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*In May of 1917, U.S. medical teams became the first American troops to arrive in the European war zone. Helen Dore Boylston served in France with the first Harvard Unit, a U.S. medical team that treated more casualties than any other group of American doctors and nurses during the conflict. In 1927, she published *Sister: The War Diary of a Nurse*, an account of her experiences in the field. The following excerpts span from February to November of 1918.*



February 23.

Glorious day out. Spring comes so early here. Already the line of the hills against the sky is green, and Jock, the camp gardener, is plowing in the quadrangle.

Two hundred gassed cases came down last night. Poor wretched things. And we had no beds for them. Had to put stretchers on the floor. And they were so uncomplaining about it. One said to me, as I was bathing his eyes while he lay on the floor, "It's jolly good to be here, sister."

February 28.

The first thing I heard when I went into the ward this morning was Hilley, playing "White Wings" on the gramophone. I don't believe he's had that record off since I was here before.

I have the same side of the ward that I had before, with nearly all the same patients. Forty of them. But it isn't as easy as it sounds, for the dressings are hard. I'm so pleased to have that side again. But heavens, how I worked! My back is busted in two tonight. Slowly, down the ward, doing the dressings and making the beds. But every time I straightened up, there was old Dad beaming. The dear plucky old thing! It's quite an accomplishment to get old Dad to beam. He came all the way from Australia to fight for the England he had never seen. He is over sixty, and no one can imagine how he got into the army. But he did, and now he lies here with his leg torn to pieces. He's a crotchety old darling, always raging and roaring about something...



... And then there is Hilley. His hip was shattered by an explosive bullet when he was crossing a river, and he would have drowned if his chum hadn't come back to him and carried him out on his back. There is more to it, but I'm not sure I've ever got it straight. Anyway, Hilley's chum got the Victoria Cross for it. But Hilley, as he says, got nothing but a bum leg. He is an Irish Guardsman, and everyone in the hospital knows him. Long and thin, with a fine, keenly intelligent face which is proudly decorated with a neat black mustache, he has lain for nine months tied to a Balkan frame, and he is the heart and soul of A 1. He bucks the boys up no end. Always singing, or joking, or wrangling about something. He never complains, though he is tortured daily. We have always been great friends. We have old jokes that we cherish, and certain formulas of greeting and leave-taking. It was Hilley, long ago, who started the boys saying "good night" to me, all in one voice. They think it is a great joke, but it's a lot more than that to me.

I wondered tonight if they had forgotten. There were new boys in the ward, of course, and it had been a long time since I had been there. But when it came time for me to go off duty I stopped in the doorway as usual and said "good night" to the boys near at hand. Like a flash Hilley pulled himself up hand over hand, along his frame, yelling, "Hey, mates, shut your noise! Sister's going!"

There was a grinning silence, while I said, in a rather small voice which I tried to keep from shaking, "Good night, lads. Sleep well."

With a crash that shook the hut, all the old boys responded in one shout, "GOOD NIGHT, SISTER!"

The new boys stared. The sister in charge flew out of the office.

"For God's sake, Boylston!" she exclaimed. "What on earth are you doing?"

"Nothing," I replied meekly. "Just saying good night to the boys."

"Well, for the luva mike! I should think you were!"



March 8.

... I haven't written in this lately because I've been too busy. There is a new crowd at the Senior Officers' Machine-Gun School, and they have nearly rushed the Harvard Unit off its feet. It is great fun, because no matter how complicated things get, the men have to go back up the line at the end of the month. And next time they come down the line, if they ever do come, poor dears, they will be at some other base, rushing other girls. I always have a curious sense of impersonality in these affairs. Officers come out of the line presumably for extra study, but mostly for a rest and a good time. And they must have a girl, or girls. They have seen enough of men for a while. So they fall enthusiastically in love with the first girl they meet, and everybody has a gorgeous time. But I wonder, now and then, if they ever really see us as individuals? I doubt it. Anyway, everybody forgets everybody else as soon as they are gone, and that's that.

It's a fascinating game, this playing at love with people who can't stay long enough to be serious. One feels so safe. I'm getting to hate long-drawn-out affairs. Once in a while, of course...



