

BOOKS AND MULTIMEDIA OF INTEREST



And If I Perish: Frontline U.S. Army Nurses in World War II, by Evelyn M. Monahan MEd, PhD; Rosemary Neidel-Greenlee, MSN. 514 pages, \$30, New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf Publishers, 2003. ISBN: 0-375-41514-9.

Until now little has been done to record and interpret the thoughts and recollections of World War II nurses. No governmental agency or historical society officially recorded firsthand evidence of the role nurses played in the Great War, so we were pleased to read *And If I Perish: Frontline U.S. Army Nurses in World War II*.

Nurse anesthetist service in World War II was described in books by historians Marianne Bankert¹ and Virginia Thatcher.² Both wrote of nurse anesthetists on ships and in military hospitals overseas, and of the sacrifices nurse anesthetists made at home to support the war. However, *And If I Perish* is uniquely valuable because it concerns all nurses and includes compelling firsthand battlefield descriptions.

Evelyn Monahan and Rosemary Neidel-Greenlee are both veterans of the military and of previous efforts to record women's roles in wartime. They are thus well-qualified researchers. Fifty years after the fact, they must have worked very hard to locate, survey, and interview frontline army nurses. For more than 12 years, they sorted more than 100,000 letters. From oral histories they produced a captivating personal narrative of nurses who are now for the most part deceased.

The book's focus is on 70 of the 59,000 nurses who volunteered to serve. The authors interviewed their sample carefully and began a

narrative from the landing with D-Day forces in Africa in 1942 through the German surrender in 1945. The nurses describe how they established and staffed hospitals in canvas tents and under battlefield duress, protected patient safety, maintained standards of care, and kept harmony among the staff and patients. The tales told by nurses on board the *HMHS Newfoundland* (a hospital ship that was bombed on September 12, 1943, by a German plane in violation of the Hague Conventions) about their struggle to escape the sinking ship from below decks are very gripping. These same nurses were eventually transported back to work in the combat zone.

World War II nurses were graceful in the face of danger. They volunteered for duty only 3 miles from combat, without the benefit of formal military training, and yet they earned only 50% of the pay given to men and were not even accorded a salute. Morale was nurtured creatively; inevitably the nurses worked their way into one another's hearts.

There were several nurse anesthetists among the group of 70 Army nurses in *And If I Perish*. Some had received formal anesthesia training in the United States, but others like Martha Cameron were operating room nurses conscripted into anesthesia service while overseas. Cameron described how she learned to give spinal anesthesia: "(The O.R. Supervisor) looked me in the eyes and said 'You'll do whatever the chief of surgery tells you to do.' So I learned how to give spinals. The first time I hit the subarachnoid space and drew spinal fluid, I was hooked. I studied hard, read everything I

could find, and loved my work." Other nurse anesthetists told of forgoing the protection afforded by a trench to shield an anesthetized patient from the shrapnel of live artillery or starting an anesthetic in one hospital and transporting the patient to another because a severe storm had blown the hospital tents over. If the book has a shortcoming, it is that CRNA readers will finish it wanting to know more.

And If I Perish does more than just record the work performed by nurses in World War II. It teaches us that in World War II, nursing advanced social values in the military by promoting gender integration. During World War II, military tradition and opinion firmly opposed male officers as nurses. The authors point out that the first male did not enter the Army Nurse Corps until 1955. He was 2LT Edward Lyon, a nurse anesthetist.

The nurses in *And If I Perish* were terrific examples of progress in nursing and anesthesia, living examples of the trend that has spread around the world for using nurses in the military and recognizing them as the benchmark for military clinical anesthesia.

REFERENCES

1. Bankert M. *Watchful Care: A History of America's Nurse Anesthetists*. New York, NY: The Continuum Publishing Company, 1989.
2. Thatcher VS. *History of Anesthesia, with Emphasis on the Nurse Specialist*. Philadelphia, Pa: JB Lippincott. 1953.

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