

# An Army Nurse Describes a Deadly Attack on a Hospital Ship

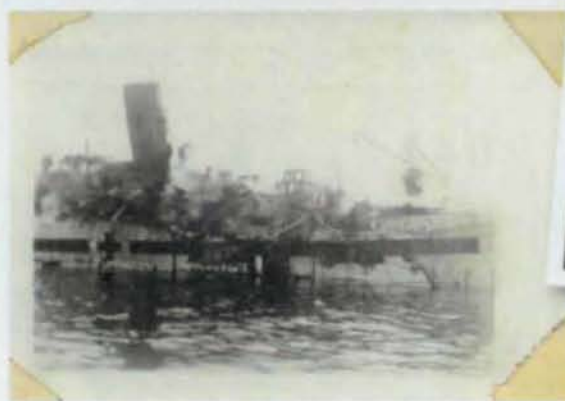
By Andrew Carroll

**A**n estimated 460 American women died as a result of their service in World War II. In 1943, U.S. Army nurse Vera Lee came close to being one of them. On September 9, Allied forces launched a ferocious six-day invasion of Salerno, Italy. Lee was with the 95th Evacuation Hospital in the Gulf of Salerno, aboard the hospital ship for the Eighth Army, the HMHS Newfoundland, which was attempting to deliver nurses to the Salerno beaches. Although the white ship bore giant red crosses and was brightly illuminated at night, the Luftwaffe repeatedly bombed it, killing six nurses and all medical officers aboard, and damaging the ship to such an extent that the Allies had no choice but to scuttle it on September 14. Ten weeks later Lee wrote to her family in Lewellen, Nebraska, to describe the attack and how lucky she was to be alive. She had witnessed firsthand the fate of another nurse who wasn't so fortunate. The letter's original spelling has been preserved.

Dearest all:

Just yesterday I wrote you a letter but your air mail of Oct 30th & V-mail of Nov 7th came this morning so will answer them today. Jan and I got up for breakfast this morning and made a dashing trip with our mail man to another town to have my picture taken for my Identification or a.g.o. card. I've been without a bit of Identification since the bombing—no dog tags, no pay datta card—I'm almost not in this army. It has sort of worried me too—because something could have happened & no one know who I belong to. I still have my chain around my neck but the dog tags were torn off—Guess that something fell on my chest that morning & took them off.

I still don't know if this will pass the censor but will try & tell you what hap-



Vera Lee's hospital ship (top) was bombed to pieces by the Luftwaffe.

pened the 13th of Sept. We tried to land in Italy all day Sunday the 12th but they were too busy fighting to worry about a hundred nurses on a hospital ship. Several bombs just missed us several times but we didn't really realize what it was all about. Evening came & we had to go out of the harbor because our ship was all lit up. We taxied around in the sea off shore about 30 miles all nite—our ship & 4 other Hospital ships—at 5 a.m. we were awakened by a bomb falling very close to us—Some of

the girls dressed then but most of us went back to sleep. (We all slept in the nood because all our clothes were packed & ready to get off the ship the next morning.)

At 5:10 we heard a plane & then that bad awful whistle a bomb makes & bang!—You'll never know of the thousand things that flashed thro my mind those few seconds. I thought sure I was dying—could feel hot water falling on my face & body—Had heavy boards on my chest that had fallen from the ceiling—I shut my eyes &



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thought it was the end—Then the next second I thought "What the hell, I'm not dead—get out of this place"—then I could see poor Wheeler & Waldin without a stitch of clothes on trying to find anything to put on. I couldn't see for the terrific smoke in our room—but was a mass of motion trying to find my coveralls which I had hung on the post hole the nite before. I found on the floor—all soaked with water & black with dirt—put them on & found my shoes—grabbed my helmet & water canteen & grabbed on to someone's arm & followed the light that Claudine was holding. She couldn't hardly find where the door was because the wall had all been blown out.

When we got on the deck we all had to get on one side because the bomb had torn away the other side of the ship. I'll never forget seeing this one British nurse trying to get thro the porthole but was too large to make it. She was screaming terribly because her room was all in flames. One British fellow saw that she could never get out so he knocked her in the head with his fist and shoved her back in his room—She died but it was much easier than if she had burned to death.

We loaded in a life boat—70 of us in one boat that had a capacity of 30. Were taken on another hospital ship & given tea & hot coffee. I felt a darn good cry coming on so some British fellow took the 4 of we girls to his room & we drank a bottle of Scotch. I got "stinko" drunk—cried & when I snapped out of it, I felt fine. All the bruises I got out of it was a scratch on my knee, a cut on my left foot and marks & scratches on my chest where debree fell from the roof.

—Someday I'll tell you more about it....

Love,  
Vera

Andrew Carroll's Legacy Project (online at [warletters.com](http://warletters.com)) is dedicated to preserving and collecting correspondence from all of America's wars. If you have a World War II letter you would like to share, please send a copy (not originals) to the Legacy Project, PO Box 53250, Washington, DC 20009, or e-mail [WarLettersUS@aol.com](mailto:WarLettersUS@aol.com).