

S E C R E T

SECTION V

33D FIELD HOSPITAL

REPORT ON NURSING ACTIVITIES

FOR THE YEAR 1944

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Since the 33rd Field Hospital began to operate in October 1943, it has been assigned to and has served the troops of the Fifth Army. It is presently attached to the II Corps, but during previous periods it has been attached to the VI Corps and the IV Corps.

The hospital is divided into three hospitalization units and a Headquarters. Except for short periods during the year 1944, the three hospital units have been set up adjacent to the forward clearing companies of the active divisions, usually within range of enemy artillery. They hospitalize the non-transportable surgical cases only, evacuating them as their conditions warrant. The purpose of these small units in the forward areas is to provide speedy and effective surgery in cases whose chances of survival would be greatly reduced or even lost if further transporting were undertaken.

Eighteen (18) nurses are assigned to the hospital. They are equally divided among the units, with one nurse, the Principal Chief Nurse, assigned to the Headquarters. The hospital staff is augmented by specialized teams from the 2nd Auxiliary Surgical Group, who are attached in numbers required by the immediate situations. It is they who administer the shock treatment and perform the necessary surgery. One 33rd Field Hospital nurse is assigned as surgical supervisor, and five (5) are assigned as post-operative nurses in each hospital unit. Consequently, the work of the field hospital nurse is concerned chiefly with the post-operative care of the patients. Caring for this severely wounded type of patient is a constant challenge. Her skill, good judgment, and patience have a great bearing on the actual balance between life and death. In addition to this great responsibility, she is often working under severe handicaps.

For the period 1 January to 15 January 1944 the hospital participated in the Winter Line Campaign. On 22 January 1944 the men of the hospital landed with the troops on the Anzio Beachhead. They were followed by the nurses on 28 January 1944. Not only was it the first hospital to set up and receive patients on the Beachhead, but it was the only hospital which remained on the Beachhead until the breakthrough.

Following the breakthrough the 33rd Field Hospital units resumed their usual forward position. They continued to advance with the troops in this position during the entire phases of the Advance on Rome, the Pursuit North of Rome, and the Battle of the Approaches to the Po Valley.

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As though it were a prelude to the momentous events which were destined to follow during the year 1944, the nurses of the 33rd Field Hospital were greeted on the first day of January 1944 by a battle with the elements. A terrific wind and rain storm struck at midnight and continued to rage in all its fury for a period of eighteen hours. Having served in the most forward hospital areas for a period of two and one-half months, these nurses were

accustomed to coping with handicaps arising from adverse weather conditions and difficult terrain. However, never before had they encountered any conditions which equalled this in intensity. Not only was the wind and rain destructive, but it was accompanied by bitter cold and sleet. At this time Units A and C were operating and receiving patients, and Unit B was bivouaced with Headquarters. All were affected by the gale. However, Unit C was located in an area which was particularly vulnerable to the most drastic effects of a high wind. Twelve (12) patients were hospitalized at this time, all of whom were non-transportable, and some of whom were still critically ill.

About midnight, when the storm threatened to tear down the tents, personnel were summoned to secure the pegs of the post-operative tent. Shortly afterwards, the threat became so great that it was obvious no tents could possibly stand, and the realization that the post-operative tent must stand was predominant in the minds of everyone. Without hesitation all nurses and men, with complete disregard for their personal possessions concentrated their efforts upon holding up the post-operative tent. The urgency was so great that many of them were clad with insufficient warm clothing.

Action was immediately initiated to arrange for the evacuation of the patients, even though it was apparent that nearby units were facing a similar situation. Wires had been ripped from their attachments, and not only were the personnel forced to work with the lights from flashlights, but also, the danger of exposed live wires in the darkness became menacing. There was also the danger of falling tent poles striking personnel in their efforts to salvage sufficient surgical equipment necessary for the care of the critically ill patients. This danger did result in one casualty, an enlisted man who sustained a head injury.

To avoid danger to the patients, it was necessary to discontinue all infusions and Wagenstein suction, as it was impossible for a bottle to remain suspended even though securely attached. In addition to the tremendous task of avoiding the disaster which would be caused by the tent, heavy from rain, falling upon the patients, there was the problem, almost insurmountable, of keeping the patients warm and dry and also reassured. The storm continued unabated, and it was not until 0500 hours that the evacuation of the patients began. It was only through brute force that tent poles were kept standing and the tent itself kept intact. At one point the chains of one of the tent poles broke loose, and it was feared that it would be impossible to keep any of the tent poles standing. Fortunately, however, the chains on the other three poles remained secure.

