
American Red Cross base hospital no. 38 in the world war. United States army base hospital no. 38, organized under the auspices of the Jefferson Medical College and Hospital, stationed at Nantes, France, 1918-1919, by W. M. L. Coplin.

American Red Cross Base Hospital No. 38

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XIX

THE S. S. NOPATIN

THE Detachment's trip to France on the "Nopatin" was an adventure of some magnitude. The transport was a 300-foot coastwise steamer intended for service between New England ports; she had been idle for several years. Then the War came, with its demand for vessels of all sorts, and the Navy took over the microscopic "Manhattan" as it was then called, renamed it the "Nopatin," and proceeded to fit it up for service in the English Channel. The vessel was subjected to a general overhauling; partitions were removed and the lower portholes were covered with heavy planks. To make it seaworthy for the long voyage across the Atlantic great braces and timbers were set up on deck and within the hull. The converted "Nopatin" was ready for use in June, 1918—that famous month during which so many thousands of American soldiers were rushed to France. Every transport bound for Europe was crowded to capacity with troops and every foot of deck space was at a premium. So the War Department cast its eye down the list to find a nice portable little outfit of about two hundred men that

would just fit the limited space on board the "Nopatin."

Thus it came to pass that, with some misgiving, the Detachment of Base Hospital No. 38 came aboard on June 21, 1918. The boat looked woefully small beside the huge bulk of the "President Grant" which was tied up opposite at the next pier. Most of the officers were aboard the "President Grant"; they spent much of their time during the next two days in calling across the narrow strip of water and making all sorts of uncomplimentary or unkind remarks about our shiplet. The Detachment had the last laugh, however, for when the convoy sailed the "President Grant" developed acute peritonitis or something and had to put back for repairs while the diminutive "Nopatin"—the seagoing Ford—went merrily on her way.

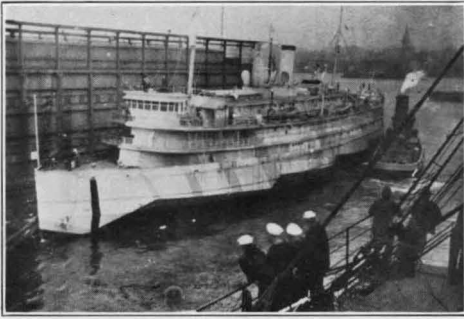
Lieutenant-Colonel Lambie, Major Lowman, Captain Pratt, Captain Bertolet, Captain Tripp and Lieutenant Lull, occupied staterooms on the top deck. The main Detachment was assigned to hammocks and the "noncoms," in pairs, went into the little staterooms. Packs were unslung and the organization prepared to make the best of things *en voyage*. Everything seemed quite comfortable. After all, the "Nopatin" was not a half bad sort of boat—at least not while securely tied up at the pier; compared to the larger transports with their thousands it was a luxurious craft when in quiet water and lashed to a land-mast, the dock.

On the afternoon of June 22, 1918, memorable date,

the mighty craft steamed down the bay and anchored in the harbor to await other constituent members of the convoy. The assembling vessels were far enough down to get the heavy swells from the ocean and the initial casualties occurred that evening. Raeber captured first honors by falling out of the mess-line at supper (citation). From then on familiar faces—many, many familiar faces, dear familiar faces, were missed; Raeber, Sprecher, Crosby Smith, Haslam, Hamilton, Clever, Casey, Parkinson—immortals first to succumb—became stricken heroes; many were sick but those named rose to incomparable heights. The “Nopatin” pitched fore and aft with energy and determination; she also rolled from side to side; the combination resulted in that ghastly, uncertain, diagonal lunge that shifted gastric moorings and brought the stomach very close up under the eaves with that charming sensation that one gets occasionally when the elevator man is in a hurry to go out to lunch. The “Nopatin” was rather wide for her length, and then too, the deck extended out over the hull line after the manner of most river steamers. When she came down into the trough between swells, this generous surface smacked the water flat, sending a shudder through the entire boat; it made the unhappy “thirty-eight” feel as though a barrel stave had been applied with force and accuracy to the open country immediately below his breastbone. Throughout the day and also in the erstwhile silent night, the wooden reinforcements of

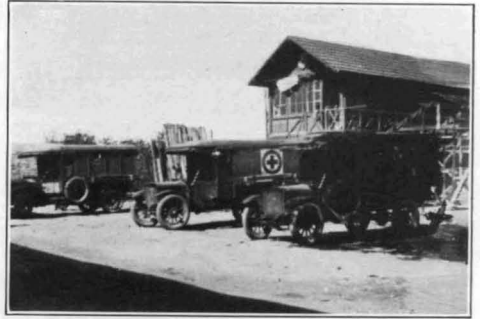
the vessel groaned and squeaked, the fore and aft stairways sang a strident hymn of hate; when at sea often winds screeched through the rigging and great waves banged and broke on the wooden sides. Much of this, mind you, even while we were still (?) anchored in New York harbor! Our subsequent sufferings on the open sea must be left to the reader's imagination. No mention need be made of that awful night in mid-ocean when the Colored Infantry in the next transport prayed for us as the frisky "Nopatin" did tail-spins and looped-the-loop—that night when the musical stairways played "Nearer, My God, to Thee" and the mess tables and benches went crashing back and forth like flails! That was the terrible night when the sailors pumped out the ship and Captain Pratt pumped out Crosby. Let us forget it, by all means.

