Nurse anesthetists remembering a world at war—Part II: My assignment as a Red Cross Nurse

Key words: American Red Cross nurse, World War II.

Throughout 1995, the United States has been celebrating the Allied victory over the Axis powers in World War II. The American Association of Nurse Anesthetists (AANA) Archives would like to take this time to recognize nurses and specifically nurse anesthetists' participation in the Allied cause.

This article, the second of a two-part series, presents a reprint of an article by Gertrude Madley, RN, titled "My Assignment as a Red Cross Nurse." Ms. Madley, an employee at Herman Kiefer Hospital in Detroit, Michigan, was chief nurse of the American Red Cross Harvard Unit from 1940 to 1942. The article was originally read at the meeting of the Michigan Association of Nurse Anesthetists on February 19, 1944, in Detroit, and it was later printed in the May 1994 issue of The Bulletin of the American Association of Nurse Anesthetists.

[Preparations to go to England begin]

"It was in the fall of 1940 that I received a call for duty, my assignment to be Chief Nurse of the American Red Cross Harvard Unit, going to England to study epidemics under war-time conditions. It was felt that we could perform a twofold mission, give help to Britain in her hour of need, and at the same bring back to our country something of value to be applied after national disas-
ment together with material for other buildings, all being set up in order, but our carefully made plans did not work out that way at all. Things we needed most were the last to arrive—among them, soap and cleaning rags.

Our biggest problem was one of shipping. Everything had to go over by British merchant convoy. Since we were not at war, our ships could not put in at British ports. Even though we were not at war, we sent over a tremendous amount of supplies. I feel that not many Americans know how much was sent across, but we saw much evidence of it. People would stop us on the street and shake our hands, many times with tears in their eyes and way, 'Thank you, America.' We were taken to supply depots and shown the food and clothing that had been sent across, and those showing us around would express the hope that the people of America would know how grateful they were and every time I have an opportunity I say, 'Thank you for Britain.'

Before going on to what we experienced over there I would like to tell you of our trip across the Atlantic by British merchant convoy. It was a thrilling experience and in telling it I pay tribute to the merchant navy. We sailed from New York for Halifax, where our convoy was to be assembled. We waited there three or four days while the ships arrived. It was very foggy and gray in Halifax and we were not at all sorry when the day came for us to be on our way. There were eight of us on a freight ship and we had a jovial Scotch captain. Each boat was given a signal to which she replied and then she left the harbor and took up her position outside.

When we had assembled outside the harbor, it was a thrilling sight. There we were, fifty-seven freight ships (much as we see going up and down the Detroit River), arranged twelve in a row, in five rows. In the middle of the front row was our escort vessel, an armed cruiser, and in the middle of the pack was the battleship. There were four destroyers on the outside of the convoy and all ships in the convoy carried small guns. The ships in the convoy were from all friendly countries who were at war. Every time the escort vessel signalled a message to the convoy, each ship had to answer.

The rate of speed at which a convoy travels is placed by the rate of speed the slowest boat in the
convoy can maintain, and we travelled at the rate of five knots per hour, taking twenty-one days to cross. Sometimes it seemed that we could have walked faster. We got to know the ships' signals. We knew that two short blasts meant so many degrees one way, one short blast, so many degrees the other way, and so we zigzagged across the ocean, the ships keeping in perfect formation.

It was thrilling to go on deck after dark and see the dark silhouettes of the ships and hear the quiet chug-chug. It made me think of a group of people tiptoeing along not daring to make a sound. Somehow one got the feeling of determination of those ships to get the goods to where they were needed. We were warned against throwing things overboard but one day one of the passengers thoughtlessly threw overboard an empty cigarette package. Quicker than it takes time to tell we were reprimanded by the escort vessel. If a submarine had surfaced, that little cigarette package would have told the enemy that a convoy was not too far away. It is not very difficult to understand how a submarine can get into the middle of a slow-moving convoy under cover of night and do untold damage before it is taken care of, and that is just what they do. They fire four torpedoes at once, so they don't often miss.

We tried to avoid having too many nurses in any one convoy, but, we were unfortunate in having nurses on two boats sunk in one convoy, and we lost our house-mother and five nurses. Nine were picked up by a tanker and six were landed in Iceland and two we knew had perished at the time.

There was the other boat with the nurses aboard, to be heard from. I will never forget the day that I received a cablegram from Iceland telling me that four nurses had been landed there after twelve days in an open boat. They were suffering from severe frostbite and were returned to America.

