# ANC Reinforcements Land in France

By Vincoe M. Paxton, R.N.

ANC reinforcements are needed from time to time in the forward hospitals as the course of battle throws new demands upon these installations. To meet this need with the least possible delay, a pool of volunteer nurses was formed and sent to France. This is the story of their experiences and impressions from the time they were selected in England until they arrived here.

## Assembling the Nurses

A transit hospital in south England was chosen as the area where the nurses from various points in the United Kingdom should assemble. Many had never seen such a hospital before. This was one of the hospitals which took immediate care of the patients from the invasion beaches. The chief nurse told how the staff had been awake the whole night before D-day. Ambulances with the first patients were already at the door by eight-thirty on that fateful morning. They had transferred patients from the ships which had returned across the channel from the invasion beaches.

Through careful training the hospital staff is able to admit large numbers of patients in record time. A patient averages only fifteen minutes in the admitting area. A ward of twenty-five patients had been seen by the ward officer, dressings changed, and orders written, within an hour.

When the soldiers arrived at the transit hospital their first concern was to get clean. There were showers for the ambulant, help in bathing from nurses and other patients for the handicapped. Some had beards a half inch long. It was not uncommon, as the days at the front increased, to use four blades in shaving one patient. Then there were hair cuts and a change of clothes. The next concern was food—hot fresh food in unlimited quantities and time to eat it! Their stomachs were like bottomless pits. The dietitians took special care that food was attractively served and that special diets, such as those for soldiers with jaw injuries, were adequate in nutritional value. In addition to being clean, the apex of luxury was a clean bed with white sheets. It is amazing how few narcotics are needed and the patients awaken only for food.

But the primary function of the hospital is to evacuate patients to other hospitals farther back. Most patients are evacuated within twenty-four hours. In one busy day as many as 800 had passed through, so speed is also needed in the process of loading. One train of some 300 patients was loaded and on its way within forty-five minutes time.

The pool nurses will remember their stay in the assembling area not only because of the things they learned. There was an atmosphere of friendly helpfulness. Staff nurses shared their dayroom with the pool nurses. There was a radio bought by the nurses' fund, a piano loaned by Special Service, a stove, grass rugs on the floor, and comfortable chairs almost like home. The ablutions hut had modern plumbing. The nurses had painted the walls green and placed mirrors at convenient heights. An electric washing machine made it possible to do last minute laundry; an ironing board behind neat screens in the dayroom was always busy.

The chapel was strikingly beautiful, walls tinted soft blue, the altar decorated with candles and red, yellow, and brown flowers arranged with rare taste by the operating room supervisor. The flowers were a gift from the gardens of a friendly duchess who often sent miniature bouquets for each patient and decorations for the tables in the mess hall.

The pool nurses enjoyed these things because they knew that soon in France they would be living under very different conditions. In preparation for this, the assembling area had quartered them in tents making them as comfortable as possible in their first transition from permanent quarters. There were concrete floors, a stove, electric lights, and canvas cots. The nurses learned how to tie the flaps properly to keep out the rain and to maintain a blackout. One night they pitched and slept in their pup tents to learn how to manipulate this equipment. They were sent on long hikes in full field uniform. Immunizations were brought up to date and field equipment made complete.

When the last bit of preparation was done they were sent to the next station to join an overseas troop movement called "joining the packet."

## Joining the Packet

They were sent in a special coach from the assembling area to the station where they would prepare to join the movement. There they were quartered in the former commanding officer's house. There was little time to enjoy this post. The first day while still travel weary they answered an SOS to help sort mail. (There is no way to describe the headache for the APO staff which large troop movements make.) They received their final issue of equipment including entrenching shovels in case they should have to dig fox holes. Some of the equipment had to be brought from London and the truck returned at 3:00 A.M., in time for the

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Q.M. officer to issue and the nurses to pack it before the early take-off. A last important item of issue was sea-sick tablets.

The troop commander was very young to be a lieutenant colonel (only twenty-six). He had landed on D-day with his infantry division and was personally leading his battalion in an attack when he was wounded. Evacuated to the United Kingdom by air, he was well again, and was now returning to join his battalion. He was a slender, quiet, unassuming individual but he had an air of confidence which made him a good leader. His accent disclosed immediately that he was one of Georgia's gifts to the Army.

