THE SATURDAY EVENING POST
FOUNDED IN 1728 BY Benj. Franklin

Angels in Long Underwear

By PETE MARTIN

The adventures of one of our North African Army nurses, Lt. Col. Bernice Wilbur, whose job included acting as house-mother, purveyor of stockings, arranger of a desert marriage, and nurse to the wounded McNair.

"THERE was this nurse who used to walk past our house in Brockton, Massachusetts," says Lt. Col. Bernice Wilbur. "She was always in crisp, starched white, and to a little colt-legged girl staring at her, big-eyed, from a window, she was something very wonderful and special. Then and there I decided I wanted to be a nurse when I grew up." Which is one reason why Lieutenant Colonel Wilbur—her friends call her Bunny—was in North Africa to take care of Lt. Gen. Lesley J. McNair when he was wounded during a visit to the Sedjenane-Mateur sector on the road to Bizerte.

It is not the reason why she is, at the age of thirty-one, director of all the American Army nurses in North Africa. Nor is it the reason the wounded general thought her so competent and such a fine type of girl that he asked if she might make the trip home with him and continue his treatments en route. The reasons for those things are a part of Bunny Wilbur herself. They were born in her and were developed and fostered by the gran'ma who raised her and threatened her with a stick on the one occasion during her high-school days when she stayed out after twelve o'clock at night. Gran'ma looms big in Bunny Wilbur's life.

"She's got courage," says Bunny. "She has a fierce pride, an uncompromising honesty and, although she's over eighty, she's as keen as a whip."

Bunny Wilbur made her climb to her present position in spite of the fact that head nurses are traditionally supposed to be stern, granite-faced and acidulous. She is none of those things. She understands the uses of discipline. She has been very firm with what she calls, "the few problem children we had in Africa." But her smile is warm and wide, and her handling of the problems of the girls who work with her is sympathetic and human. In North Africa she was just as

Lt. Col. Bernice M. (Bunny) Wilbur, of Boston, Tunisia and points between.

JACK MANNING

insistent on the lifting of the Saturday-night curfew from ten to twelve o'clock, so her nurses could dance two hours longer, as she was on drill, calisthenics and road marches for them. She swears by those nurses. "They are," she says, "the finest group of women I have ever known." And after she gets through telling you about them and about the things they've done, you are willing to agree they are all of that.

Bunny Wilbur has been so close to the front lines that she hedges about her exact nearness to the German guns, for fear someone in authority won't approve, but her story is not primarily one of blood and thunder. It is, first and last, a story of the devotion, teamwork and selflessness of a bunch of American girls on a strange continent doing a tough job up to the hilt.

"Our standards of hospital technique in Africa are just as high as the ones at the Mayo Clinic," she says proudly. "You can tell the folks at home that their sons and fathers, their husbands and sweethearts are getting the best surgery in the world. They are getting the best doctors and the best care."

With sixty-two other American Red Cross nurses she started overseas with the Harvard Red Cross unit in 1941. The nurses went over with Canadian troops in freighters, TNT boats and whalers. "I was lucky," Bunny says. "One day a torpedo went under the bow of our ship. I didn't see it, but the lookouts did, and our destroyer escort rushed around the ocean like crazy, dropping depth charges." Twenty-seven of the nurses in two other boats were torpedoed. One girl named Edna Cree, who went over on a TNT boat, arrived with a machine-gun bullet from a strafing plane imbedded in a book she brought with her.

In England, six of the Harvard unit's nurses were picked to help battle a typhoid epidemic in Bristol. Bunny and the five girls with her found themselves assigned to a British fever hospital filled with 228 typhoid cases. "I was one of the two nurses put on night duty," she says.

People were very hospitable and she was waked up almost every day to go to a tea or a garden party. One day she was pulled out of bed to meet Queen Mary. "The Queen was very kind and gracious," Bunny remembers. "She was dressed all in blue and gray, and looked lovely."

The Road to Africa

ONE of the nurses almost didn't get to meet the Queen. The day before, she discovered she had picked up unwelcome company. As Bunny tells it, "She came in with her hair standing out like a Fiji Islander and stood there saying over and over in horror-stricken tones, 'I'm lousy.' Being host to vermin made her terribly upset and embarrassed, but in desperation she used lighter fluid on her head and, although it nearly burned her scalp off, she got her hair fixed and set in time to meet the Queen the next morning."