March 9.

The spring offensive is on the way. The boys have all been recalled and there is an unpleasant tension in the air. John left today. I was to have had a farewell luncheon with him this noon, but at the last minute my off duty time was changed and I couldn't go. He waited ages, down at the Lac, and then appeared in the doorway of the ward with an appropriately forlorn expression. He stayed about an hour, and we finally parted with all the necessary drama. He is the first of the crowd at the school to go. The thought of it makes me sick. The crowd at the school will all be killed. They always are. I don't see why we aren't all crazy. Maybe we are. We ought to be. And yet, after saying goodbye to John, both of us feeling miserable and tragic, I went off duty and went out to dinner with Kit and Jerry and Jardine and Len Van Stone and had the time of my life.

I suppose that's why we aren't crazy. We can do things like that and it keeps our balance.

4 a.m., March 24.

They've come!

I've been working all night. Just got off...

... Our first warning that the convoys were coming was the low drone of motors—the ambulances, winding over the roads in the moonlight. As far as the eye could see they were coming. Just black beetles, crawling, scarcely a yard between them, and not a light anywhere. It was about an hour after supper, and there was an air-raid on. Not a very bad one, but our shells were coming over so low that our hair stood on end with every screech. Ruth and I were standing outside the mess watching the air-raid, when, through the sound of whistling shells, we heard a low purring note that had nothing to do with the jerky growl of Gothas. We exchanged a startled glance and started for Matron's office, neither of us saying a word.



Just as we reached the Administration Hut the first ambulance stopped in front of us, the others close behind, and we had to wait until the boys were taken out. Nearly every one should have been a stretcher case. Ragged and dirty; tin hats still on; wounds patched together anyway, some not even covered. The boys' faces were white and drawn and their eyes glassy from lack of sleep. Some of them were not more than sixteen or seventeen. And they stood, ghastly in the pale light, waiting to be told where to go. There were great husky men crying with the pain of gaping wounds and dreadfully

swollen, discolored trench feet, who sank down exhausted the moment they stopped. There were strings of from eight to twenty blind boys filing up the road, clinging tightly and pitifully to each other's hands, and led by some bedraggled limping youngster who could still see.

Everyone had a cigarette in his mouth and another behind his ear, if he were so fortunate as to have an ear. And they grinned at us. Grinned! "Cheerio, sister! I got a Blighty one this time!" Over it all the shells screamed, the Gothas growled, and the searchlights swept the sky. Now and then a bomb exploded in the distance, and each time those poor devils jumped horribly—and then grinned again at "sister." They were sickly things, those grins.



Ruth and I stood beside the road with tears rolling down our cheeks, trying to grin back. I wonder if I'll ever be able to look at marching men anywhere again without seeing those blinded boys, with five and six wound stripes on their sleeves, struggling painfully along the road.

Matron sent us to the D lines, which are reserved for the walking wounded. She said there were only five hundred in the convoy, but that there were stretcher cases coming. If she sent Topsey Allen with us, did we think the three of us could clean up the five hundred walkers? We thought we could.

In the D lines we made a frantic effort to systematize our work. We had a small table for the medical officer, a large table piled with bandages, splints, boric ointment, sponges, and a basin of Dakins' solution for wet dressings. Then there were two smoky lanterns and an enfeebled primus stove.

Ruth, armed with a pair of scissors, stood in the doorway of the dressing-tent and beckoned the boys in two or three at a time. Because there was so much to do, it was impossible to take the dried and stiffened bandages off carefully.

The only way was to snatch them off with one desperate yank. Poor Ruth! Her tender heart nearly broke. She'd cut the dressing down the middle, the poor lad looking on with set jaw and imploring eyes. There'd be a quick jerk, a sharp scream from the lad, a faint sob from Ruth, and he was passed on to the medical officer, while Ruth began on the next.