It was a bright sunny morning when the nurses, dressed in combat clothing, wearing steel helmets, web belt with first-aid kit, canteen, and entrenching shovel, musette and gas mask slung, and a horseshoe blanket roll over the right shoulder, stepped into formation and marched off with the troops. The post band turned out with brilliant music and they were off to the rail head.

### Crossing the Channel

The traffic crossing the channel is carefully regulated. It is at the rail head that final arrangements are made for a secret time of departure. All ships which belong to a particular convoy are made ready. The pool nurses were only a drop in a bucket as compared to the large number of troops waiting in this area to cross the Channel. The soldiers in charge of the billets who had been told to prepare for "a special sniper group" were much surprised to see a group of nurses.

There is not much one can do in a restricted area. Some of the nurses went to the cinema, others to the Red Cross Club, and a few who stayed at home enjoyed the phonograph and records one of the officers brought. The music brightened this last evening in England.

Whether because of the sea-sick tablets or whether the Channel was unusually calm, none of the nurses became ill. The first evening was a busy one getting acquainted with the ship, having dinner with so many people (there were five sittings), and practicing life-boat and gun-alert drills. Though it was Sunday, there had been no time to pause for church. When everything was quiet, everyone below deck, and the blackout on, the voice of the chaplain came over the loud speaker in a brief vesper service.

The ship was one of four specially built vessels which had transported infantry on D-day. It was operated by a British crew and had a Royal Navy detachment aboard. The British troop officer was most considerate of the American nursing sisters. "Queue up—line up" (trying to speak American) "for first supper," he announced. What meals that ship served! Even fried chicken! It seemed a very fine bit of courtesy from a friendly nation.

Suddenly the voyage was finished and the nurses stepped off the ship into a waiting LSA which was quickly lowered to the surface and steered up to the coast. The door was let down and the nurses marched off on the sands of one of the famous D-day beaches. As they looked at the high overhanging bluff it was not hard to realize that the beach had been taken from the Germans at a cost. The colonel knew how steep the climb would be so had told the nurses to await his return while he marched off at the head of his troops up the trail to the top of the bluff. In a short time a truck came asking for the "important baggage" which the colonel had sent him to bring. That was how the nurses could ride to the top.

On the top of the bluff everything was deserted except for some scattered Army tents, a few Army vehicles, and fields of disembarked American and British troops. Pointing beyond the hedgerow to a small empty field the colonel said, "This is the nurses' area. Make yourselves at home." The nurses took off their heavy equipment, sat down on the grass and began to wash their faces and comb their hair in preparation for a supper of K rations. Their morale was very high. They were prepared, if necessary, to pitch their pup tents and spend the night there, but after some delay trucks came for them. In some mysterious way hot coffee from one of the tents was brought to supplement the K rations and the nurses, bidding the troop commander good-bye, rolled off into the night.

### Learning To Live in France

The hedgerow country adjacent to the invasion beaches was the most fiercely contested territory in the present phase of war. Shell holes, blasted bits of road, signs reading, "Mines cleared to the hedges" and whole devastated villages look bad enough in broad daylight. They appeared awful by the half light of a cloud-blacked-out moon as the nurses traveled a strange road in a new country. Trucks had to drive with "cat eyes" and the road was a constant stream of convoys. The constant "swish" of the lighter vehicles and the "swoosh" of the heavy ones fastened itself on the memories of the nurses in that first ride. Because of the numerous detours and one-way traffic roads, the driver lost the way and took a road which led them into one of the most damaged cities of the area. It was 1:00 A.M. when the nurses were finally asleep on cots in a tent of one of the general hospitals in the area.

In the morning they were taken to a station where they found pyramidal tents set up in a pasture designated as the "nurses' area." They unrolled their bed rolls on the grass inside the tent and began to settle down. From the field kitchen they ate from their mess gear, washing it in cans of water in the field custom. In the evening a French woman came to milk the cows and the nurses found

considerable difficulty in telling her in their French that they would like to help her milk.

