

FINIS

by

The Navy Nurses



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Foreward

In departing we bequeath to the Army a legacy which we will cherish in memory and attempt to preserve in this book. FINIS was the brain child of the Navy Nurses who were here during the phase out of the Station Hospital, Headquarters Support Activity, Saigon. It is a tangible remembrance of an active period which saw a small Navy facility develop into a well equipped, sophisticated hospital where we worked side by side with other members of the Navy medical team in accomplishing the mission and objectives of the Medical Department. We are not unmindful of the efforts of our predecessors who laid the ground work for what we were to enjoy. The equipment, which made our work more productive, had been ordered months before our arrival; the innovations, which expanded the physical plant, were already on the drawing board. To them we are grateful for their foresight, their fortitude, and the effort expended during those formative days beset with frustration.

The year of 1965 proved to be a most demanding one for the hospital. Terrorist activity in Saigon resulted in large "flaps" and the input of casualties from the field or as a result of other disasters, especially in the first half of the year, provided experiences in mass casualty nursing which will linger on in our memories for the rest of our lives. There were the rewards of feeling that we had made a positive contribution to the cause of peace in Vietnam by caring for the sick and wounded who were making far greater personal sacrifices even to the giving of their lives.

We were privileged to work with a dedicated group of doctors and medical service corps officers who shared with us and were helpful and supportive in so many ways. The contribution of the enlisted staff and especially the hospital corpsmen concerned with direct patient care was inspiring. When the hospital was busy, they made themselves available working long hours without complaining. Never was it necessary to seek out nursing service corpsmen when casualties arrived and needed to be cared for; willingly the corpsmen were there in response to the need of the moment. How they "got the word" will remain their secret. Our professional co-workers, the federal civil service and Thai nurses worked along with us ever mindful of the fluctuating demands and aware that planned "off-duty" days might have to be cancelled. For her devotion to duty our lone Red Cross worker was an inspiration to all of us and will long be remembered. Last but not least was the group of faithful Vietnamese employees who kept our establishment spotless and provided services which made life easier for us. In part the title of this volume was prompted by one of them.

This book of memories is our attempt to capture precious moments, the golden threads in a tapestry depicting our saga in war torn Vietnam. May it help to keep our experiences alive and to make it possible to share them with others who have not had the privilege of being a part of history in the making.

AEM

Saigon, Vietnam
15 March 1966

The Hospital

The United States Naval Station Hospital, Saigon was established in 1963. Dedicated to giving the best possible treatment to the sick and injured and to the maintenance of health, it has modern equipment and adequate supplies and stands continually ready and professionally capable of providing our forces with medical care. It is the only naval hospital in the world receiving battle casualties directly from the field.

Located on both sides of Saigon's busiest thoroughfare, Tran Hung Dao Street, the Outpatient Clinic is housed on the first two floors of the Metropole Hotel which is also used as a BEQ. Across the street, a former five story French apartment-hotel type building has been converted into a 100 bed hospital. Newly constructed buildings surrounding the structure provide a modern galley and dining room, storerooms, a surgical suite, an inpatient x-ray department, and the blood bank. Other clinical services as the laboratory, main x-ray, and pharmacy are located in the Metropole.

The mission of the hospital is to provide medical service for U. S. military and official civilian personnel and their dependents primarily from the third and fourth corps areas and the capital military district. In one form or another all services normally available in a large municipal hospital are provided by the Station Hospital. The hospital is also responsible for a military public health service providing sanitation inspections, immunizations for all personnel in the Saigon area, ship inspections, an industrial health program, and other preventive medical activities. Many other medical activities are unique to the Naval Station Hospital. It is the only hospital in Saigon providing outpatient clinical care to all U. S. forces, civilian employees, MSTS personnel, government contract employees, State Department employees, third country military forces and dependents.

Although the hospital includes plans for facile conversion to an expanded organization in time of emergency, the Station Hospital, Saigon, is unique in that battle casualties are received regularly and on numerous occasions has accepted large numbers of casualties from the American and Vietnamese civilian population. In short, the hospital's organization and methods are suited not only to normal operations but are sufficiently flexible and adaptable to cope with routine drastic changes. In addition to treating mass civilian casualties, hospital personnel are required to take precautionary methods to insure the welfare of the hospital's property and personnel. The possibility of treating a terrorist who has been injured by his own device and "gets in line" with other casualties is not to be discounted.