The medical officer looked at the wound, said "Wet — dry — boric ointment," or "Splint," to the orderly at the table. The orderly scribbled the order on a bit of paper and gave it to the lad, who moved on to Topsey and me. They came much too fast for us, and within fifteen minutes were standing twenty deep around the dressing-table. As the hours went by we ceased to think. Our hands moved automatically. We were hardly conscious of the shuffling of feet and the steady drip-drip of wounds bleeding from surface vessels, torn open when Ruth took off the dressing. I remember hearing a soft thump now and then. I suppose somebody fainted. But there was no time to look up. We were needed elsewhere for stretcher cases at that very moment. After a while Topsey had to give it up, and went away very white. She was sick before we started, anyway.

We're through now, just as the dawn is coming. I don't know whether I'm sleepy or not, but when I close my eyes the bandages go on rolling and winding and staining crimson. The blur of faces is still there in the sputtery light, and I can hear the ceaseless shuffle of feet. So I'm writing in this until it all goes away and I can sleep...

August 19.

There are compensations, after all.

Tonight, about nine o'clock, Betty Lazenby and I borrowed bicycles and rode down through the village and around by the beach road. A little half-moon was just slipping up over the sand-dunes, and in its faint light our little village looked like a dainty little gingerbread town. Beyond the village the mist was rising from the fields and drifting into the tiny stretch of woods beyond. The

air smelled of autumn, cool, and with that sweet, damp, earthy smell, mingled with whiffs of peat smoke. At the end of the road the dunes lay black against the sky, but with a touch of gold along their edges. One felt that beyond that ridge of dunes lay the outermost rim of the world, the place where dreams are born.

We went on until we heard the sea roaring and three giant searchlights flashed out across the sky. Then we turned and went home again through the mists.

Nothing is too much to bear when the world remains like this through it all.



September 5.

The Hindenburg Line has broken!!

Camp is wild with excitement. Perhaps this is the beginning of the end. And if it is—what then? I had forgotten that there might be an end; that someday I might be back in America.

We got our first stretcher convoy in months yesterday. Since then they have been coming in steadily. The boys are so worn out! This morning I arrived at one youngster's bedside just in time to prevent a lively attack of hysteria. They come out to France younger and younger. This lad wasn't a day over seventeen.

No air-raids since the push started.

September 7.

Still very busy. We are having awfully heavy dressings now. One that I did today almost made me cry, and I don't cry easily, either.



The lad was a Canadian, about twenty-two, with a frightful arm; elbow joint smashed, and the whole arm stiff and swollen, and full of gas gangrene. In getting off the dressing I had to move it some, and though I was as careful as I could be, I could hear the bones crunching and grating inside. Then I had to pull off hard, dry sponges, and haul out yards of packing that kept catching on the splintered bone. The lad just turned his head away and never made a sound—didn't even grit his teeth. Once, accidentally touching a bare nerve-end with my forceps, I hurt him terribly and he turned his head to see what I was doing. I saw that his eyes were full of tears and the pupils enormously dilated with pain. But not a word out of him. No groaning. No "Please wait a minute, sister." Just patient silence. I choked for an instant, and then burst out, "Oh, I'm awfully sorry, lad! I didn't want to hurt you." And he said, so gently, "It's quite all right, sister. Carry on."

When I'd finished and was tucking him in, he looked up at me and said, "You're very gentle, sister. Thank you very much." And I had tortured him unbearably!

I couldn't say a single word.

October 3.

Cambrai is taken! And the boys are in high spirits.

We are getting American wounded by the hundreds now. I got fourteen in my ward last night. All the wards are jammed full.

November 11.

In ten minutes the war will be over. Hostilities are to cease at eleven o'clock, and it is ten minutes to eleven now. It's incredible that one can measure peace in actual units of time. I lay awake all last night, thinking.



What are we all to do now? How can we go home to civilian life, to the never ending, never varying routine?

And the Twenty-second General Hospital, that vital living thing, saturated with the heights and depths of human emotion, will become a slowly fading memory of days when we really lived.

There go the bells! And the drums! And the sirens! And the bagpipes! And cheering that swells louder and louder! The war is over — and I never felt so sick in my life. Everything is over.

But it shan't be! I *won't* stop living!

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Read the full text of [Helen Dore Boylston's diary](#).
