

Liège under Siege

The U-M physicians and nurses of the 298th General Hospital treated the wounded of World War II while bombs fell all around them. BY JAMES TOBIN

THE FIRST “BUZZ BOMB” CAST

a sickly orange glow over the 298th General Hospital — the all-volunteer unit of doctors and nurses organized at the University of Michigan — on the night after Halloween, 1944, just outside the Belgian town of Liège. That one fizzled down into an empty field, but more of Hitler’s V-1 flying bombs came every day and night, so many the staff got grimly accustomed to their blatting putt-putt-putt, like hideous motorcycles in the sky.

The men and women of the 298th had been stationed for much of the war in a pleasant English village. During all of 1943 they treated only 540 battle casualties. On November 20, 1944, they took in nearly 600 patients before midnight. Their real war had begun.

The 298th started in the mind of Albert Furstenberg, M.D., dean of the Medical School from 1935-59. Furstenberg had taken steps to prepare U-M physicians and nurses for military service when the Nazi armies invaded Poland in 1939. By mid-1940, the Medical School had become the official sponsor of the Army’s 298th Hospital, and plans to train a staff were put in motion. Soon after the attack on Pearl Harbor, the unit was ordered to active duty. Walter G. Maddock,

M.D., an associate professor of surgery and a lieutenant colonel in the U.S. Army, commanded a cadre of 28 physicians, while Captain Margaret K. Schaefer oversaw some 120 nurses.

On October 20, 1942, the 298th sailed from the New Jersey docks on the S.S. Mariposa, a luxury cruise liner that had spent the 1930s ferrying well-heeled tourists from Hawaii to Tahiti to New Zealand. There was not much luxury left; members of the 298th bunked four-deep in the ship’s ballrooms. But like many Americans who reached the U.K. early in the war, they were in for a long wait to see action.

Orders landed them in the South Gloucestershire village of Frenchay,

just outside the city of Bristol. Here they took over a half-built hospital, the third U.S. Army hospital in the U.K. But months went by before many beds were needed.

In the spring of 1943, battle casualties from North Africa began to arrive at what Maddock called “this little bit of Michigan in England,” and more soon followed from the battles for Sicily and Italy.

After months of preparation and training, Maddock reported, “it was a great thing for the unit to get down to the work of taking care of patients.” Three out of four injuries were to the extremities, with many complicated fractures of knees, elbows and ankles, so the orthopedic service was espe-

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cially busy. The doctors also repaired many nerves severed or damaged by flying shrapnel and bullets. But plenty of injuries couldn't be blamed on the Germans. "As in our practice at home," Maddock wrote, "the motorcycle is a deadly weapon."

The patient load was still not terribly heavy, and the staff found time for bicycle trips, baseball (the merits of which they debated with the local cricket squads) and British girlfriends, whom they courted at a local establishment called Fishponds. The highlight of their British service was a visit by the Dowager Queen Mary, grandmother of Elizabeth II.

Finally, orders came to move up to Colwyn Bay in North Wales, where the training turned to anti-gas procedures. It was May 1944. On June 6 they listened to radio reports of the Normandy invasion, then cooled their heels for six more weeks. In mid-July they finally reached Utah Beach. The front was twelve miles inland. In an old hospital in the captured port of Cherbourg, they treated Allied casualties all that summer.

In October, the 298th moved via train and truck to a field outside the city of Liège, Belgium, just 30 miles from the German border. The buzz bombs began to pass over their heads in November, bound for Antwerp and England; then they began to fall on and around Liège.

V-1s exploded all around the hospital, two or three while the staff watched a performance of "La Traviata." Another hospital in Liège was destroyed. On some days the groaning bombs came fitfully, on others like



clockwork, every fifteen minutes. They could be heard approaching for agonizing moments, with no way to judge where they would land. Amid the racket, maimed soldiers and civilians alike streamed into the hospital for treatment.

By mid-December the buzz bombs were falling so often the officers drew names from a hat to decide who would stay if the camp had to be abandoned. But the order to move never came. Just before Christmas, the 298th was flooded with new casualties — many of the wounded from the Battle of the Bulge, some 60 miles to the south. The doctors and nurses worked on, though the buzz bombs continued.

Finally, when the Germans were far to the east, toward Berlin, the long barrage wound down. It was estimated that some 3,000 buzz bombs had struck or passed over Liège. Not one had hit the 298th, and none of its members had been killed.

"Few general hospitals found themselves under enemy fire equal to that experienced by your unit during the siege of Liège by robot bombs," Col. C.H. Beasley, a senior surgeon in the Medical Corps, wrote Maddock. "You did not let this form of Nazi terror interfere with the performance of your mission." [M]



Top: Harry Towsley at the 298th
Bottom: A train carrying members of the 298th leaves Ann Arbor

On September 21, 2012, a monument will be dedicated to the heroic men and women of the 298th U.S. Army General Hospital at the site where the hospital was located in Liège, Belgium. E-mail m.ms@skynet.be for more information.

Original sources for the history of the 298th are preserved mostly in the papers of Harry A. Towsley (M.D. 1931, Residency 1934), at the U-M Bentley Historical Library. Towsley, who served with the unit throughout the war, acted as its historian, keeping a detailed journal and shooting thousands of feet of 8 mm film. He was a member of the pediatrics faculty from 1934-67 and chair of the Department of Postgraduate Education (today the Department of Medical Education) from 1967-71.