When it was finally possible to emerge from the post-operative tent, the scene which met the eye was one of almost complete desolation. Every tent except half of one other hospital and one personnel tent was levelled. The possessions of everyone was either blown far away or submerged in water. Even the New Years Day turkey, partially roasted, were floating down the road, which was literally a river. There was no dry firewood and the water had weighted down the tents so that it was impossible to secure whatever dry and warm clothing may have been salvageable.

At sundown, when the storm still had not subsided sufficiently so that tents could be raised, the homeless nurses and personnel were evacuated to Unit A, which was working feverishly but successfully to keep its hospital tents up. However, again the nurses were rendered homeless, but satisfactory accommodations were later arranged.

Upon retrospection, the humor element was by no means lacking in this or almost any other major event which occurred during the year. It has never failed that certain incidents which may at the time have appeared to be desperate take on a ludicrous aspect when individual experiences and reactions are recounted. Less pleasant aspects are quickly forgotten. In fact, upon reflection, this whole scene reminds one of a slapstick comedy. Here were usually well groomed individuals, particularly nurses with neat hair-dos, looking totally bedraggled. There were officers in ridiculous garbs, due to the fact that either they had no time to put their trousers on, or they had lost them. One found personal belongings in unheard of places freakishly carried there by the wind. The turkeys floating down the road added to the incongruity of the scene, the whole of which provoked uncontrollable laughter.

After a brief stay at Headquarters, where severe weather conditions continued to prevail, threatening once again to destroy the protection afforded by the tents, all nurses were assigned to temporary duty, for the purpose of staging, at the 21st General Hospital, Naples, Italy. Here for the first time in four months, and the only time since, they were quartered in a building, which even with its disadvantages, was a novel experience. They had for the first time overseas too, the advantages and enjoyments of living in a city.

On 22 January 1944 the long awaited news of the successful invasion of Anzio and the establishment of the Beachhead was broadcast. The nurses received this news with great elation, for they knew that the rest of their unit had been scheduled to land with the troops on D-Day. This was the first definite information they had as to the exact purpose of their staging period. Not knowing when they would be sailing, they immediately set about preparing for the voyage. Having landed before by wading in water up to their waists, most of them prepared for such a situation. On 27 January 1944 at 1700 hours they boarded an L.C.I. and in a very short time were sailing toward Anzio.

After an uneventful but rather uncomfortable voyage the harbor of Anzio was sighted at 0800 hours 28 January 1944, D plus 6, but due to repeated air raids it was necessary to remain out at sea until 0900 hours. After disembarking repeated alerts were sounded and a tremendous effort was made to quickly move the nurses to the hospital area of Unit B, which was approximately two miles from the harbor of Anzio. This unit was the first hospital to receive patients on the Beachhead and at the time the nurses arrived the doctors and well trained enlisted ward personnel were caring for 84 patients, 39 of whom were non-transportable.

Upon arriving at this area the nurses experienced their first full scale air raid in which several planes were shot down. Even though the nurses had undergone enemy shellings previously, none of them at this point had any sensation of fear and all of the usual precautions seemed totally unnecessary and even foolish to them. The nurses were then taken to their respective

bivouac areas still foolhardy to the point where they belittled the fears of other hospital personnel and made absolutely no provision for their protection during the night. The fact that there were already shattered nerves among the personnel did not deter them from their "cocky" attitude. As though some Guiding Power was aware of their blissful ignorance, the first night passed unbelievably quiet.

The following day Unit C took the necessary steps to set up its hospital for operation. Work throughout the day progressed uninterrupted by enemy activity, but in the evening enemy planes came over at regular intervals dropping their bombs of destruction dangerously close. The defense put up by the anti-aircraft guns created a deafening roar and enemy flares lit up the sky so that it appeared as daylight. For the first time, and never to be forgotten through the tragic days that followed, the nurses had full realization of the hazard, with the attendant death and destruction, that the sound of each enemy plane and shell signified. Whatever ideas of adventure and glamour they may once have entertained, they now faced the great task before them with sobriety and unfaltering courage. From that moment on the nurses of the Anzio Beachhead served the wounded in their hospitals with unfailing devotion, even though mentally and physically fatigued and disheartened almost to the breaking point. The very weakness of their patients became their greatest source of strength and courage.

For two long terrifying weeks intermittent raids and shelling continued day and night almost without respite. Nurses dug their own foxholes and each night they were made deeper. There was no "going to bed". Each night meant several dashes to the foxholes, which were outside and cold and wet, so that it was necessary for them to sleep fully clad. Throughout this period no nurse left her patients for protection, regardless of the danger at hand.