Then a week later I received a telephone message telling me that two more nurses were landed in Ireland. The other four we never heard from. The two that were landed in Ireland were kept in a hospital there for three weeks. They, too, had severe frostbites. They had been in an open boat for nineteen days in the cold Atlantic. They had one-half cup of water twice a day and a meat ball daily as long as they lasted. The men tried to knock down a seagull but were too weak to wield the oar. They picked barnacles off the boat to eat. Two men died and those two girls experienced everything that goes with a shipwreck and displayed as much courage as anyone I have ever heard of. They joined our unit and put in one year of good faithful service.

[Arrival in wartorn England]

When we arrived at Liverpool, we had our first glimpse of a balloon barrage. It was a beautiful sight, great silver balloons up against a clear blue sky. Liverpool was a distressing sight. There was tremendous damage and the people looked so poor and depressed. We learned that all our hospital beds had been burned in the warehouse at the dock-side only a week earlier. The Battle for Britain was over just a week before we arrived.

We left for London that afternoon, travelling by train. The country was more beautiful than I had remembered it. The fields were green, the hedges very pretty, and the flowers out in profusion. It was the middle of June, 1941. It seemed almost unbelievable that the war was so near, but when passing through large towns and cities, we saw much evidence of it. Upon arrival in London, even though there was much destruction, we found the atmosphere was different. There was none of that feeling of depression that we felt in Liverpool.

There is much destruction in London but London covers a large area, and somehow one does not get the heartache as when visiting a smaller town or city that has its very heart blasted out. St. Paul’s Cathedral stands out very well because so many buildings are down around it.

St. Thomas’ Hospital across the Thames River from the House of Parliament and Westminster, and known to nurses as the Nightingale School, has been badly hit. Ten nurses and doctors were killed, but no patients. While we were being taken around there, the matron and sisters were apologizing for the condition of things, while we were filled with admiration with the way in which they were carrying on. They presented to our unit an engraving of Florence Nightingale at Scutari and in the lower right corner was Florence Nightingale’s own signature. This picture is to be brought over to Washington after the war and hung at the National Headquarters of the American Red Cross.

Large blocks, where once stood department stores, are vacant except for the basements, which have been cemented and filled with water for firefighting. Lifebuoys hang around them. We had to be sure to fill our bathtubs at night before retiring in case we had to put out fires if the water pipes had been damaged during raids.

[Preparing our hospital]

When we arrived in England our hospital was not ready, but I had to go down there on business. I stayed at a hotel and during the first night I was awakened by a terrific bombardment. I quickly realized that there was a raid on. The doors and windows would rattle and shake after an explo-
sion. The sky would be lit up as if by fireworks, and through it all I could hear the fascinating sound of the tramp of the warden’s feet in the street below. Next morning I learned the raid was nineteen miles away. It was the night that forty-eight land mines were dropped on Southampton.

We visited Bath the day after a big raid there. Rescue parties were still digging. It was a horrible sight but I think that the thing that impressed me most was the dazed expression on the faces of the people. On going back a few days later, all of that had disappeared. People were going about their work as usual—they had a job to do. The only thing that was left of the raid was the horrible destruction which could not be cleared up overnight.

We had our own warden’s post at the hospital. We had to go through a very rigid course of training. We had to know how to crawl through a smoke-filled house, do lifesaving, extinguish fires and incendiary bombs, learn to detect poison gas by the smell, and then pass a written examination, after which we received a letter of congratulations from the chief constable, together with an identification card, an arm band, whistle and badge. We were then full-fledged air wardens. We had four air raid shelters on our grounds equipped with heat and light, blankets, hot water bottles, blood plasma, first aid kits, food in cans, stoves, etcetera. We learned, too, to stagger our supplies. So often a large town or city during a blitz lost all emergency supplies because they were stored in one warehouse that was destroyed. We had stores packed away in every building.

One can readily see, after a blitz, why the food and clothing sent over from this country meant salvation. How fortunate we are that we are privileged to live in a country like America, and how many of us offer up our thanks in prayer. The things we see in the movies and read about in the newspapers, and hear about over the radio, are actually happening over there. Do we ever try in imagination to live that thing through?

We had many visitors from all over the country. They were interested in our hospital from a standpoint of reconstruction after the war. They were much impressed by our centralization method. As well as having a central supply room, we admit-tered and discharged all of our patients through one building. The visitors did not like our central heating system any too well. They wondered how we could live in such heat, and they marveled that we did not catch our death of cold every time that we went out. Frankly, I wondered how I ever lived to grow up. I was born and raised over there, and had come to appreciate central heating here, over the method of having to ‘lay a fire,’ in front of which I toasted my shins and shivered up and down my spine. I remember how, as a child, I suffered from chillblains on my fingers and toes. However, it was very nice to be back, and to be of service to the land of my birth, and I was made very welcome wherever I went; in fact we all were. People were very kind. We just could not accept all the invitations we received.