When word is received that an incident has occurred and many injuries are suspected, the mass casualty plan is activated. Ambulance teams are dispatched to the scene to aid the injured and assess the situation. This information is relayed by radio to the hospital and additional

equipment and personnel are dispatched to the scene if necessary. The injured are brought to the receiving area of the hospital where surgeons triage, assign treatment priorities to the various categories of injured. Following the casualty reception and triage, initial casualty reports are prepared, and during the ensuing hours, restocking of supplies, movement of non-serious patients, and arranging for special air-evacuation is accomplished. The Station Hospital was directly involved in mass-casualty reception during the following incidents.

During the early morning hours of 1 November 1964, the Bien Hoa Air Base was subject to hostile mortar fire of the Viet Cong. Throughout the night the number of casualties mounted. After the enemy broke contact the problem of treating the wounded was of utmost importance. Initial sorting and bandaging was done at the air base and the more serious cases were transferred to this hospital. Seventeen casualties were received by helo-evacuation and of these casualties, two were placed on the critical list, two on the serious list. Approximately eleven hours were spent by the staff personnel treating the wounded and performing life saving surgery.

On Christmas Eve 1964, the heavily populated Brink BOQ located in the heart of the city of Saigon, was ripped by an explosion determined later to be an act of terrorism by the VC. Immediately following the blast, this hospital had ambulances and personnel at the scene, rendering first aid and searching for casualties who were trapped in the debris. Approximately 90 casualties were received and although four nurses were injured during the blast, they continued to work at the scene and at the hospital. A hospital corpsman, who suffered smoke inhalation while helping patients from the building and performing first aid, was later awarded the Navy Commendation for his actions on this night. The nurses, who were injured, were awarded the Purple Heart for their injuries.

On 17 February 1965 the Enlisted Barracks at Pleiku were attacked by VC insurgents and this hospital received 16 of the most serious casualties. It was necessary for the operating room personnel to work for 17 continuous hours in order to treat the victims.

By Presidential order, military and official civilian dependents were evacuated from Republic of Vietnam during the month of February, 1965. Hospital personnel processed their treatment records, performed physical examinations, and gave immunizations for travel.

The United States Embassy was the next scene of VC terrorism. At approximately 1100 hours on 30 March a large explosive device was detonated next to the Embassy, killing approximately 19 people and injuring more than a hundred. As this hospital was the closest military medical facility, almost all casualties, Vietnamese and American, were brought here for treatment. A seemingly never ending stream of civilians, including women and children, bleeding and in shock were treated here in the first hour. A hospital corpsman was instrumental in saving the life of a Lieutenant Commander who had a severed carotid artery. He controlled the hemorrhage

by holding the severed ends. He was later awarded the Navy Commendation Medal for this life saving act.

On 16 May 1965, the Bien Hoa Air Base was again the scene of heavy casualties. The premature explosion of large bombs killed 27 and injured more than 100. This hospital received the most seriously injured cases; of the 16 casualties 5 of the victims required major surgery which was performed within six hours of admission.

The brutal terrorist act of mining the My Canh restaurant on June 25, 1965 resulted in 42 killed and approximately 100 injured, of whom 27 seriously hurt were treated at the Navy Hospital. Vietnamese patients were admitted and retained until well on the road to recovery.

On 4 December 1965 at 0530 the terrorists struck close to home. This time the scene was the Metropole Hotel, the first two floors of which house the outpatient department. In addition to reducing a portion of the clinic, laboratory, and X-Ray spaces to rubble, fifteen hospital corpsmen who lived in the hotel were injured and subsequently awarded the Purple Heart.

In the first part of 1965, casualties from the battle field accounted for a large proportion of the patient census. The term "dust off" is a code name given to casualties arriving from the field by helicopter evacuation. A main regulating office is in contact with all medical evacuation helicopters and receives from them pertinent information as to the number of patients, diagnosis, condition, ETA and special instructions that are needed for the treatment and transportation of the patients. Upon notification by telephone from the med-evac center the hospital dispatches an ambulance and attendants to a soccer field landing zone, a 5 minute drive from the hospital. The attendants meet the arriving casualties and transport them immediately to the hospital. Approximately fifteen of these "dust offs" arrive weekly.

During the year of 1965 it was felt that in addition to the duties of care and treatment of U. S. forces this hospital could extend its surgical services to selected Vietnamese civilians. Arrangements were made with religious organizations, provincial representatives and particularly with USMC personnel from the Da Nang - Chu Lai area for the admission of prospective candidates for special surgery, the majority of whom had harelips and cleft palates. A parent accompanied the child and remained in attendance during the entire hospitalization. Approximately 50 cases have been done thus far, affording these children and some adults the benefits of treatment they might not otherwise have received.