On 5 February 1944 enemy shells threatened to strike Unit B, and a rapid evacuation of the patients and personnel was necessary. Previously, when a situation became perilous, a unit was moved back. Here there was no moving back and it was apparent, too, that there was no area on the entire Beachhead perimeter which was entirely safe. However, moving away from the harbor, which was under almost constant attack, improved their situation tremendously.

In broad daylight on 7 February 1944 the first major hospital catastrophe occurred when a German bomber dropped anti-personnel bombs on the 95th Evacuation Hospital which was across the road from the 33rd Field Hospital. As a result of this three nurses, one Red Cross worker and 23 patients and personnel were killed. In addition to this 68 sustained injuries, some of whom were personnel of the 33rd Field Hospital.

On 10 February, in daylight, with this scene of death and destruction still vivid in the minds of the nurses of the 33rd Field Hospital, a concentrated enemy shelling partially destroyed the hospital of Unit C and resulted in the death of two nurses and injuries to 8, one of whom was the Commanding Officer of the hospital and three of whom were doctors.

At the time of this attack 48 patients, the majority of whom were critically ill, were hospitalized in Unit C. The shells hit directly in the center of the cross arrangement used in the hospital set-up. Immediately,

the safety of the helpless patients was foremost in the minds of everyone. All available personnel worked feverishly to transfer the patients to litters so that they would be closer to the ground. This was done with great difficulty, not only because of the infusions which had to be discontinued, and the Wagenstein suction, closed drainage set-ups, etc. which had to be disconnected, but also, because the tents were plunged in utter darkness when the generator was hit so that the tents had to be ripped open for light. In an amazingly short period of time the patients were on litters and were being evacuated to the 56th Evacuation Hospital which was out of range of this particular shelling.

Evacuated to the 56th Evacuation Hospital also were the nurses, stunned and griefstricken by the tragedy that had struck in their midst. 1st Lt. Glenda S. Spelhaug, their Principal Chief Nurse, and 2nd Lt. LaVerne Farquhar of the 2nd Auxiliary Surgical Group were in Lt. Spelhaug's tent when a shell hit nearby and instantly killed them.

Lt. Spelhaug was loved by all who knew her. Her leadership, her enthusiasm for the work of the field hospital, her kindness and unselfishness had always inspired the nurses of the 33rd Field Hospital. She gave of herself untiringly, never thinking of herself but always of others. As her very last act she gave her helmet to a nurse who did not have one.

Lt. Farquhar, affectionately known as "Tex", through her genial nature and her kindly spirit had won the love and admiration of everyone with whom she came in contact. Her loyalty, her sincerity, her concern for the happiness and well being of everyone around her, and her fun-loving nature endeared her to the hearts of all of her associates.

Their sacrifice will never be forgotten and their spirit will never die.

The Beachhead casualty rate continuing to mount, work was resumed the following day so that the shelled hospital of Unit C could again be opened to receive patients. Unit B was receiving medical patients and Unit A was on the alert to move to a forward area. Because of the deaths and injuries sustained by the staff of the hospital, a reorganization was necessary. Jessie L. Paddock, then 2nd Lt. was appointed Acting Principal Chief Nurse, and later Principal Chief Nurse. Two nurses, 1st Lt. Elaine A. Roe, who has since left this organization, and 2nd Lt. Rita V. Rourke were awarded the silver star for gallantry in action on 10 February 1944. On duty in the post-operative ward, they had remained at their posts until all patients had been evacuated.

The personnel, in a determined effort to cope with the enemy activity and to conserve all possible energy, dug foxholes in their tents and made preparations to sleep in them, thus living more normally. From time to time they were improved, and the nurses began to vie with one another for superiority in foxholes. Little evening parties in the tents began to appear but when a nurse was "invited out" her first inquiry would be concerning the foxhole situation. No gathering was any larger than foxholes would accommodate. Her best friend was her helmet and was at her finger tips awake or asleep. During the night, if she were off duty, the first sound of an anti-aircraft gun was her signal to put on her helmet, curl up in a knot with her face against the side of the foxhole and just wait for "Jerry" to pass over. Any curiosity she may have had during the earliest raids had completely left her.

Again, the humorous situations occurred. It may have been trying to bathe while jumping in and out of her foxhole, which was truly a comedy. At times it would take two hours to get bathed and dressed completely. Trying to dodge the foxholes in the area, which was literally peppered with them, was just like a game of "hop-scotch" and quite a challenge in the darkness. "Sally's" remarks ("Jerry's Front Calling", Nazi propaganda program) which heretofore had been a little foreboding became highly amusing.