[Visits with the Royal Family, Winston Churchill, and General Eisenhower]

It was a few days after our first nine surviving nurses arrived in London, that our director and I were asked to take them to Buckingham Palace to meet the Queen. We were met by the Queen’s Lady-in-waiting and taken to the reception room. The Queen shook hands all around and complimented the nurses on looking so nice. I told her they were wearing borrowed clothing—they lost everything when they were torpedoed and the other nurses had stayed at home so that they could go to the Palace properly dressed. ‘Just the same,’ the Queen said, ‘they look very nice.’ Queen Elizabeth then took us for a walk through the Palace grounds. The swimming pool was being repaired. The Queen was very animated. She put us completely at our ease and she is every bit as charming as she is said to be.

The following day we went to 10 Downing Street to meet the Prime Minister. That, too, was a thrill. Mr. Churchill, after shaking hands all around, stood in front of us and said, ‘Well, we are very sorry for the ordeal through which you have passed, but you must thank God, as we do, that you are here. Thank you for coming.’ ‘And now,’ he went on to say, ‘I must hurry because I have to have lunch with the King, and I mustn’t keep the King waiting because he has to tell me what to do.’ I can’t for the life of me see anyone telling Mr. Churchill what to do.

We also went to the American Embassy to meet our own Mr. Winant who has endeared himself to the hearts of the British people. General Alexander, the British general who has been so active in the East, visited us a few times. We had some of his officers, including a Brigadier General and some of other ranks, in as patients. General Eisenhower and General Mark Clark visited us one Sunday evening for music and coffee.

Queen Mary came to see us. We were rather disturbed when she arranged to come on a Saturday afternoon because we were very proud of our laundry. It was the envy for miles around, and our laundry staff did not work on Saturday afternoon. However, the Chief Constable came to see us about the visit. We could not tell anyone that the Queen
was coming, not even our nurses, but when we asked the laundry staff if they would mind working, they said, 'No,' almost eagerly. We found out later that our gardener who was an old British soldier, had seen the Chief Constable when he called. The gardener said that that meant one of two things, either a murder or royalty, and as far as he knew, there had been no murder! It took an hour usually to take any visitor around, but the Queen stayed two hours and a half. We had tea, and then the Queen asked to have her picture taken with us. She chatted and laughed, and frankly, I think she enjoyed her visit as much as we enjoyed having her.

[**Rationing**]

Food rationing is carried on over there differently. The basic essentials of the diet, such as butter, meat, bacon, fats, sugar, tea, milk, et cetera, were apportioned per person per week. The housewife registered at a certain store for these commodities. The storekeeper knew, in that way, how much he should have on hand and the housewife was sure of getting her supplies. Fish and poultry were not rationed but they were not easy to get. Children were allowed extra milk, and only children could buy oranges, the number to each child and the age limit being regulated by the quantity of oranges.

For some time we were allowed one egg per person per month, and we did not see it because it went into the cooking. One day, when I was knitting, one of the nurses told me that if I would knit her a pair of red mittens, she would go out and get me an egg. I felt quite safe and said, 'All right, get me the egg and I will knit you the mittens.' She did, much to my surprise. She had not told me that she was in the habit of visiting a farmer and his wife once a week, who gave her bacon and an egg for tea. This day she did not eat the egg, but brought it back to me. I took it to my room where I boiled it, and there never was an egg that tasted like that one.

Our Director sent home for powdered milk for powdered eggs, so that we were able to use the powdered milk for cooking and drink the fresh milk with our meals. We used the egg powder for cooking and ate our one precious egg. We dug up some ground outside our huts and grew some peas and beans that were delicious.

When I got to England I wrote home saying that I wished I could tell them about the number of ships that were in our convoy. I went on to talk about Heinz's 57 varieties. Later in my letter I said that I thought the British people had enough to eat, but that the diet was monotonous, with not much variety. When I wrote my next letter, I asked if they understood what was meant by the 57 varieties, and back came the reply, 'Oh, yes, we got it, and we have been across to Canada to see how many we can send to you.' We were not allowed to write home for anything, so the family thought that that was my way of letting them know I wanted food. The packages they sent were most acceptable, butter and jam especially.