The second day, half the nurses were awakened very early in the morning and sent by truck to the Third Army Headquarters from which they were to be assigned to hospitals in that command. The story continues with the remaining half of the nurses. They were taken on a six-mile hike to give them a better acquaintance with the country in which they were living. At the first stop they were shown the way a mine detector operates. A little farther down the road they saw groups of engineers at work on the tedious task of clearing the mines from the fields of the area, foot by foot. That afternoon was devoted to lectures on current events, France, Germany, booby traps, mines, and pronunciation of French.

Next morning they were awakened early and loaded on a G.I. truck for the next lap of their journey. All day long the convoy moved on until the hedgerow country and its devastated villages were replaced by wide fertile plains where crops were being harvested. The neat stacks of hay and the stubble fields looked much as they do in America. This was the area where the Germans had been surrounded and forced to surrender. There were pleasant rivers and green wooded areas. As one of the nurses remarked, "It is hard to believe there had been any war there until suddenly a damaged building, a wrecked German vehicle, a fox hole, or a grave would come in sight."

For eighteen hours the convoy rolled on. There was no stopping for meals; the nurses opened their K rations and ate as they rode. As the convoy penetrated farther and farther into France, American soldiers stationed there would stop at their work and send up a yell. One M.P. directing traffic in a deserted village said, "Well, I'll be doggoned!" The French civilians shouted "Les femmes!" in welcome. The children ran beside the truck throwing apples and the nurses threw back candy, wafers, and gum.

As the night began to blacken, the convoy continued to speed on. Then the roads and bridges began to be damaged as in the hedgerow country and detours began to be frequent. This was the first time the nurses had crossed a stream on a pontoon bridge. Rain began to fall at intervals and it was cold in the open truck. Then the guide became uncertain of the road.

The nurses were weary, their faces were wind burned, and their eyes red from the dust of the road, but they behaved like Spartans. They passed through cities still smoking from German bombings. They saw signs plainly warning of mines and booby traps. One nurse made her way to the chief nurse and asked, "Isn't there danger we might follow one of these wrong roads right out into enemy territory?" She admitted the possibility, but recalled that all nurses had their Geneva passes for protection. An hour later, still lost, another nurse whispered, "Don't you think that someone should take charge and do something?" Said the chief nurse, "I think he is doing the best he can. We are so far forward the roads are not marked very plainly, but he keeps asking the sentries. He will find it eventually. You are quite chilled. Why don't you put on your raincoat?" She did, and then lay down in the bottom of the truck and was soon fast asleep.

At last the destination was reached. The commanding officer was awake to personally receive the nurses and to help them place their luggage in the tent prepared for them. "I've always wondered what a bunch of nurses did when they got into a place in the middle of the night and now I'll get a chance to see," he joked.

### Behind the Lines

The nurses slept from weariness despite the fact the C.O. had told them a German soldier had been picked up on the grounds that day, that they could hear shelling in the distance, and a delayed action mine exploded near the area.

This installation was on the grounds of a large château. With a young French woman whose husband was with the Free French Army, two of the nurses visited the village curé. From a huge volume of history he told them something of the community. The estate of some 2,500 acres was first mentioned in the thirteenth century. It was acquired by and had remained continuously in the hands of the present family, despite the revolution, since 1715. The village of about ninety souls were the caretakers employed by this family. A fine old church, built as a memorial to one of the women of the wealthy family, had beautiful stained glass windows and a hand-carved wooden plaque of fine workmanship above the altar. To the same benevolent family the village owed its museum and modern school. The family had fled to Paris at the beginning of the war four years before and until that week the château had been German headquarters for the area. They had preserved the building. The well-equipped large kitchen and stove big enough to prepare food for a fabulous number of guests, the cut glass chandeliers, the paneling of the well-stocked library of beautifully bound books, the piano in the large drawing-room were all undamaged. Many varieties of trees grew in the grove about the château. Vines, flowers, and statuary still remained. At one end of the garden was a swimming pool at least 100 feet across. It was an unusual experience to see this old country estate.