After seven weeks in Bristol, the six American nurses went back to Salisbury to join the Harvard unit. The unit had volunteered to work for the British Ministry of Health, to study epidemiology and public health. Mobile units were sent to blackout tunnels and as far away as Wales and Northern Ireland.

"The night the news of the Jap attack at Pearl Harbor came in, we went over to the recreation hall and curled up on the floor to listen to the radio," Bunny says. "At two o'clock in the morning we heard the President's speech. Afterward, when the short wave brought us The Star-Spangled Banner, we all stood up. We felt so full of emotion we had to gulp and blink our eyes to keep it from spilling out."

The U. S. Army took over the Harvard Red Cross unit on July 4, 1942. Thirty-one of the sixty-two nurses put on Army uniforms. Others went to work in Red Cross clubs in other parts of England. The thirty-one were sworn in as second lieutenants, and Bunny Wilbur was named acting chief nurse.

Three evacuation-hospital units and a surgical unit went into Africa on D day. One unit made the landing at Oran on barges. Another group landed at Arzeu, twenty-five miles away. The nurses went through the streets in armored trucks. They were supposed to go to a French military hospital, but in the darkness they reached a French civilian hospital instead, where American and British troops had already been brought in. The hospital had been stripped bare. There were no food, no sheets, no dressings or bandages. There was nothing to cook with. The nurses ripped off their clothes and underwear to make bandages. They emptied their musette bags and fed the patients cold C rations. For a week they worked twenty hours at a stretch, snatching short naps on the dirt roof or on the ground in their blue slacks and topcoats. After that another unit moved in with full equipment, mattresses, beds and gasoline stoves. Within a short time the patients were getting full hot rations.

Two of the girls of the Arzeu unit were assigned to operating-room work. An inferno was roaring and crackling outside. The who-o-o-m-m-mp of high explosives and the chattering cough of machine guns came to them as they handed clamps to surgeons and counted sponges.

While they worked they worried about the other nurses of their group who had gone to try to catch a little rest in a villa on the beach. When the two in the operating room came off duty, they found the others in a slit trench that the nurses had helped scoop out themselves when the strafing and bombing became too heavy. Another unit found wounded men lying on cots in the open air and pitched tents over them where they lay.

Bunny Wilbur's own journey to North Africa was something she won't forget in a hurry. She was the only woman on board her particular ship. On the last day of the voyage, a souvenir menu was printed especially for her. On it was inscribed, "The captain, officers and crew wish to extend their sincere appreciation to a lady and commemorate her unique voyage alone with 4447 men."

Her ship had trouble getting started, and dropped behind the rest. Once under way, it ran into a storm that took it between its teeth and shook it as a dog shakes a bone. It was four days before it sighted the rest of the convoy.

"The ship next to ours was torpedoed in the Mediterranean seventy miles from shore," Bunny Wilbur recalls. "It was full of British nurses and one of our own nursing units was also on her. Word had been passed around that subs were stalking us and we spent the night dressed and wearing our life jackets. When the tin fish hit our neighbor ship, we could feel the jar of the explosion coming through the water and through the steel plates of our own vessel. It was as if a giant had bumped us in a boomps-a-daisy dance. Five of the British nurses in the torpedoed ship were drowned, but none of our girls with them were lost. One of the British nurses saved three of her sister nurses by swimming out from her life raft and pulling them back with her to safety. Trying to rescue a fourth, she was so exhausted it was all she could do to keep her own head above water. The girl she was trying to save waved her away, said, 'Cheerio,' and went down."

War's Backwash

IN DECEMBER, 1942, Bunny Wilbur was brought to base headquarters and told to take charge of all the nurses in the North African area. It was her job to see to it that they had the things needed, that they carried out their assignments, had a proper training program and recreational facilities. Theoretically, she kept office hours, but actually she was on call twenty-four hours a day.

Her description of the things that went into the making of a nurse's typical day behind the front highlights a miracle of planning and skill focused upon the needs of American boys brought to earth by the enemy.