She began to take the raids and shellings, which by now were mainly during the night, for granted and in her stride. Except for being momentarily frightened she carried on with little or no apprehension. All had narrow escapes from injury but soon learned that the best course to follow was the one over which her work ordinarily would take her.

On 16 February 1944 Unit A moved into a forward position. Due to limited time no foxholes could be dug and the personnel spent a terrifying first night with little or no protection from the raids.

In a few days all units were functioning at their very maximum. In spite of shifting of personnel and the very maximum number of duty hours nursing care during a great part of the period of 18 February to 1 March 1944 was not of a high standard. There were times during this period when only that nursing care necessary to sustain life was possible. Short illnesses among the nurses, already small in number, increased the inadequacy of the nursing personnel, and further overtaxed the energies of the remaining number. In addition to this already existent shortage, enemy action of varying intensities continued to prevail. Consequently, morale was lowered by insufficient sleep, the constant threat of hazard and the extra duty hours. It became a problem, which was an ever present one, one which had a direct bearing on efficiency.

On 29 February 1944 the hospital area of Unit A was heavily shelled. No serious casualties occurred among the personnel and patients but a rapid evacuation of the patients to Unit C, which was already overtaxed, was necessary. Unit A set up once more and continued its hospital service with only a minimum break in continuity.

On 3 March 1944 when the fact was evidently established that there would be no further advances on the Beachhead the three units of the 33rd Field Hospital were consolidated to function as one unit, similar to an evacuation hospital. At this point the casualty rate sharply decreased and more normal working hours were resumed. Enemy activity continued but was of a much less intense nature and was confined mainly to the evenings and darkness.

However, Beachhead hospitals continued to be attacked and it was decided to sink all hospital tents on the Beachhead to approximately three feet below the surface of the ground. This was accomplished and life on the Beachhead became almost pleasant in spite of intermittent raids and shellings, which continued until the last day of the breakthrough. The casualty rate became so low that only short duty hours were necessary. Dances and parties were held in the great sunken tents, and even though it was necessary to dance with helmets on, they continued even though a raid was in progress somewhere on the Beachhead.

Organized recreation in the form of baseball and volley ball created widespread interest and rivalry among the Beachhead hospitals. Movies and band concerts and sunbathing all combined to make the final days of the Beachhead one of the most pleasant periods of the year. The nurses were granted seven day leaves to Naples and it wasn't long before the horrors of the early days were forgotten and only the pleasant aspects remembered.

where During this period of inactivity plans were being formulated to care for the anticipated influx of casualties which would result when the breakthrough occurred. On 22 May 1944 the casualty rate rose sharply and the breakthrough seemed imminent. The news that the breakthrough had come at last came at noon on 23 May 1944 when the hospital was caring for casualties which far exceeded its capacity. Long hours and even incoming shells carried little import after that. The Beachhead forces had at last been liberated and once again the hospital could move.

On 25 May 1944 Unit A moved into its forward position with the clearing company of an active division, and shortly thereafter, Units B and C. The advance on Rome had begun. So accustomed were the nurses to their dug-down tents that sleeping above ground for the first time in four months seemed strange and made them apprehensive. The days when they were "cocky" were gone forever. Though the lessons were hard, the Anzio Beachhead thoroughly educated them. Because of their proximity to the fighting they have since encountered a small amount of enemy activity as they have advanced, but fox-holes or makeshift protections have been used with prudence and humility.

As they moved into this first position the vast devastation of the towns and countryside was a constant reminder of the deadly Beachhead fighting. The casualty rate during the first few days was high and once again all units were functioning at almost their maximum.

As the advance began to accelerate the casualty rate lowered. So rapid became this advance that it was difficult for the field hospital units to keep the pace. Often a unit would be just completing setting up when the orders to move would be given. In spite of the inconvenience and extra labor entailed this news was always welcomed. They had remained stationary for four long months, and also, every move forward is a move closer to home. At times it was apparent that setting up a hospital would be of no benefit. Consequently they frequently made only the necessary preparations to spend the night. At other times they completely lost contact with the troops and on one occasion Headquarters lost contact with one unit.

The first American women to enter Rome when it fell into Allied hands were the nurses of Unit C. They were with the troops when they were triumphantly welcomed and part of the vast throng which gathered for the delirious celebration of the liberation of Rome.

Typical of the confusion which was rampant during this rapid advance was the plight in which Unit C found itself. Mistaking a collecting company convoy for that of a clearing company the unit followed it far beyond the outskirts of Rome. Suddenly, the unmistakable sound of small arms fire was heard and an immediate "about face" was executed. They finally located their proper bivouac area behind the Vatican in Rome. In the vernacular of one nurse "they were about to shake hands with the Jerries".

