When the 298th General Hospital was called to active duty in June of 1942, the University of Michigan Medical School’s organization of the unit already had been two years underway. The 298th provided heroic front-line medical services to the armed forces in England, Belgium and France under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Walter G. Maddock, M.D., associate professor of surgery, with nurses directed by Lieutenant Margaret K. Schafer, instructor in nursing and operating room supervisor who ultimately became lieutenant colonel and chief nurse in the European Theater of Operations.

The 298th was one of the countless contributions made by the University to the nation’s defense during perhaps the most challenging period of its history. To meet the demand for trained personnel, the University moved to a three-term year for continuous operation, and the Medical School accelerated its instruction to produce doctors in three years instead of four.

Unprecedented levels of government research, much of it classified, were conducted at the University, and the U-M trained more than 4,000 enlisted men and officers for the Navy, 8,000 Army soldiers, and 12,350 civilians in such areas as language instruction, ordnance inspection, meteorology, naval architecture and Army law—all while the University itself suffered a severe shortage of workers due to massive conscription and voluntary service.

Burgeoning enrollments as veterans returned challenged the University after World War II as well. Older than the typical student, often married and more likely to have cars, the surge of veterans changed the student landscape forever and helped signal a post-war University far different from that which existed before the conflict.
The Furstenberg Era

Nancy Furstenberg Remembers Her Father

Her father also pursued outreach programs with hospitals in Flint, Detroit and Grand Rapids. Nancy says, hoping that by doing so students would gain a more realistic and varied clinical experience. He was an original member of the federal government's Donn Planning Committee, advocating for a linkage between medical schools and the Veterans Administration hospitals as a means of improving medical care for veterans returning from World War II and expanding the clinical experiences available to students.

Her father’s commitment to building those relationships drew the entire family into the effort on many occasions, she recalls. “Our whole family and the Ruthvens went out to Palm Springs once to visit W.K. Kellogg,” she recalls. “I remember hearing my father and President Ruthven whispering together about the alarmingly high cost of our hotel rooms: $35 a night. They were both frugal. But it was well worth it. Kellogg even named one of his Arabian horses after Dad.”

Her parents’ marriage derived from a medical event: her mother, Elizabeth (known as Micky), a young college student at the time, was a diphtheria patient in the old Infectious Diseases Hospital when she met her future husband, the attending physician. “They couldn’t have been more different,” Furstenberg says. “My mother was a freshman, social, outgoing, dramatic, artistic. But my father had the good sense to know she would be one of his greatest assets.” Micky earned her bachelor’s degree from Michigan four years after her husband became dean of the Medical School, and Nancy remembers her father “standing up and bowing” as his wife received her diploma.

Although her forthrightness and outgoing personality Nancy Furstenberg attributes to her mother’s genes, she carries with her a heavy dose of her father’s down-to-earth pragmatism. “I wanted to be an actress,” she says. “I spent time at Interlochen and I got accepted into the Yale School of Drama, almost the same day I got accepted into the University of Wisconsin Medical School. But I didn’t have high cheekbones and I didn’t have a great figure, and I said to myself, ‘Get real.’ I’ve never regretted the choice I made, though I do wish I could have been more successful in my own medical career while Dad was still alive.” (After her father’s death she went on to become associate dean of the Medical School at the University of North Dakota.) She does remember with satisfaction, though, the time she overhead him say on the telephone to a colleague, “I used to wonder about women in medicine, but Nan seems to be doing all right.”

Now in her ’70s and again a resident of Ann Arbor, Nancy Furstenberg retains the abiding interest in medicine that began in her early childhood. “I think my first word was ‘ophthalmology,’” she says. As the Medical School celebrates its sesquicentennial, she herself celebrates her life in medicine, but Nan seems to be doing all right.”