"I woke up at six-thirty or six-forty-five in the French hotel in which I lived," she says. "I have trained my mind to be an alarm clock. Any nurse masters that trick sooner or later. The streets were so noisy they served as another kind of alarm clock. There was the clatter and rattle of French trucks burning charcoal and wood instead of gasoline; they made a loud whistling sound. The people in the streets were noisy too. They wore shoes with wooden soles, since there was no leather. The Germans cleaned out the country. They even took the metal tops off of salt-cellars. Practically everything was bought on the black market. When Lend-Lease shipments came in, you could tell they were there by the long lines of people lined up outside of the stores.

"From the hotel I walked three quarters of a mile to the mess hall at another hotel. The breakfast was usually scrambled eggs made from egg powder. Sometimes we got flapjacks and salt pork, which we pretended was bacon. There was also bread, jam and coffee. When I reached my office, a telephone might be ringing and a voice from the station where the trains came in might say, 'I've got ninety-six patients here. What shall I do with them?' Sometimes we got as many as four hundred patients a day by air. The planes brought them in, eighteen litter cases to a plane, or twenty-six sitting cases. They had already had their emergency-first-aid care when they arrived. When a plane came in, a doctor went over to it, looked into it to see whether it was carrying litter cases or

Taking wounded soldiers from ambulances to receiving tents, in each of which a doctor and nurse are on duty. This unit was close to Rommel's guns.

OFFICIAL U. S. ARMY PHOTO

After relating her Tunisian experiences, Lt. Col. Bernice Wilbur models new Army nurses' uniform for members of the Massachusetts League of Nursing Education.

BOSTON GLOBE

ACME

Three "angels" and Lucy, the jeep, in North Africa. Geneva Imbody and Augusta Peake are wearing men's G. I. clothing; Bunny Wilbur holding helmet.

OFFICIAL U. S. ARMY PHOTO

Lt. Col. Wilbur snapped this picture of General McNair three days after he was wounded. Behind him: Colonels Edmunds, Buckley and Williams, of his staff.

sitters. If it was litters, he put up his hand four times, and four ambulances came arunning and the load was transferred to them.

"During the previous night we had heard approximately how big the next day's load of patients was likely to be and we tried to get everything ready in advance, so there'd be no mad rush when they arrived. Since wounded men are always hungry and dead tired, they were given a hot meal right away. If we had anything special, such as fresh meat, it went to them first of all. The staff got what was left. The shock cases were taken into the shock tents, where they were treated with hot blankets, hot-water bottles, transfusions and intravenous injections.

"A typical unit has two operating tents and a dressing tent. During big pushes we used all the tables in all three tents twenty-four hours a day. The nurses on duty in the operating tents were supposed to work in shifts, six hours off and six on, but it was hard to get them to go off duty—the anesthetists especially. You could drive them away and find them back again in three hours, claiming they had had sufficient sleep and were fresh, rested and ready to start in all over again.

"In the February push, several of our hospital units were trapped by the Germans in front of the lines. The officers wanted to send the nurses back and let the men take their chances of getting through safely, but the nurses volunteered to stay. They were the last ones to come back. They had to leave all their equipment behind them, but it was eventually salvaged."

When the American nurses first arrived in Africa, it was bitter cold. Their blue slacks soon wore out, so they bought men's G. I. long woolen underwear, men's coveralls and field jackets, men's fatigue hats and men's G. I. high shoes. Bunny Wilbur vouches for the fact that men's long woollies make excellent pajamas. "It was so cold you got dressed up to go to bed and undressed to get up," she says. Also they arrived in the rainy season; the rainiest one North Africa has had in years. The mud was deep and they went sliding about in it, skidding in the gluey stuff and wading through rivers of rain. The litter bearers slipped and slid while the nurses prayed they wouldn't drop the patients they were carrying.

One of her problems was the matter of stockings for her nurses. The ones they had wore out rapidly, and the nurses who had been torpedoed didn't have any. "It wasn't the Army's fault," she says. "The chief nurse of the Army Nurse Corps back in Washington was doing all she could to take care of us, but shipping space was limited."

