

## **Collection of Books on Experiences of Military Nurses During Wars**

Until the 1980s, the general public and too many American politicians discounted and belittled the service of American women in the military. Many books have been published about the experiences of men in war, but readers need to hunt to find books about women and nurses who served. In fact, even as recently as post-WWII, women who served, including at the frontlines and as POWs, were not considered veterans and were discharged from the Army and Navy to return to civilian life and resume pre-war roles with no benefits nor recognition. Their wartime experiences were considered a “blip” in their lives to be brushed aside, to be forgotten, in many cases, even by their families. In fact, women served in all U. S. wars from the colonial era to present day. Generally unknown is that in the Great War (WWI), American nurses volunteered and were on the front lines years before U.S. troops arrived. In WWII, for more than three years, 77 American Army and Navy nurses were POWs of Japanese forces in the Philippines in the same camps and under the same conditions as the American soldier POWs.

Following is an annotated bibliography of books in a collection donated to the MSU library, May 2016. This collection contains information pertinent for students of nursing, ROTC, women’s studies, and history.

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### **The Civil War – The War Between the States**

Brumgardt, J.R. (1980). **Civil War Nurse: The Diary and Letters of Hannah Ropes**. Knoxville: University of Tennessee.

Brumgardt calls Hannah Ropes the Florence Nightingale of the Civil War. He wrote that Ropes’ writings are “of substantial value with regard to important political and military figures of the war period, the activities of women nurses in the army hospitals, the internal affairs of such establishments, and women’s social involvement immediately prior to and during the civil conflict.” (ix). She was a Massachusetts mother with adult children, an activist and abolitionist when the war started. She was the matron of the hospital where Louisa May Alcott worked. When Ropes arrived at the Union Hospital (formerly the Union Hotel, Georgetown), she was appalled at the conditions she found there. Disregarding army restrictions, she strove to obtain food and supplies and to counter malfeasance of some hospital administrators as she provided care for “her boys”. When she was blocked in her reforms, she went to Secretary of War Stanton. She died in just six months, January, 1863, from typhoid. Her letters comprise more than half of this small book.

Cumming, K. (1959). **Kate: The Journal of a Confederate Nurse**. Harwell, R. B., Ed. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University.

Kate Cumming's journal was published in 1866, and all but forgotten. Some consider it the most accurate personal description of Confederate hospitals and medical care. Even with some editing for this publication, her journal portion fills more than 300 pages. She documented her experiences with the Confederate Hospital Department of the Army of Tennessee as a hospital matron. As matron, she focused primarily on preparing "delicacies" (nourishment, meals) for the patients, both Confederate and Federal POWs. Being published in 1866, it was not edited, not even for misspellings. It's been said that "history is written by the victor" so it is especially interesting to read this book. It provides a perspective seldom found in more popular Civil War books, which focus on the Army of the Potomac and the Army of Virginia and Robert E. Lee. Her strong views about wanting freedom and being "left alone" by the Federal government persist to the end of the fighting. (Interesting to me is that she never did see that maybe the slaves also would like to be "free" and "left alone".) She is vehement that Andersonville prisoners were starved because Lincoln refused to exchange prisoners and that he well knew that the South could not house nor feed the vast numbers of prisoners it held. She saw the Federals as robbers and murderers and cites cases of Union abuses that are missing from other civil war books.

Edmonds, S.E. (1999). **Soldier, Nurse and Spy: A Woman's Adventures in the Union Army**. DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press.

Sarah Edmonds spent two years as Private Franklin Thompson as a soldier and hospital aide, went AWOL in 1863 and resumed working in Union hospitals as a female nurse. In the guise of a man, she was able to be self-supporting and lived an independent life as a bookseller and publishing agent for a few years before the war. She was a Canadian living in Michigan in 1861 when she enlisted to serve her adopted country. Her bravery and "soldiering" earned the respect of her fellow soldiers, who did not know she was a woman. Initially assigned hospital duty, she transferred to regimental postmaster and mail carrier, and at times was behind enemy lines. In spring 1863, in Kentucky, she left her male persona and the 2<sup>nd</sup> Michigan, went to Washington, D.C. and became a nurse in union hospitals there. She maintained detailed notes on the war and her memoir was published in 1865.

Hancock, C. (1937). **South After Gettysburg: Letters of Cornelia Hancock, from the Army of the Potomac**. Jaquette, J.S., Ed. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania.