There is a point system over there [in England] in addition to the allowance of basic foods to cover the purchase of canned goods, fish and meat, fruit and vegetables. Most small homes at any time have kitchen gardens where they grow almost enough vegetables to last the year around. Soap is rationed, which is most uncomfortable. Shoes and clothing are also rationed. We were allowed sixty-six coupons for a period of fourteen months. We could use only twenty-two of them over the first four-month period. When you stop to realize that you give up two precious coupons for each pair of stockings, you will realize why the women in England are not wearing many stockings.

People are beginning to look shabby, but it is not noticeable unless you look for it, because everybody looks alike. There was the same shortage of supplies that we are experiencing here [in the United States] today. You took shopping bags and your own paper and string to the store. Even on buses and street cars, boxes were placed for discarded tickets; pieces of paper as small as that were salvaged. You could not buy a kettle or a pot for love or money. There was a utility china, something like a heavy lampshade, for which you paid twenty-five cents for a cup and the same for a saucer.

The health of the nation is better than it has been for many years. It is thought that is due to the controlled, well-balanced diet. People eat all they can get, there is nothing to leave, and all that they get is good for them.

[**Morale high**]

The morale of the people was always high, and we must remember that at that time things were not as bright as they are today. This war has brought rich and poor together as nothing else could, and why not—they were fighting for one common cause, and that, their very existence.

Their civil defense is almost one hundred percent perfect, but only after much bitter experience. London burned for lack of fire-fighters in the early days, now every man between the age of eighteen and sixty, and all single women are required by law to do so many hours per week of fire.
watching. They work in pairs, one resting while the other watches.

In the homes are two types of shelters, the Anderson outside, and the Morrison inside. The Morrison shelter is like a large billiard table with a steel top. It can be used as a table during the day, and at night a mattress is put under it, and of the two I think I would prefer the latter.

When we first arrived over there, a large part of the London population was going into shelters at night. We visited the London subways many nights and watched the families arrive to go to bed. There was a first-aid post there with a graduate nurse in charge and canteens where hot soup, cocoa and tea, cookies and sandwiches could be purchased.

There were first-aid posts and gas decontaminating stations about the country, with all kinds of signs and instructions as to how to find them. In London, as well as the usual road ambulances, there is a river emergency service. When London was burning and falling, the ambulances could not get through but the river emergency could get into many places. We spent a very pleasant afternoon with them visiting many of their ambulance boats, where they put on a demonstration showing how they get people out of difficult situations.

The Home Guard, when it was first formed, was made up of retired officers and men. Invasion was expected at any time and only men with the knowledge of firearms were of value. The evacuation of Dunkirk had just been accomplished and so much material had been left behind. One could go on and on about that valiant body of men who had retired and had come back to help defend their country in its great hour of need. The Women's Voluntary Service under the very able leadership of Lady Reading is another wonderful organization.

There are the hospitals for wounded and sick men and women of the armed forces. Civilian hospitals, doctors and nurses are controlled by the British Ministry of Health. I attended a conference at the Royal College of Nursing. There were nursing representatives from almost all friendly nations. We were asked to talk for two minutes, telling what we were doing in England. I was filled with admiration while listening to nurses from other countries struggling to make themselves understood in English. They were attempting to persuade all young girls from their countries to take up nursing because of the great need there will be for them at home when this war is over, particularly in the public health field. The thing that impressed me most was that they all talked of the time when they would return, not if. There was no doubt even then but that some day they would return to their homelands.

Transportation became more and more difficult as time went on. Regardless of whether you had a first class or third class ticket when travelling by train, you invariably rode standing up in the corridor. Troops were constantly on the move. If I was ever fortunate enough to find a seat, I would amuse myself by reading the notice over the seat opposite me, which read, 'If the train is attacked, drop to the floor.' I would be wondering which of the eight of us would be down first. At all depots we saw signs that read, 'Carry your lunch with you.'

Travel by bus was ideal if you could make a reservation. You could not board a bus unless you had a seat reserved. The buses were comfortable, there was no standing. You saw the country at its best and the driver always stopped where you could get a cup of tea to drink with your sandwiches. There were many bicycles and our staff did very well procuring them. I did not attempt to ride. After these nice wide roads here, I could not get used to the narrower ones over there, which twisted and turned so much. One invariably got caught with a troop convoy of many trucks and motorcycles.

The problem of keeping up the morale of our own group was not too easy to cope with, but it was something we were prepared for before leaving this country, and for that reason we had planned to have a recreation hut that we would encourage all to use, instead of staying in their rooms alone. We had a victrola in the recreation hut and some records of good music and every Sunday night we gathered together there for music and coffee.