The nurses' needs sharpened Bunny Wilbur's wits and eyes. She began to study Lend-Lease shipping manifests and, discovering that a consignment of stockings for the French and Arabs had come through, she went into action and got an order which said that any Lend-Lease goods her nurses found useful would be released to her. She thought fast before putting those stockings on sale in the various post-exchange huts. Army boys, bent on building up a little private international good will, might have bought them for the local French girls, so Bunny Wilbur specified that they were for nurses only and each post-exchange hut was allowed only a certain number. Recently, she was able to get some rayon panties and cotton pajamas through the British. The panties and pajamas were stored in warehouses for English nurses, but Bunny found out they had an oversupply and was able to put them on sale for her own girls. The panties went for twenty-five cents a pair.

Proper uniforms and work clothes for her nurses have recently been designed by stylists working with the Army in this country. A new coverall suit has been created. Slacks are being made with big cargo patch pockets, to be worn with especially feminized high shoes and fatigue hats. For summer wear the nurses are being given brown-and-white seersucker dresses for hospital use and jackets of the same material to wear on the street, so they won't have to change when they go out.

"My girls managed to keep their femininity," Bunny Wilbur insists. "They saw to it that their hair looked neat and attractive, and they didn't let themselves grow careless about make-up." Buying lengths of pipe at twenty francs a length, Bunny's nurses rigged up a shower bath, hitching it to a delousing machine for hot water.

"You should have seen the faces of American boys light up when they were brought into a tent hospital and glimpsed a real American girl waiting to do things for them. The boys tried every dodge they knew to get the nurses to linger a little longer beside their cots. They even made up tall tales of their adventures out of the whole cloth, hoping to lure them into sticking around a few minutes longer than their duties called for."

Cupid in Khaki

ROMANCE rears its shining head in North Africa just as it does in Madison, Connecticut; Puyallup, Washington, or Las Vegas, New Mexico. But because of the necessity for crowding it into odd moments off duty, it speeds up and races like an engine minus a governor. To prevent hasty marriages, repented at leisure, the Army established a two months' waiting period between an application to be married and the marriage itself. But Bunny Wilbur tells of one time when the two-month rule was by-passed.

"A girl in my outfit had been engaged to an Army pilot back home before she came to Africa," she says. "She was all ready to marry him when he was transferred abroad. She was ill in a hospital and couldn't get up and marry him before he went. When she docked in Africa, he was at the water front waiting for her. He must have been watching every boat as it came in. He was being sent to the front and they wanted to tie the knot right away. I promised them I'd call up and try to get special permission while they were on their way back to rejoin their units on a ration truck. They had been gone only a short time when I got word that permission had been granted. I called the nurse's outfit on the phone and told her commanding officer everything was okay, so that when the engaged couple got there preparations had been made for the great event. The other nurses had made sandwiches and had decorated the tent with flowers. The ceremony was performed by the chaplain of the unit, and they were married with the groom's college class ring. All the trousseau you need in Africa is a uniform. The bride was stationed in a hotel with cottages adjoining it, and the couple were given a twenty-four-hour honeymoon, which they spent in part at one of those cottages."

Bunny Wilbur's duties demanded that she be a blend of sorority house mother and lady MP. "As soon as women land in a territory, the men stationed there break out with a rash of invitations," she says. "They want to have dances and parties right away. But we have to know where our nurses are all the time, and only ten per cent of a unit is allowed off at once. We set up a clubroom in an old store, with a snack bar, a small library, tables and magazines. We have two regular dances a week and informal ones every night. One of the hottest dance bands we had was made up of colored soldiers just back from Egypt."

All newly arrived nurses' units were taken directly to a tented staging area. The area was marked off with white stones, and during a four-day period of instruction the girls were kept in the area and not allowed to leave it. Nor were men visitors allowed in. Four larger stones marked the corners of the restricted area. It didn't take long for some inventive soul to figure out that the regulations could still be lived up to even when a board was placed on one of the corner markers to be used as a card table with the male player outside the area and his feminine opponent safely within it. According to Bunny Wilbur, "Nurses were not allowed in officers' quarters or vice versa. We had almost no trouble when it came to behavior, but we had to play it in that uncompromising way."

Another rule put into effect was the one against a Tom Thumb flag raising and lowering ceremony. Somewhere a few enterprising nurses got hold of a tiny American flag about three inches wide and five inches long. Rigging it on a two-foot flagpole with string lanyards, they held (Continued on Page 36)

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formal colors ceremonies morning and night. One of the nurses borrowed a bugle and learned to blow Retreat. "It became so popular and drew such a crowd," Bunny says, "it almost caused a riot, and we had to stop it."