Hancock arrived in Gettysburg a few days after the battle in July 1863. She saw the bodies and the wounded still in the fields and her letters reflect her actions and care even before hospitals and medical care was organized in that area. Her letters include her observations of major events and leaders in the war. The last letter is dated May 1865.

## The Great War – World War I

Borden, M. (1930). **The Forbidden Zone**. Garden City, NY: Doubleday.

The “forbidden zone” was the label applied by the French where the frontline hospitals were located behind the trenches of WWI. Borden’s writing is poetic in her descriptions. She recalls and describes a scene in depth so the reader can mentally visualize the scene, e.g. the desolation of endless mud where there once had been a Belgium village. In the chapters related to the wounded, she describes the ashen faces, the “old” men returning from the trenches versus the young and jaunty men going to the fighting. When nursing, her reactions include not allowing herself to think about death, nor to think about what was under the dressings. She kept working almost mechanically as one died in her arms. Closing down any emotion, she has the bearer remove him and then describes the balancing needed by the waiting bearers to place the next wounded in the tight space just vacated. In the hut where she was working, “We could revive the cold dead there; snatch back the men who were slipping over the edge; hoist them out of the dark abyss into life again.” (157). She had been a war nurse for two years at that time, and served a total of four years.

Brittain, V. (2009). **Testament of Youth** (Originally published in 1933)

Considered a classic memoir, Brittain, a British nurse, describes her nursing experiences in The Great War and is quite descriptive of care in that war and working in tents in the mud and rain as she served in London, Malta, and France near the Western Front. The shattering of her pre-war life reflects the changes her generation experienced with the desperate conditions of that war. Her fiancé, a brother, and a good friend were all killed in the war. She emerges a pacifist, and psychologically spent. Today the nightmares and flashbacks she experienced would be identified as PTSD. It is a decade before she is able to adjust and heal enough to contemplate marriage and engage in a “normal” life.

Volk, K. (1936). **Buddies in Budapest**. Los Angeles: Kellaway-Ide.

Katherine Volk and her sister were American Red Cross nurses in the winter of 1914-15, assigned to Budapest, Hungary. The Red Cross hospital patients were primarily Hungarian, German, and Austrian soldiers as well as Poles, Bohemians, and Italians from the Carpathian mountain region on the eastern front. Her book briefly recounts Hungarian history and the culture the Americans experienced. The hospital was located in a former three-story school for blind children and was staffed with 13 nurses and three physicians from the United States. Being neutrals, they had to carefully guard their words, and learn some German and Hungarian. She reports each nurse would routinely do 150 dressing changes every shift. She had many patients who arrived with frozen feet or no feet, and many of the patients spoke of the thousands of wounded, on both sides, who were left in the fields to die in the snow. Only wounded who could get to an aide station received help and then they still had to travel several days in unheated conveyances through the mountains before reaching hospitals. American Red Cross personnel were withdrawn before the United States declared war, ending its neutral status.

## World War II

Aggeles, T. B. (2007). **Answering the Call: Nurses of Post 122**. [www.Xlibris.com](http://www.Xlibris.com): Xlibris.

Aggeles has interviewed 20 nurses in the American Legion All Nurses Jane A. Delano Post 122, most of whom served in WWII. Interviewing began in 1999, and the post disbanded in 2004 as membership numbers dwindled. Reading these accounts gives an overview of the variety of wartime settings where nurses served.

Cooper, P. (1946). **Navy Nurse**. McGraw-Hill.

This book details the first days of the war in the Pacific Theater in Pearl Harbor, the Philippines and other Islands as the Japanese attacked. The author gives detail of the movement of Navy nurses across the Pacific and the European theaters. Although she does not reveal details of actual nursing and duties of nurses at the time, she does relate the locations and peripheral activity of the nurses as the war progressed, both overseas and within stateside hospitals. She identifies the growth of the Nurse Corps and of Navy hospitals and hospital ships. The book concludes with the “reconstruction” (rehabilitation in today’s terminology) of the most prevalent injuries.

Glines, E.L. (1990). **Heads in the Sand**. Los Angeles: Authors Unlimited.

This small volume contains the story of the author’s sister who became a navy nurse after December 7, 1941. In 1945 she received orders to the *U.S.S. Benevolence*. She witnessed the signing of the surrender aboard the *U.S.S. Missouri*, and after a brief leave, returned to the *Benevolence*. With hundreds of others, she was sprayed with radioactive water from the 1946 underwater atom bomb test conducted at Bikini Atoll. Three years later she died with cancer.