Pearl Harbor happened while we were over there and it was not any easier to bear over there than it was right here at home. A number of the nurses wanted to come right back where they felt there must be a lot for them to do.

Over there in winter it gets dark shortly after 4:30 P.M. and does not get light until 9:00 in the morning, while in summer it is not dark very long.

In July, 1942, our unit was taken over by the United States Army Medical Service and it meant breaking up. Fifty per cent of the nurses joined the Army Nurse Corps and remained at the hospital, sixteen of us returned to the States, while the rest went to London to work for the American Red Cross.

Our troops were coming over in larger and larger numbers. Very few of the [Red Cross] clubs were ready and there were as yet not many Red Cross workers over there. Those Red Cross clubs are a God-send to the men. Each one is like a little bit of home. There you see Coca-Cola™, coffee,
and doughnuts. The men have a happy way of finding out if there is anyone there from their home town. On the wall outside the office hangs a large map of the United States. As the men register they write their name on a piece of paper, put a pin through it, and stick it into their home town on the map, at the same time looking to see if there is anyone else there. The clubs plan recreation for the men, such as sightseeing tours, concerts, dances, et cetera, and then, too, the men are always sure of a bed and a meal at a reasonable price.

[Return to the United States]

We travelled back to the States by United States naval convoy and all the way we had such a feeling of security. Every morning at five o'clock, General Quarters was sounded and every man went to his post for the hour of daybreak. This to watch for submarines that might have caught up with the convoy under cover of night. We had 'Abandon Ship' drill every day. General Quarters was sounded and we all went to our state rooms, put on our life jackets, and waited there until we were summoned on deck. We stood alongside the lifeboats to which we had been assigned until one of the ship's officers had inspected us. He not only saw that our life jackets were properly tied, but that we were properly dressed in case we would have to take to small boats.

There were one hundred and fifty women and children on board and the tiny tots were most uncomfortable tied up in their life jackets and they voiced their protests loudly. We were treated just like a part of the Navy. Our portholes were not open from the time we left until we arrived in this country. The ship was blacked out at night. We enjoyed movies every night and there was a man on board who knew how to make good American ice cream, and we started eating it shortly after breakfast.

We had been at sea a few days when a submarine came up just a hundred yards from our starboard bow. General Quarters sounded and we did as we had been trained to do,—we went to our state rooms, put on our life jackets and while waiting down there could hear the depth charges being dropped. We put on an increase of speed, too. We were conscious for the first time of the vibration of the engines. When the 'all-clear' sounded, we rushed up on deck to see what we could see, but it was all very peaceful. Everything had apparently been taken care of. Before we arrived in New York, one transport was afire and was badly damaged and partly disabled and the passengers were taken off. It was amazing to see with what speed such things are taken care of. That burning ship was immediately taken away from the convoy; it was an ideal time to attract attention of the enemy to our convoy as that smoke undoubtedly would.

We were landed at Staten Island and it was with much relief that we found the ever-faithful American Red Cross there to meet and help us. There were trucks and cars to take us to the depots and a canteen serving coffee, milk and sandwiches, which we needed after the grilling ordeal of passing censor and customs officers. We had a sick nurse who was very yellow from jaundice and it was a great relief to me to have her taken all the way to her home in New Jersey by car, rather than putting her on a train, wondering how she would get along.

[Conclusion]

I have tried to give you an all-around story of my experiences on a Red Cross Mission, touching only lightly on the many phases, each of which is a story in itself. I feel that I am a very fortunate person in having been allowed to serve in the two World Wars. During the first war I had three and a half years service with the British Army, serving in Malta, Italy and France.

Words cannot express what I feel about the American Red Cross. I only know that it is deserving of all the support that we can give it. It is a peace-time, as well as a war-time organization, entirely dependent upon the generosity of the American people. It follows our Army wherever it goes. It is the go-between for our fighting men and their families, giving relief and comfort to both.

Its needs are greater now than ever before. Surgical dressings and blood plasma must reach the fighting front in sufficient amounts. We are as much a part of this war as our men who have gone prepared to give their lives, while what we can do and give is small in comparison, but vital. Any able-bodied person can give a pint of blood without cost and it requires very little time, but that blood might be the difference between life and death to some man over there.

There are many opportunities for service for volunteers who have time to spare, so let us do what our President [Franklin D. Roosevelt] says, 'Let us back the attack.'"
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