



Army nurses at Anzio beachhead found mud and bugs part of the decor.

Anzio nurses

Women who were there recall bravery on the beachhead

By Evelyn M. Monahan
and Rosemary
Niedel-Greenlee

As rough seas off the coast of Anzio, Italy, tossed the landing crafts like discarded match sticks, the nurses of the 33rd Field Hospital fought to keep their footing and their breakfast. The sounds of high-pitched German airplane engines, exploding bombs, and anti-aircraft fire drowned out all human sounds except the almost deafening lub dubs of their own hearts as the sound beat again and again in their ears.

It was well past 0800, the time scheduled for the nurses to wade ashore on Anzio, and the Luftwaffe showed no signs of stopping their attack. The planes made run after run over the harbor, the staging area and the hospital tents, dropping their bombs and turning to repeat their attacks until their bombs and ammunition had been spent on the American and British troops below.

Each of the Army nurses with the 33rd Field Hospital was a veteran of combat situations. They had served

previously in North Africa and Sicily. And, since the hospital's creation in October of 1943 (the invasion of Italy was on Sept. 9, 1943) it had followed Gen. Mark Clark's Fifth Army as it made its way north. They had often cared for injured soldiers only a mile or two behind the front lines, and they had shared the GIs' hardships, the GIs' living conditions and the GIs' risks.

When the worst storm in more than 100 years hit Salerno on New Year's Eve, 1943, the nurses and medical personnel of the 33rd Field Hospital fought the elements for the safety of their patients. The storm had raged for hours, turning the hospital area into a field of mud. Just before midnight, the furor of the storm had grown so powerful, it was reclassified as a cyclone and threatened to level the 40 large tents that protected the more than 1,000 wounded GIs. As though summoned by the sound of a bell, corpsmen, doctors and nurses grabbed whatever clothes were closest to them and spilled into the blackness of the night. In the hours that followed, nurses, doctors and medical personnel

fought falling tent poles, driving rain and the hazard of downed electrical wires to evacuate all but 12 patients to the safety of a large warehouse miles from the hospital site.

Another battle still awaited them. Doctors, nurses and corpsmen laid hold of the poles and chains supporting the post operative tent and hung on with all their might. The 12 post operative patients inside could not be transported without serious risk to their lives, and if the tent offering their only physical protection from the elements went, there would be little chance for their survival.

In the darkness of a moonless night, with generators off line, and fallen electric wires hidden by ankle deep mud, nurses crawled from patient to patient. They worked by the light of flashlights carried in their mouths or tucked under their chins to leave their hands free. They worked quickly, disconnecting Wagenstein suction and intravenous infusions, lifting the wounded men to litters balanced on cinder blocks as close to the mud floor as possible. As they worked, the hand-



The front with no back: Anzio beachhead hospital following a German shelling of the tented hospital area.

that found the strength to hold chains and tent poles against a cyclone, found the gentleness to touch the arm, shoulder or neck of a wounded GI with the strength of assurance.

Finally, just as the sun began to rise, the storm moved out of the area. Nurses, doctors and corpsmen looked around them and saw the total devastation left in the cyclone's wake. The only tent left standing was the post-op tent they had battled for through the night. The physical remains of the 33rd Field Hospital lay soaked in the rain and mud the cyclone had left behind. Suddenly the sound of laughter broke through the tension that held the hospital hostage for 18 hours. In the first light of dawn, hospital personnel got their first real look at each other in more than eight hours. They were clad in bath robes, boxer shorts, muddy O.R. greens, field jackets, ponchos and helmets; the only personal possessions remaining to them. The laughter rose to a crescendo as one by one, they turned toward the rapidly moving river that had replaced the hospital's main street. Floating along in the fast-moving current were several dozen nude and stuffed turkeys that were supposed

to be the main course for their New Year's Day dinner.

Now almost four weeks later, the 33rd Field Hospital was part of an invasion that would make everything they had experienced before seem like a "walk in the park." Shortly after 9 a.m., the German planes ran out of bombs and flew to the safety of their own lines. Landing craft stopped circling and in the 15 minutes that followed, six days after the initial landing, Army nurses assigned to the 33rd Field Hospital and the 95th and 93rd Evacuation Hospitals waded ashore on the beachhead that would be their home for the next four months.

That home would be a beachhead 15 miles wide at its base, and seven miles deep. The main tented hospital area was, by necessity, located only six miles from the front lines, and fully accessible to German artillery that shelled the area on an almost daily basis. Perhaps their main targets were the airstrip, the anti-craft batteries, the ammunition dumps, the fuel dumps, and the motor pool, all located on the edges of some part of the tented hospital area; but that didn't stop the shells from falling on the hospital tents or in

the hospital area. Neither did it stop the bombs that fell on the hospital with devastating effects. In fact, the hospital tents were hit so frequently that the front-line GIs nicknamed it "Hell's Half Acre," and loudly proclaimed their reluctance to being sent there for medical care or medical evacuation.

Less than 30 minutes after their arrival, the men of the 33rd Field Hospital who had been on the beachhead since 22 January, 1944, warned the nurses to take cover during bombing or shelling whenever it was possible for them. No one, of course, left patients, no matter how heavy the attack, but if the GI or nurse was off duty and there were no major hits, it was wise to head for a foxhole.