Jopling, L.W. (1990). **Warrior in White**. San Antonio: Watercress Press.

A life summary written by the author from memory. A Red Cross – Army nurse in the Philippines a few months before December 7, 1941, the chapters about her experiences in the early years of the war are the more illuminating in this small volume. She was on night duty in an Army hospital in Manila when the Japanese began bombing the base and the Philippine capital, December 8. Her accounts include retreating to the peninsula of Bataan and Corregidor Island. She gives a brief description of providing care in the Bataan 1,000-bed “hospital” under the trees, and in the tunnels of Corregidor with the months of starvation and scant supplies. She was one of 13 nurses who were evacuated to Australia via submarine in April, 1942, a few weeks before the final surrender. Her weight in those four months had dropped to 70 from 100 pounds. Her descriptions of the desperate situation on Corregidor and in the overcrowded submarine are perspectives not usually found in other literature. After some stateside duty, she became a flight nurse and followed

the fighting, medevac'ing wounded from Pacific islands as the Marines fought their way towards Japan.

Mangerich, A. J. (1999). **Albanian Escape: The True Story of U.S. Army Nurses Behind Enemy Lines**. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky.

In November 1943, 13 Army flight nurses and their medical team on a transport plane were blown off course by a storm and German planes, and crash-landed behind German lines. With the help of Albanian partisans, this narrative is a vivid description of their 800-mile trek across mountains and in bitter weather fleeing from German bombings and patrols to reach Allied lines.

Monahan, E. M. & Neidel-Greenlee, R. (2003). **And If I Perish: Frontline U.S. Army Nurses in World War II**. New York : Knopf.

Chapters chronologically describe the military situation and the concurrent medical response. The book primarily follows the 48/128<sup>th</sup>, 95<sup>th</sup>, and 44<sup>th</sup> Evacuation (evac) hospitals on the frontlines in North Africa, Sicily, Italy, France, Belgium, and Germany. Nurses arrived with invading forces in North Africa, and in subsequent offensives, within three days of the initial assault. Like the troops, the nurses endured the mud, snow and sleet, and at times 30 below zero temperatures. They packed and moved their tent hospitals within a few hours, sometimes more than once in a week, to stay close to the fighting. They were with the troops the months the army was pinned-down on a seven-mile strip of beach in Anzio, Italy. There they experienced German strafing of the clearly marked hospital. One nurse was standing between two patient beds when her hospital was strafed, again. One of the two patients was hit across his chest, the other his head. She witnessed their deaths. OR staffs worked 12-hour shifts, when they could. Otherwise, they worked until the long lines of litter patients were cared for, some lines extending for a mile and more. One OR team became separated from their supply lines and other teams, and worked for more than 70 hours without relief. After Germany surrendered, while others celebrated, the nurses continued to care for the wounded and sick, and they also were tasked with trying to save the starving and dying inmates of the concentration camps.

This book is well documented with statistics of the number of killed and wounded, including the number of nurses killed. It includes anecdotes gleaned from hundreds of interviews and the historical context of medical advancements and the role of medical personnel "trying to survive the insanity of combat". Even though they did not carry weapons, these accounts clearly dispel the myth that women were never in combat,. I highly recommend this book to ROTC cadets and midshipmen.

Norman, E.M. (1999). **We Band of Angels: The Untold Story of American Nurses Trapped on Bataan by the Japanese**. New York: Random House.

In 1990, only 48 of the 77 nurses who survived and were repatriated in 1945 were still alive. Elizabeth Norman was able to locate and interview only 20 of these elderly women.

She perused diaries, letters, news accounts, and did extensive interviews. The nurses fled with American forces south until they were against the sea and starved into surrendering. During those months (December 1941-April 1942), the nurses set up the “hospital” in the jungle of Bataan, and then moved to the 1000-bed hospital in the tunnels of Corregidor Island. After capture, despite no medications and minimal supplies, they provided what care they could in the prison camps. They maintained a work schedule despite starvation and disease, and not one nurse died in captivity. Norman believes their “unit cohesiveness” was pivotal in their survival. It was the men who christened these nurses a “band of angels”. The nurses responded to the interviews with “we” rather than “I”, and the chapters give the collective story of their imprisonment, survival, and reception when they returned home with severe weight loss, hair loss, beri beri, etc. A remarkable story.