Nurses off duty may have dates with beaux in uniform, but they must be in before ten o'clock. On Saturday nights they are given a late pass to stay out until twelve. The nurses don't take advantage of those hours, and no nurse has ever been reported late.

"I have never seen stamina and resilience to match the kind our men in Africa had," Bunny comments. "The nurses worked hard to save them, but a patient has to want to pull with you to recover, and those boys did. Most of them, being youthful, had remarkable recuperative powers, but when General McNair was wounded, he could have shown any of them a few things in the way of gameness, stamina and the will to get well. The general is fifty-four."

Bunny Wilbur was watching a hospital unit being set up when a call came through from her commanding officer asking her if she would mind taking care of the general. After he was hit, he had walked down the side of a hill to a jeep. The driver drove him back to a first-aid station, where his wounds were dressed and he was given blood plasma. "It felt as if I had new life put into me," is the way the general described that emergency transfusion.

"We've used loads of Red Cross plasma, for all types of wounds," Bunny Wilbur says. "Many of the men receive as much as three pints of plasma during the first few hours, and more later on. I've seen them brought in with almost no blood pressure. Five hours later they'd be sitting up. The African campaign hasn't been any skirmish, but future ones will be much bigger, and the need for people to donate a pint of blood to the Red Cross is greater now than it ever was."

General McNair had shell fragments in the back of his head, and the bones of his left shoulder were shattered into small bits. From the first-aid station he was taken to an evacuation hospital in an ambulance and carried into the dressing room on a litter. An Army surgeon operated on his shoulder. His head was operated upon by still another surgeon and the shell fragments were removed.

When they brought him back to the tent prepared for him, Bunny Wilbur saw to it that he was kept warm, that his pulse and respiration were taken regularly.

No Special Favors

"He snored beautifully," she says, "and I kidded him about it. I have seen a lot of plucky men in Africa, but he was as plucky as any of them. There was a story in the papers that said I hid his clothing to keep him in bed. I never saw or talked to the newspaperman who dreamed that one up. The truth is that his clothes had been cut off before his operations, and he had none. We had to borrow others for him when he got up. When I came home I read that I had been wounded and had reported back for duty. No American nurse has been wounded in North Africa, and that includes me. When the general's trays were brought in, he would ask, 'What did the other patients have?' If there were any extras on his tray, he had them taken off. He didn't want special favors or coddling. A lot of officers and enlisted men inquired after him each day. Invariably, they said, 'He's the best soldier in the Army.' I certainly didn't know I had such a precious patient until then. When he found he could go home by air transport, his staff and the general himself requested that I be allowed to come along with him. He still needed care. His dressings had to be changed and his stitches were due to come out en route."

In addition to being a good soldier, Bunny found the general a gentleman of the old school. When she reached Washington and went down to the station to make a quick trip home to Massachusetts, he came down to the train with her and sat with her until it pulled out. She doesn't think many generals would be so thoughtful and considerate.

When Bunny Wilbur arrived back home with General McNair, she was still a first lieutenant. At the end of her short leave, just before she stepped on the plane to return to Africa, she was made a lieutenant colonel. According to Mrs. McNair, the captain of the airport, who had seen Bunny Wilbur arrive only a few days before with a single silver bar on each shoulder, was rendered speechless when she reappeared wearing the silver oak leaves of a lieutenant colonel. He couldn't believe his eyes. There was no time for her to purchase the insignia of her new rank, so Col. Florence A. Blanchfield, the acting superintendent of the Army Nurse Corps (then a lieutenant colonel), removed the silver leaves from her own shoulders and pinned them on Bunny. "It is most unusual for anybody to skip that many grades in rank, but she deserved it," says Mrs. McNair. "She is one of the grandest girls I've ever known, and one of the most modest. She was so excited when the news of her promotion was broken to her she couldn't eat."

Bunny Wilbur rated that promotion. Bolstered only by the rank of first lieutenant, she had been carrying the heavy responsibility of acting director of American nurses serving in the North African theater of operations. The chief nurses in the European and Southwestern theaters hold the rank of major or lieutenant colonel. Also the British chief nurse in North Africa holds the rank of colonel.