Next day the nurses were stationed at an evacuation hospital which had been very busy due to the large number of wounded German prisoners taken in the area. One ward (the "big top," made by interlacing four tents) had ninety beds of prisoner

patients. One of the staff nurses had lost two members of her family in the war and it was a hard experience for her to work on that ward. But as she washed blood and grime from their faces and changed their soiled dressings she made her decision. "I don't see any half-way business in this," she said, "if they're not killed someone has to take care of them."

Two days later the pool nurses were placed with a field hospital. Its own platoon of nurses had not arrived and American soldiers, admitted as patients before the cots came, were lying on blankets on the ground under the first hastily erected ward tent. The sun shone hotly and some patients had high fever. The nurses rolled up the side of the tent, washed their faces, and served supper. The cots arrived the next morning so that the patients were high and dry when a downpour came.

The big event here was a visit to the patients by Bing Crosby, who gave a show at a troop installation near by. The nurses were all permitted to go and the C.O. himself watched the ward, insisting that he had letters to write and had no time for "such foolishness," so that the nurses would not embarrass him with their gratitude. As the M.P. made a reserved space at the front of the area, the thousands of troops sitting on the ground waiting began to cheer loudly, and when the nurses saw that Bing Crosby had not arrived they realized that the cheer was for them. Many of the men had not seen American women for months. The show was wonderful and Bing ended by singing the most loudly requested song, "White Christmas." It was an all-American group including Negro and oriental faces and each man responded with one emotion to the song.

At the field hospital, Major McCafferty, Chief Nurse of the First Army, found the group and gave them their permanent assignments. With their several units they, like those who went to the Third Army, will serve as reinforcements with the forward hospitals until "it's over over here."

# The Barbados Nurses Association

By Eunice Gibson, R.N.

If you will look at your map, you will find that Barbados is the most easterly island of the Lesser Antilles, in the British West Indies. It has an area of 166 square miles and a population of 200,000. Most of the island is rural. One hospital serves the entire island and is financed by the government though controlled by an independent board.

The island has always been a British possession. Laws are made by local bodies, the House of Assembly and the Legislative Council. These are similar to the House of Commons and the House of Lords in England, but when laws are made here they must be approved by the Secretary of States for the Colonies.

Nursing in Barbados has been influenced in a great measure by British and Canadian nurses. There are about 375 registered nurses, including a great number who registered in 1934 as "existing nurses," those who were not fully qualified at the time of registration. There are approximately 120 nurses on the hospital staff, including six overseas trained nurses, as well as locally trained registered nurses and student nurses. The majority are students.

The Barbados Nurses Association was inaugurated in July 1936 with ten members enrolled. The objectives of the organizations at that time were to

(*a*) insure a high standard of nursing in Barbados,
(*b*) encourage the honorable practice of the profession,
(*c*) promote knowledge concerning matters connected with or of interest to the nursing profession by means of lectures, conferences, study, and personal exchange of views,
(*d*) provide funds including a provident fund for the benefit of its members,
(*e*) afford means for social gatherings for the promotion of better understanding among nurses.

*Nursing bureau.*—By December 1936, when the membership had grown to thirty-six, it was found necessary to start an employment bureau to help in placing qualified professional nurses and another objective was adopted:

(*f*) to maintain a bureau to supply fully qualified nurses for employment.

Through this bureau, nurses can be secured to care for patients in private homes as well as in the Barbados General Hospital. Thirty-two nurses are now registered at the bureau. Three hundred and sixty-seven calls for nursing service were filled during the past year; of these, sixty-eight were for special duty at the Barbados General.

*District nursing service.*—In the course of their work, the nurses came in contact with people who were in need of nursing service, but were unable to pay a private nurse or a visiting nurse's fee. One large parish, in which nursing service was

Miss Gibson (Barbados General) had advanced training in obstetric and public health nursing in England. She had experience in private nursing in the U. S. and has visited hospitals and nurses "in the six British West Indies Islands between Barbados and Boston and in Trinidad." Since 1940 she has been supervisor of the work carried on by the Barbados Nurses Association.