Robinson, T.M. & Perry, P.M. (eds). (2001). **Cadet Nurse Stories: The Call For and the Response of Women During World War II**. Indianapolis: Sigma Theta Tau Press

Cadet nurses received their nursing education from the federal government with the requirement that they work as nurses in the civilian sector for the duration of the war. The program was in effect 1943-1948 and in this book the program is explained and nurses recount their experiences in the program.

### **Korean War**

Omori, F. (2000). **Quiet Heroes: Navy Nurses of the Korean War, 1950-1953, Far East Command**. Saint Paul: Smith House Press.

The author wrote this book to commemorate the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the outbreak of the Korean War and to help Marines express thanks to those who cared for them. When the war began, reserve nurses were taken from their civilian lives, sometimes with just a few days notice, and transported to Yokosuka, Japan, or to ports to board one of the three hospital ships that went to Korea. The 100-bed dispensary in Yokosuka, within a few weeks would swell to a hospital caring for 1000 wounded. The November to April 1951 Korean winter would bring temperatures to the minus 30-degree range. Frostbite would take hundreds of men out of the war and many would require amputation. In August 1951, the first hospital ship, *USS Consolation*, was fitted with a helicopter landing deck. With helicopter medevac (medical evacuation), doctors and nurses began seeing men with injuries that just months earlier would have died in the field or from the rough and slow transport to a medical facility. Major offenses would mean hundreds of wounded being admitted and surgery personnel working 72 hours with just two hours of sleep each day. Interspersed in the narrative are letters written by men who had been patients during the episode in the narrative.

### **Viet Nam War**

Freedman, D. & Rhoads, J. (Eds) (1987). **Nurses in Vietnam: The Forgotten Veterans**. Austin, Texas Monthly Press, Inc.

Nine army nurses who served at different places in Viet Nam recount their reasons for serving in Viet Nam (they were all volunteers), their impressions and experiences there, and how the war affected them in retrospect. They served between 1965 and 1971 and were among the 8,000-10,000 women who served. (The military did not keep records specific to the number of women who served.) They cared for different categories of patients, surgical, medical, psychiatric, and drug overdoses. The accounts are in the nurses' own words and help illustrate the country, the army, and the political controversy of the era.

Hovis, B. (1991). **Station Hospital Saigon: A Navy Nurse in Vietnam, 1963-1964.** Annapolis: Naval Institute Press.

Hovis, and six other Navy nurses were tasked in 1963 with converting a dispensary into the first hospital in Viet Nam to serve U. S. personnel, military and civilian, as the war began expanding. At this time, the troops were volunteers and advisors. The physical location in multiple buildings is explained, including the multilane highway that bisected the hospital from the labs and x-ray department. She documents observations of the escalating violence and frequent bombings and the Vietnamese government coups. She also notes that years later when researching for her book, an archivist found so little historical information about this hospital that it is like it never existed (157). This book remedies that omission.

Norman, E. (1990). **Women At War: The Story of Fifty Military Nurses Who Served in Vietnam.** Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press.

Interviews conducted in 1983-84 were the basis of Norman's doctoral dissertation. In this book she clusters the extensive data into a highly readable narrative. Starting with volunteering and arrival in Vietnam, she identifies commonalities and themes in the nurses' accounts. Chapters such as Professional Strains and Moral Dilemmas of Nursing in Vietnam, and Factors Associated with the Year the Nurse Served in Vietnam take the reader through experiences and perspectives of wartime service. About one third of the book describes their experiences returning to "the world" (i.e. the United States) and perspectives about stateside military and civilian nursing and adjustment to the antiwar culture. Included are insights of patterns of chauvinism, conscious and subconscious in the culture of the time. The final chapters address "Coming to Terms with the War" and "Lessons Learned" including advice for future nurses going to war. Those interested in women's history as well as military nursing may find this book valuable.

Van Devanter, L (2001). **Home Before Morning: The Story of an Army Nurse in Vietnam.** Boston: Sheridan Books, University of Massachusetts.

Van Devanter was a surgical nurse in the Viet Nam highlands during multiple "pushes" with large numbers of never-ending casualties. She describes her deepening revulsion at seeing mutilated young men in surgery and the long hours assisting surgeons striving to achieve "order" in massive wounds. Her descriptions of days after days of caring for long lines of

wounded, and several deaths that deeply affected her, illuminate the development of PTSD in her and others who worked in similar conditions.

Van Devanter, L. & Furey, J.A. (eds.) (1991). **Visions of War, Dreams of Peace**. New York: Warner Books.

