during a short dry spell, or even between temporary showers? It may have made the work harder but I doubt if anyone complained about it except that he felt it made the poor soldier more uncomfortable. In the morning, however, the sight of the sufferers of the night before, in comfortable beds, between clean sheets and waiting for their "chow" gave one the thrill that even now comes to those who were able to help. That was a greater thrill than the people at home could know because it was closer
contact with the grim actualities of war. It had "local color" which was often crimson.

In spite of much criticism of the government one felt proud of the arrangements in the Center, elated that he was caring for the wounded and his patriotism and desire to serve were stimulated. He was even more proud when he compared it with the arrangements for the care of the French wounded. One wished that the American people, whose spirit and money had made these things possible, could see what their support was giving their soldiers; one's deepest regret being that all was extravagantly done and all the way down the line one encountered "patriots" who were taking care of themselves.

What one saw clearly, however, was the result. What may have mysteriously disappeared down the line worried us not at all, so long as we could give these men what their sincere fellow countrymen wished them to have. We know they received it.

Thus affairs went on until the Armistice. The recollections of that day should never be forgotten, but it is doubtful if they should be or can be recorded. Only this—duty and attention to the responsibilities of a Base Hospital required us to take care of the fact that there was no armistice in a hospital. That we did. If I recall correctly that was a night when we should have celebrated "peace," but there was a hospital train coming in and we stayed at home. No credit in that, we should have remained home.
Later come the days of relaxation. Baseball, basketball, Red Cross entertainments, theatricals and all the other things that were encouraged to keep the active American mind and brawn from "slipping a cog." Our debt of gratitude to the Red Cross Hut and its workers can never be sufficiently acknowledged. Our life in the tent in the mud, after Evacuation No. 31 relieved us, can never be forgotten, but with it all there was the big gamble about when we should be ordered home that kept up our interest.

Of course a separate paragraph should be devoted to the banquet at which we tried to consume all the surplus fund so that Uncle Sam should not get it. We did have that banquet but the then C. O. confided to me afterwards that when he walked into the dining-room of the Hotel de Bretagne he had visions of the "outfit" being placed at the bottom of the list. We did manage to get home that night with Captain Bertolet leading, Lieutenant Sinclair bringing up the rear, and the stragglers, but the C. O. was in the meantime using Jack Keenan's good offices and intimate knowledge of the M. P. to prevent a report being sent in. The C. O. tells me that if he ever goes to war again there will be no banquet. He only escaped by a hair's breadth, succumbing to Willis' idea of having entertainers. Had that been permitted we never would have reached home.

But at last orders for home arrived. The last march to the station at Nantes. The usual wait and then the
box cars to St. Nazaire. It mattered little, we were starting for home. Perhaps now we look back with regret and wish we had taken a more tearful leave of dear old Doulon. Apparently as a punishment for our levity the Good Lord sent us that wonderful four days of rough weather in the Bay of Biscay on the rollicking “Freedom.” The C. O. told me he had often wished for a trip on a destroyer, just to feel the ocean roll under him, but the trip on the “Freedom” had given him all of that he wanted and we can perhaps all agree with him. Then again, to men who went over on the “Nopatin,” what could a turbulent ocean do? Positively nothing. Like typhoid and paratyphoid, the ocean had no terrors for them, they had been vaccinated against it, and were immune to any possible attack.

Comrades—officers, nurses and men—how unforgettable it all remains, how cherished are all its memories, how stimulating the thought that we did our bit and did it as best we could, and on every detail that came to us. Perchance some of us may become garrulous old men, possibly women, and pass on to posterity recollections of service in the A. E. F.; no doubt often the years may minimize some things and magnify others, but two generalizations will endure, the atrocious cruelty and utter uselessness of war, and the sympathy and helpfulness of all who were of “38”; let us not forget the former and to the latter may we cling, holding closer those bonds, never fragile, forged on land and sea, on two great continents,
during a war that in magnitude surpasses the combative tragedies of all the centuries embalmed in martial history.
There never was a time when, in my opinion, some way could not be found to prevent the drawing of the sword.

*U. S. Grant.*

"Unless mankind destroys war, war will destroy mankind."