The convoy, seven transports in all, put to sea on June 23, 1918. Most of the transports were big lumbering vessels with sleek inquisitive guns mounted on platforms fore and aft. Our vessel, being a minor in size and senile in years, was not permitted to carry fire-arms, but relied for protection upon four depth bombs, floating smoke boxes, a smoke screen machine, low visibility, and Providence. The convoy was shepherded by a sturdy cruiser and five sleek destroyers; a number of little subchasers saw us safely on our way. The "Nopatin," gay in her new camouflage colors, brought up the rear of the flock like a frolicsome spaniel, one that would



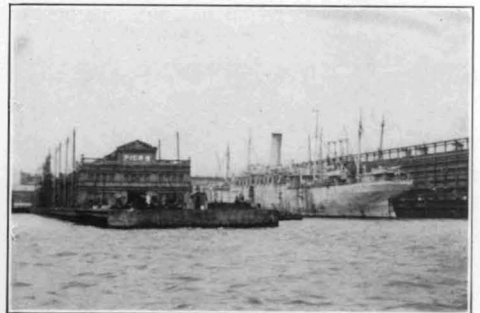
S. S. "NOPATIN"
Our Transport to France

GARAGE
LE GRANDE BLOTTEREAU



THE CHAUFFEURS
A Holiday Party

S. S. "FREEDOM"
Our Transport Home





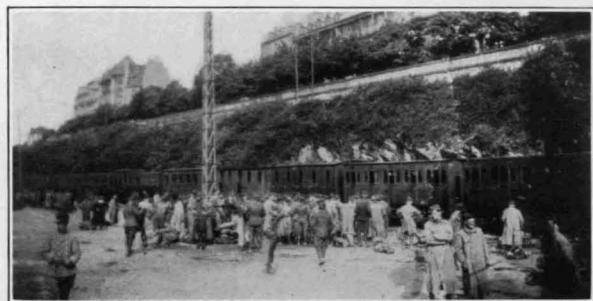
BASE HOSPITAL No. 38
HOSPITAL TRAIN
UNLOADING AT DOULON STATION
NANTES

BASE HOSPITAL No. 38
THE LAKE AND RUSTIC
BRIDGE, GRAND BLOTTEREAU



BASE HOSPITAL No. 38
OFFICERS' CAR

BASE HOSPITAL No. 38
INTERIOR OF TYPICAL
WARD



BASE HOSPITAL No. 38
ENTRAINING AT BREST

have been pleasing to contemplate safely on land.

The organization was fortunate in having the boat to the exclusion of all other voyagers; the men were allowed on deck most of the time. After entering the Gulf Stream the warmth of the water tempered the wind and the sea and sky both shone with a radiant blue; many good times were enjoyed on the sunny little aft deck of the "Nopatin." The Detachment did not loaf all the time, for there was much work to be done. The boat had to be kept spick and span; bunking spaces required scrubbing and "whitework" shone to the satisfaction of even the ferocious old "Exec." Besides that, Base 38 men stood watch as auxiliary submarine lookouts and supplied a deck guard posted to prevent any disheartened gastric gymnast from trying to end his military and naval career in the chilly Atlantic.

For days the Detachment was compelled to remain at the life rafts during the danger times of dawn and twilight. About 6 P. M. the husky boatswain suddenly appeared below decks blowing a blood-curdling whistle and shouting "Awrl hands on deck!" in a foreign voice; while the gong clanged out the signal for "abandon ship." Men then dropped the "spotted cubes" or their "Snappy Stories" and art needlework, and seized life belt, wallet, canteen, emergency ration and valuable personal effects, dashed wildly, 200 strong, up a companion ladder four feet wide, over benches, braces, ropes, stanchions and other hazards, to life-rafts where roll call

was taken to ascertain the total casualties. Then the cry "All present or accounted for!" or more often "All present but Cole!" The early morning "abandon ship" drill was less pleasant; the sea-going Gabriel woke the living, dead and dying, at 3 o'clock, in the pitch dark, and one never knew until he reached the deck whether it was a false alarm or the real thing. Men stood shivering by stations until the stars were blotted out by the radiance of dawn and the coming of daylight again brought a sense of safety to the convoy. The bugler sounded "recall" and sleepy heroes trooped back to bunks for another hour of sweet repose.