The hospital extended its people-to-people program by making it possible for the professional nursing staff of Cho Ray Hospital to spend two hours each week for observational visits at the Station Hospital. In conjunction with the USOM nursing consultant, a proposed outline of instructions was developed. The main objectives of the observations were to demonstrate how a well organized ward unit functions and to demonstrate the management devices used to accomplish optimum and safe patient care.

Two head nurses accompanied by an interpreter spent two hours at the Station Hospital under instruction. The small group approach, the informal atmosphere, the interest of the nurse and corpsmen instructors, and the obvious enthusiasm of the Vietnamese students promoted an optimum learning situation. Sixteen weekly, two hours sessions provided instruction for 32 head nurses from Cho Ray Hospital. The staff medical officers have given freely of their time to assist their Vietnamese colleagues in diagnosing and treating patients. A course of instruction in basic surgical and medical subjects was conducted for Vietnamese medical students and graduate doctors, visits to Saigon's hospitals have been made by the staff surgeons, and many operations have been performed in cooperation with 7th Day Adventist and Cho Ray Hospital surgeons. It is apparent that the Naval Station Hospital stands continually ready and professionally capable of providing the finest medical care with total community health service and more.

When the hospital was initially opened it served about 300 inpatients and 1800 outpatients annually. Now this figure has risen to 2,500 inpatients and 53,000 outpatients each year. At its present stage, like other elements of HSAS, the activity of the hospital far exceeds the concepts of its original planners. The population it serves is greater by ten fold. Five Thai nurses, three civil service nurses, a Vietnamese radiologist and a Vietnamese ophthalmologist, have been added to the assigned staff of 8 Navy nurses, 9 medical officers, 2 medical service corps officers and approximately 90 hospital corpsmen. 50 Vietnamese, hired locally, are employed as telephone operators, secretaries, clerks, food service personnel, drivers, and janitors. HSAS Station Hospital could be called The Saigon General Hospital, referring to its central role in medical care for the U. S. mission and military personnel in and around Saigon, including visiting MSTs, fleet, and merchant vessels, visiting entertainment troupes and performers, as well as the constant stream of "Visitors to Vietnam" from all walks of life, who are given conducted tours of the hospital complex. As the number of front line, mobile medical units has increased in the area, the hospital's role as an evacuation hospital has intensified, so that in addition to receiving and treating casualties directly from the field for primary treatment, it is also engaged in secondary treatment and preparation of patients for further evacuation.

The primary mission of this hospital is the care of the wounded U. S. and third country military personnel. The secondary mission is the care of sick or injured U. S. and third country personnel. When the first two missions have been accomplished, whenever possible medical services have been extended to the people of Vietnam.

The Hospital Staff

At Work

The nursing service department staff consisted of eight Navy nurses, three federal civil service nurses, five Thai nurses, and thirty two hospital corpsmen. They worked together as members of the medical team to give the best individualized patient care possible to the sick and wounded. As a result of their efforts and dedication to duty, the hospital enjoyed an excellent reputation among the military units in Vietnam as well as in the city of Saigon.

Dust-Off

The busy emergency room and operating rooms are the scene of many heart rending dramas of life and death, especially when "dust offs" arrive in rapid succession. The call comes in: "dust off in ten minutes, three seriously wounded Americans." The alert goes out to all concerned- the transportation service, the doctor, the emergency room staff, and the nursing service office. An ambulance with medical personnel is dispatched to the helicopter pad, about five minutes removed from the hospital to await the arrival of the chopper bearing the wounded from the field. The medical team is ready for action as soon as the car enters the hospital driveway.

Aeromedical Evacuation

Because of the hospital's limited bed space and constant input of patients, a regular aeromedical evacuation of patients is provided three times a week with special in between flights arranged for as required. Accomplished with expediency, safety, and comfort, the movement of patients from the hospital wards, to the ambulances, to the airfield, to the plane is an operation well known to the hospital staff, the principal role of which is assumed by nursing service personnel. On departure there are the fond farewells of fellow patients and the good wishes of the nurses and corpsmen, who often wonder what becomes of their patients with whom they shared battle experiences at the bedside.