This is a book of poems written by nurses who served in Viet Nam. They reflect perspectives before, during, and after they served and consequences of the war to themselves and, in many poems, to their patients. Their writings may seem harsh as they lack the heroics or “nobility” of war, frequently found in poetic literature.

### **Iraq War**

Ruff, C. L. & Roper, K. S. (2005). **Ruff's War: A Navy Nurse on the Frontline in Iraq**. Annapolis: Naval Institute Press.

The first fourth of the book chronicles Ruff's early life and 25 years in the Navy Nurse Corps. The remainder covers the final months of her Navy career when she was deployed as a nurse anesthetist in a 60-bed tent hospital in 2003 in Kuwait and Iraq for Operation Iraqi Freedom. The reader can almost taste the sand and grit with her descriptions of austere living conditions including high winds, 40-degree night temperatures and 110-plus daytime temperatures. Ruff gives graphic descriptions of the struggle to provide the best medical care possible in poorly lit tents with gritty air and equipment that needed constant maintenance. Her physical endurance was stressed under the harsh conditions, and that she was 45 years old at the time.

### **Additional Books**

Bartimus, T., Fawcett, D., Kazickas, J., Lederer, E., Mariano, A.B., Merick, A.M., Palmer, L., Webb, K., & Wood, T. (2002) **War Torn: Stories of War from the Women Reporters Who Covered Vietnam**. New York: Random House.

Each of the nine authors has a chapter that describes “what we saw and felt in Indochina – our adventures, fears, excitement, and the difficulties and loneliness.” Viet Nam was unique in that there was no censorship and journalists, male and female, were embedded with various combat units. Laura Hall related her perspective of the nurses. “Nurses in Vietnam saw more trauma because of the widespread use of helicopters, which got to hospitals soldiers who would have died in previous wars. Doctors were older and more emotionally anchored by careers and families. Nurses were often only a year or two older than their patients.” Many “nurses came home with a debilitating and corrosive sense of failure embedded in her soul. If only she had been a better nurse, more would have survived. No other message countered the negative ones. No one said thank you. No one honored the courage it took to make a dying man feel loved....Nurses in Vietnam often never had time to learn their patients' names. It was just the opposite in the VA hospitals, creating tremendous burdens. Armies have no medal for that kind of courage.” (274-275). The journalists' accounts range from witnessing the war from 1966 to the 1975 U.S. withdrawal and some perspectives after returning to the U.S.

Holcomb, R.C. (1930). **A Century with Norfolk Naval Hospital: 1830-1930**. Portsmouth, Printcraft Publishing Co.

This 500-page book traces the land ownership from 1636 until 1830 and the development of the Norfolk city and the naval hospital. The author includes multiple document excerpts enabling the reader to see the original resources of his information. He traces the development of the medical department and the hospital changes with wars (War Between the States, Spanish-American War, The Great War). E.g. during the 1855 yellow fever epidemic, for the first time the naval hospital admitted civilians in large numbers. He noted obtaining innovative equipment e.g. its first x-ray machine.

Ritvo, R.A. & Plotkin, D.M. (1998). **Sisters in Sorrow: Voices of Care in the Holocaust**. College Station: Texas A&M University Press.

The first two chapters present an overview of medical conditions in the Jewish ghettos and the concentrations camps. In the main part of the book, the authors describe a camp and then follow with a narrative of a survivor from that camp. These women acknowledge the compromises necessary for survival in an environment designed to exterminate them. Despite the filth, starvation, crowding, abuse, and beatings witnessed by them and experienced by them, they describe actions done by strangers to help others survive. Some of the women who demonstrated care in those atrocious conditions didn't have nursing experience before their internment. The horrors are still in the memories of the women, but the authors conclude the narratives with positive accounts of their lives 50 years later.

Witt, L., Bellafaire, J., Granrud, B. & Binker, M.J. (2005). **A Defense Weapon Known to Be of Value**. Hanover: University Press of New England.

In the years between World War II and the end of the Korean War (1945-1953), major changes occurred related to military women. The services were desegregated, the glass-ceilings blocking women from attaining high military rank were raising, and marriage no longer prevented women from serving their country. The newly formed Defense Advisory Committee on Women in the Services (DACOWITS) began addressing the battle of public opinion that slandered women in the military. Anna Rosenberg became the first woman to be appointed Assistant Secretary of Defense in 1951. This book was published under the auspices of the Women in Military Service for America Memorial Foundation, Inc. It documents the changes for military women during these eight years, and one chapter specifically addresses the nurses in Korea.