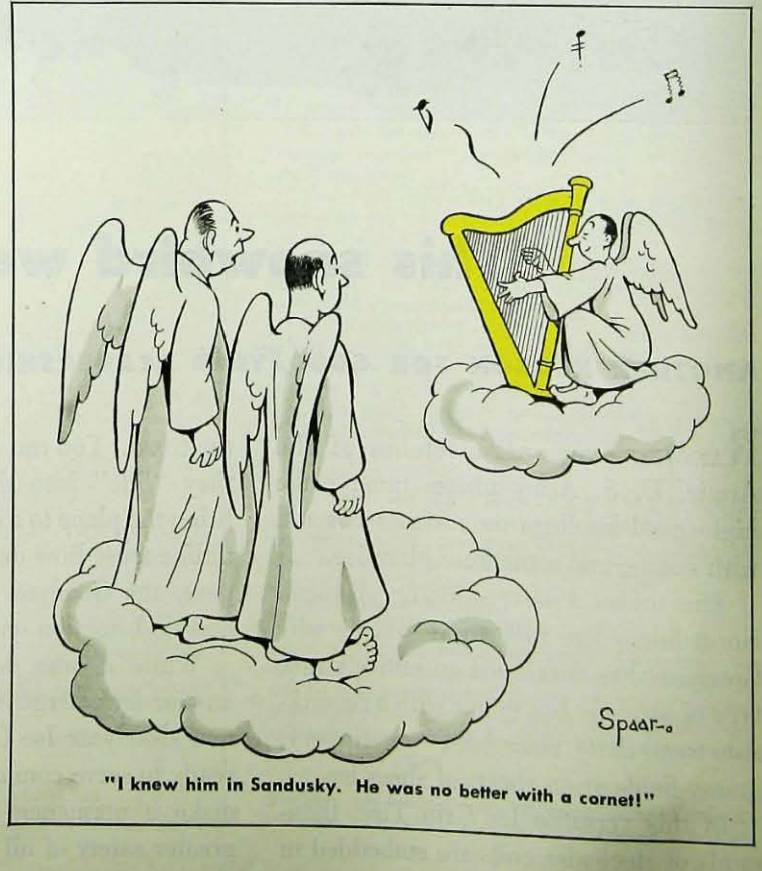
Bunny's North African commanding officer told her, when she left to come home with the general, "Have a good time; you may be stuck over here indefinitely. If you miss anything while you're home, it's your own fault." But she found it difficult to change her habits of thought. When she walked into a WBZ broadcasting studio in Boston to make a speech urging girls to become Army nurses, her first reaction was, "What a fine hospital tent this place would make." Walking on thick carpets made her feet feel queer and unnatural. Easy chairs made her restless.

"The first thing I wanted when I got back home was an ice-cream soda and a hot dog," she admits. "When I saw my first U. S. steak, I thought they had brought me one for four people, and I was popeyed when I found out it was all for me."

Advice for Would-be Nurses

She gave a talk at the Boston Deaconess Hospital, where she had received her nursing training, and another to the students of Milton High, in the town where her gran'ma lives. At Milton, girls crowded around to find out how long they would have to wait after graduation before signing up as Army nurses. One eager sophomore was disconsolate when told she would have to wait two years.

Asked what advice she would offer a kid sister who wanted to be useful, Lieutenant Colonel Wilbur replied, "If I had one, I'd urge her to be an Army nurse above everything else. It's the only women's corps which gets into the heart of things. I'd tell my kid sister to take along a year or a year and a half's supply of stockings, underwear and cold cream. I'd tell her not to let herself grow impatient if she has to wait for tedious weeks in a staging area. I'd tell her not to expect glamour or sitting by a bed stroking a fevered brow with a smooth white hand. She is likely to find herself cold and wet, and up to her knees in mud. She may be stationed close to the front and have to live in a tent, but if she's got the right stuff in her, those things won't bother her. Last of all, I'd tell her not to expect glory or medals. Her glory will be the gratitude and appreciation of the boys she takes care of. Take it from me, it's better than medals."



"I knew him in Sandusky. He was no better with a cornet!"