People-to-People

Some have said that it is through this program that eventually strife in Vietnam will be overcome. The facets of participation are many like the professional teaching done by the doctors and nurses, the consultation services provided, the emergency care given, the surgery performed on Vietnamese war victims and Vietnamese children. The phase of this program best loved by the nurses was "Operation Cleft Lip", a project which has enabled native children to obtain sorely needed surgery to correct facial deformities.

Brink Bombing

It was the night before Christmas 1964 when a Viet Cong terrorist bomb rocked the bachelor officers' quarters, the Brink. Four of the eight nurses assigned to the hospital were injured and all four refused first aid until the injured 58 Americans and one Australian were cared for. Awarded the Purple Heart for their valiant actions were Lieutenants Barbara Wooster, Ruth Mason, Frances Crumpton and Ltjg Ann Reynolds.

The Embassy Bombing

The murderous terroristic act of bombing the American Embassy on 30 March 1965 shocked the world. As a result of this incident twenty three victims were admitted to the hospital and fifty seven were treated as out patients. After initial first aid had been administered, the nursing service staff were confronted with endless slivers of glass. These were encrusted on the patients' skin and in blood matted hair; turning a patient in bed also meant changing a sheet covered with ground glass. While the challenge of physical care was great, the psychological needs were even greater. The stunned victims suddenly found themselves in strange surroundings with both eyes bandaged. Yet, there was no panic, no hysteria amidst this bleeding mass of humanity. An almost eerie calmness prevailed. The nurses concentrated their efforts on the seriously injured. Preparations were made for the immediate air evacuation of those with serious eye injuries. Corpsmen were assigned to assist the doctors at the suturing stations. The emergency and operating room suites were filled to capacity. The surgeons worked desparately to save the life of a victim whose carotid artery had been severed. The work went on until midnight. It is amazing how one can carry on for fourteen to sixteen hours without being aware of the passage of time or the need for food or of physical fatigue.

My Canh Bombing

This incident of 25 June 1965 hit very close to home. A floating restaurant, the My Canh was located but a few blocks from our BOQs; dinner there was always a relaxing interlude. Because of its proximity to the hospital, the seriously wounded casualties were brought in minutes after the disaster. Emergency care was given without questioning who the victims were. At the triage area, it was evident that many were moribund. The staff's personal feelings of wanting to do more for them were subordinated to the basic principle of mass casualty care and treatment; doctors and nurses turned their attention to saving the lives of those who could be helped. A futile attempt was made to salvage an unborn life, whose beautiful young mother had been mortally wounded. In the next room lay her two and one half year old daughter close to death from loss of blood. A bomb fragment had pierced her upper leg severing a large blood vessel, as well as fatally penetrating the chest of the Army sergeant who held her in his arms. As a fleeing major rescued the little one, a picture which was to blazen the tabloid papers throughout the world, was taken by an on-the-scene photographer.

Metropole Bombing

This bombing incident on 4 December 1965 directly affected the hospital. Parts of the outpatient services which were located on the first two floors of the building were reduced to rubble. The concrete walls and floors of the treatment rooms and doctors' offices crumbled. Much equipment in the x-ray and laboratory was destroyed or severely damaged. Across the street many of the hospital windows were shattered. One corpsman who was hospitalized for a fever sustained a cut on his face. Fifteen of our staff corpsmen who were billeted in the building were awarded the Purple Heart for injuries received. Three of the men required hospitalization with the most seriously injured one evacuated to CONUS. In all twenty four patients were admitted to the hospital and well over 80 were treated as out patients. As in the bombing of the Embassy, many eye injuries were incurred by people who tried to satisfy their curiosity.

Saigon

Even though we were restricted to a twenty five mile perimeter within Saigon itself, the city offered much interesting territory for exploring. 'Twas said that a newcomer had "arrived" when she became the owner of a camera and ferreted out interesting picture taking situations of which there were many. Always there was the need to be considerate of the Vietnamese people's feelings, some of whom objected, and one learned as a guest in a foreign country that the simple courtesy of asking permission in sign language communicated respect.

Social Activities

The numerous social activities held among the members of the military community were a principal source of relaxation. The Navy group were the instigators of many such functions. Long remembered by the hospital staff will be the gatherings held on the roof of the Ham Nghi. The highlight of the 1965 social calendar was the celebration of the 57th Anniversary of the Navy Nurse Corps. Among the guests were the initial group of Army nurses who had just arrived in Saigon to staff the newly formed Third Field Hospital. On this occasion the Army Chief Nurse presented the Navy Nurses with a pair of inscribed lacquer vases containing 57 beautiful red roses.

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31 March 1966