The dark moonless nights were full of thrilling mystery; the ships of the convoy plowed through the sea without a light showing; the phosphorescent foam outlined the black bows of the distant transports. Far ahead, against the stars, could be seen the squat bulk of the guardian cruiser, her basket masts barely visible against the pale ribbon of the far distant horizon. Occasionally a signal light on the cruiser would wink a few hurried messages to the convoy, then the ships would alter courses simultaneously or perhaps move with augmented speed. Up in the "crow's nest" the figures of the lookout were hazily discernible; watchful eyes were scanning the sea through powerful glasses. Below decks only a few shaded greenish-blue bulbs placed at long intervals guided us about the ship; they cast a ghastly light on the laden and ever swaying canvas

hammocks and on the upturned faces of sleeping men.

The "Nopatin" carried no adequate tankage of fresh water and had no condensers for its production; at fixed hours drinking water was doled out as more precious than gold. The water supplied for ablution had evidently seen service in the boilers; it was brick-red in color, had a pungent nasty smell, and was obviously unfit for steaming purposes. The little ship had no suitable refrigerators either, and the supply of fresh food began to age and go bad; fruits and vegetables went into decline; meat had to be thrown overboard in mid-ocean. The meals began to taper in quantity and quality until the ceremony of "lining up for mess" began to approach the status of a mere empty formality, like Guard mount or Muster. A hungry thirty-eighter with imagination voiced his protest by changing the name "Nopatin" over the ship's bulletin board, with his penknife, silently and unobserved; he transformed the "p" into "e." All were almost overcome with joy (and weakness) when the genius of the galley evolved a veritable banquet on the Fourth of July. Of that ambrosial repast a vision of baked ham, corn bread, fruit salad and apple pie, still lingers in memory's musty chambers; lives were saved but it was a narrow escape.

Men wandered about the ship and explored its mysteries, enjoying a freedom that those who sailed on the great crowded transports never knew. Being naturally inquisitive the Uniteers knew every inch of the ship in a

day or two. Cole was particularly struck by the life of a sailor; he wore a sailor's uniform, crowded the sea-soldiers, and answered more of the ship's calls than our own; in a week he was giving the Executive Officer little pointers on navigation. Krause, while prospecting, fell into a coal bunker, narrowly escaped being used for fuel, and was fished out in a slightly damaged condition. The "immortals" began to appear on deck, a bit limp, looking greenish-grey and weak (denying that they had ever been seasick) to help us look for periscopes or land; at times either would have been welcome.

And so the unit passed the time; reading, playing cards, singing, rumoring, smoking, policing and, half hopefully watching for a submarine to appear. On the morning of July 4th seven sleek destroyers came out from the east to meet us, making 12 destroyers in all that zigzagged back and forth in a hollow square to protect the ships of the convoy. Giving the "Nopatin" a final cleaning up, men rolled packs that day and made ready to disembark. But the foggy morning of Friday, July 5th, found us still at sea. About 10 A. M. the distant hum of an aeroplane exhaust brought all hands to deck. The machine circled over the convoy several times and then put back to the east. All the men remained on deck to catch the first sight of land which we now knew to be not far distant.

At last, far out on a gaunt bleak rock, a tall lighthouse loomed up in the fog off the port bow. Then, after an

interval, some west-bound vessels were passed, then more rocks, and finally the hazy outline of distant cliffs rose before us. None knew whether it was France or England until a little pilot boat appeared and we read on its sail the word "Brest." The cliffs came nearer and nearer, they seemed to float up to us, and became more definite in form, at last engulfing the convoy as it steamed up the exquisite land-locked harbor of this most western of the ports of France.

A captive balloon guarded the entrance to the harbor; a stately, glistening dirigible passed over the convoy. Our guardian cruiser had disappeared without saying good-bye and now the fleet of destroyers left us, the thin, trim little fighters making a pretty picture against the cliffs of the harbor, each vessel brilliantly camouflaged and at her stern "Old Glory" proudly snapped defiance in the breeze. Men cheered as the little hornets turned their noses westward into the swells of the broad Atlantic. The convoy proceeded up the estuary and did an "on the left into line" which brought us up facing the City of Brest. The reaction, after 13 days of tossing about on the ocean, was very pleasant. A band on the next transport played joyfully. Every sort of vessel was represented in that crowded harbor; little fishing craft with brown sails, barges, destroyers, a French submarine, a funny, clanking, old side-wheeler, launches, tugs and great colliers, with their strange rigging, looking like huge spiders; all were interested in our convoy.

Army and Navy officials came aboard the "Nopatin" and then left in spotless launches whose polished brasses glittered in the sunlight. The men of "38" bade farewell to their good friends the crew, and slinging packs, climbed down a precarious rope ladder to the deck of the lighter. The ropes were cast off and we said good-bye to the little "Nopatin" and turned our faces toward the shore and the next act of our great adventure.