A few days later Headquarters and Unit A joined them in this bivouac area and the nurses had the advantage of enjoying the City of Rome before it passed completely into military management.

From Rome the units began following the troops up the coast road. Instead of the usual short advances which have typified the fight through most of Italy, the units moved as far as 80 miles at a time until they reached Cecina. Up to this point the casualty rate was comparatively low, the usual characteristic of a rapid advance. However, German resistance was strong above Cecina and the casualties hospitalized here were the most severe the nurses had ever cared for. The care of these patients required the utmost in skill, ingenuity and devotion. This was the most depressing set-up the nurses had ever encountered. The mortality rate was the highest of any previous set-up or any one that has followed. Fortunately one unit was inactive so that reserve nurses were available.

While the forward unit, Unit B, was in Cecina the fall of Livorno was imminent and Units A and C were brought into the interior. Unit B continued to follow the troops up the coast road as far as Colle Salvetti.

X During the ensuing period holding units became a problem. Heretofore units were able to advance with the troops and still cover a holding unit even though it was necessary for one nurse to do 24 hour duty for a short period. However, in two instances during this period the situation demanded that units move forward even though they were still hospitalizing 30 non-transportable patients. The only possible solution to the problem was that the holding unit be taken over by an outside group. This was done and the patients were transferred to units from the 15th Evacuation Hospital. In turning over this large group of critically ill patients some amount of confusion was inevitable, so that keeping nursing care at a high standard was difficult, but possible.

At this time the units were rather isolated and widely separated. It was often difficult for Headquarters personnel to reach them, particularly since the units were still moving frequently.

The reaction of the nurses to living in isolated areas is not what one might expect. Most of them have become well accustomed to living far from a city of any size. They find there is ample entertainment among themselves and when a line is fairly stabilized they have visitors from the combat troops. The fact that they are rarely in areas long enough for organized recreation and entertainment has little significance due to the fact that moving on to more interesting areas is constantly anticipated.

They are happiest when working and on the move and do not welcome long periods of inactivity. Their work with the severely wounded new battle casualties is without doubt one of the most satisfying types of work the Army hospitals have to offer. The expressions of surprise and gratitude in the faces of the wounded when they first realize her presence so close to the front lines, and their demonstration of fortitude and courage more than reward her for any inconvenience or even danger she may have endured.

On or about 2 August 1944 fighting subsided and all units were bivouaced in the interior and were at rest. The heat of the summer was intense but leaves were granted to the Fifth Army Medical Rest Center at Castiglione, Italy, a beach resort which afforded a refreshing change. The rest period continued until approximately 8 September 1944 when the Battle of the Approaches to the Po Valley commenced. Shortly before this time, however, Florence had been completely liberated and the units moved closer to it, thus enjoying the privilege of sightseeing before moving on.

For a period of two weeks, approximately 15 September 1944 to 1 October 1944, as the troops were driving through the Apennines, all units were functioning at their maximum. Casualty rates seemed to be equally great among all divisions. Therefore, no shifting of personnel was possible. Once again overtaxing the energies of the nurses. However, through long hours, a high standard of nursing was maintained.

During the period 5 October 1944 to 1 November 1944 one Unit, Unit B, was carrying patients which far exceeded its capacity. Fortunately again, one unit was idle and reserve nurses were available. Also, temporary duty nurses were obtained. Besides the high casualty rate the unit was working under intermittent shell fire and on difficult terrain.

Progress through the mountains continued, but as wintry weather approached handicaps arising from difficult terrain and adverse weather conditions increased. The units continued to advance. At the time they were occupying their last forward areas they were fighting not only terrific wind storms and mud, but were also under intermittent shell fire. It then became apparent that progress was temporarily halted and on 19 November 1944 two units moved to the rear. Work began on setting up and winterizing a 200 bed medical hospital. One unit remained in the forward area and it too was winterized.

As the year 1944 closes, the nurses of the 33rd Field Hospital are comfortably situated, enjoying rest leaves in Florence, and are working short duty hours. Some of them are participating in winter sports. They are enjoying their comparative life of leisure but are anxiously awaiting the day when once again they can join the troops in a forward movement.

The year 1944 will be long remembered by them all. They have gained much during the year. Not only have they greatly increased their knowledge of their profession but they have learned the true meaning of courage, patience and fortitude. They have had heartaches and trials during the year but these are already lost in the happy and joyous memories they will forever treasure.