"We really didn't take the warning seriously," Jessie Paddock recalled almost 50 years later. "We had been in combat zones, only a mile or so from the front lines since we joined the Fifth Army as one of their field hospitals. We all thought the warnings were just an exaggeration."

Within one hour of the nurses' arrival at the 33rd Field Hospital, Army nurses were treating their first patients on Anzio. The rest of that first day, the evening and the night passed with no further German attacks, underscoring the nurses' belief that Anzio "was just another beachhead."

Their second night on Anzio would turn that belief around 180 degrees. With the evening and gradual darkness, German planes began another in their series of unrelenting attacks. The night was filled with the sounds of exploding bombs and anti-aircraft fire. Tracers from anti-aircraft shells threaded the night skies with ribbons of fire. Flares from German planes lit up the beachhead with an eerie green light that gave the sense of daylight experienced only in a dreamer's nightmare. The night was a cacophony of exploding bombs, flying shrapnel, strident anti-aircraft fire, exploding ammunition dumps, car horns and sirens of ambulances speeding to pick up wounded and deliver them to the hospital for treatment.

Exploded ammunition dumps sent long fingers of flames upward into the night sky as if determined to capture enemy aircraft and fling them back to

Patriot recalls fearless nurses

By John E. Binnion

My thanks go to Editor Carroll Wilson for allowing me to read, prior to publication, this story of the nurses at the 33rd Field Hospital on the Anzio Beachhead. The story certainly brought back memories, for I was a patient in the 33rd.

In fact, I was there during one of the night bombing and/or shelling "affairs" offered to us by the German army and air force. That night is one which will never be erased from my memory.

Actually, and in "whole truth," I have told the story of bravery in that hospital many times. This, however, is the first time that it could be put in print in our magazine — or, in fact, in any news media.

This is a story of heroism — not of the writer, but of the Army nurses, the physicians and the corpsmen who were there in the 33rd. The event that took me to the 33rd happened on Feb. 29, 1944 (I have hated Leap Year Day every since!). Whether the shelling and bombing took place that night or perhaps later — well, on that I am not certain.

However, the tent to which I was

assigned, and the camp cot on which I lay, were part of the 33rd Field Hospital. The walking space between the cots was pretty narrow (extra cots had been brought in) and to the best of my memory every one was occupied. Our tent was full; the hospital staff was very busy; and my wound had been dressed. Now, it was just "wait and see what the medics would do."

Then came darkness and the night.

When the bombing and the shelling began we were all frightened — no one could ever honestly deny it. Hospitals were supposed to be free from such enemy attacks. Didn't the Germans know that?

Fright, however, might be too mild a term. Some of the more agile wounded were able to get off their cots. But . . . where could they go? There was no air raid shelter; and when some tried to crawl under their beds they could not do so because the middle crossbars of the camp cots on which they were assigned would not allow it.

Anyway. What protection against shell fragments is a camp cot, covered only with canvas?

In writing this, many years later, I have no knowledge of how many days I spent in the 33rd Field

Hospital. Later I was sent to an evacuation hospital on the beachhead, a British hospital ship to a general hospital in Naples, another general hospital in Tunisia, a U.S. hospital ship to Charleston, a general hospital there, a hospital train going west, and eventually Ashburn General Hospital in McKinney, Texas.

The years, however, do not erase the memory of the 33rd and the bravery of those nurses, physicians and corpsmen. While those bombs and/or shells were falling the hospital staff members were moving around in the tents, giving medical attention where needed and calming words to all of the patients.

That was a night to be remembered. And, as I said previously, it was an event which has been told by me to others — an event which underscored the bravery of medical people performing their jobs, during time of war, without arms or adequate protection.

I offer my thanks to Evelyn Monahan and Rosemary Niedel-Greenlee for this opportunity to remember a dark night in Italy filled with terror, and for the love and care and bravery of this group in the 33rd Field Hospital on the Anzio Beachhead.

earth. The quiet, sharp sounds of shrapnel tearing its way through the canvas hospital tents everywhere, added its own special terror to the night, a night filled with the overpowering odors of diesel fuel and cordite. This was night on Anzio, the standard against which the really bad times would be measured.

"We learned fast," former 2nd Lt. Jessie Paddock said as she thought of those first nights on the beachhead. "After that second night, at the first sounds of an attack, all the nurses grabbed their helmets and headed for foxholes if they weren't on duty. That foxhole was like water in a desert to

us. We'd crouch there with our faces toward the wall until the shelling or bombing finally stopped."

She stopped for a moment and cleared her throat. "Of course, if you were on duty, it was another story. We just kept on working. You couldn't leave your patients no matter how bad it got. I remember one young corpsman who arrived on the beachhead about one week after us." She chuckled. "We were veterans by then. Anyway, this kid thought that he should head for a foxhole whenever the shelling or bombing started. We had to tell him in no uncertain terms that when a person was on duty, they didn't

head for a foxhole under any circumstances. It took him one more time and some kind of disciplinary action to convince him we were serious. After that, he just stayed on duty like the rest of us. At some very basic level, we were all scared, but we were too busy to worry about it."

Continued next issue...