1775 - PRESENT

Highlights:

- Army Nurses have provided care and comfort to sick and injured Soldiers from the Revolutionary War through the present.

- Army Nurses serve in war and peace, share the dangers of combat deployment, and provide expert medical care despite the primitive conditions they encounter.

- Although historically the majority of Army Nurses have been women, many men have served with distinction in the Army Nurse Corps.

- US Army Nurses are dedicated professionals who help set the standards for education and professionalism for Nurses around the world.

Army Nurses Corps: More Than 100 Years of Service to Our Nation

(United States, 1775-Present)
Since 1901, Army nurses have demonstrated again and again their total commitment to the highest standards of military nursing excellence. Both men and women have served as Army nurses since 1775, but the Army Nurse Corps did not become a part of the Army Medical Department until 1901. The distinguished contributions of female contract nurses during and following the 1898 Spanish-American War became the justification and demonstrated the need for a permanent female nurse corps.

When the United States entered World War I in 1917, there were only 4,093 nurses on active duty. By November 1918, there were 21,460 Army nurses, with 10,000 serving overseas. During the war, nurses served primarily in base, evacuation, and mobile surgical hospitals in the United States, France, Hawaii, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines. They also provided care on hospital trains in France and transport ships carrying wounded home across the Atlantic. Approximately 270 nurses lost their lives in the conflict.

At the outbreak of World War II, fewer than 7,000 nurses were on active duty. By 1945, more than 57,000 Army Nurses were assigned to hospital ships and trains, flying ambulances, field hospitals, evacuation stations, and general hospitals at home and overseas. In Europe, Army nurses assisted in developing the concept of recovery wards for immediate postoperative nursing care. Military nursing gained a greater understanding of the process of shock, blood replacement, and resuscitation. Air evacuation from the combat zone by fixed wing aircraft brought patients to definitive treatment quickly. Army flight nurses helped to establish the incredible record of only five deaths in flight per 100,000 patients.

During World War I, 18 African-American nurses joined the Army Nurse Corps but never served overseas due to the logistical problems of establishing separate quarters and work areas. They all left the Corps at the end of the war. Courtesy US Army Office of Medical History.
Nurses endured hardships caring for their patients. In May 1942, with the fall of Corregidor in the Philippines, 67 Army nurses became Japanese prisoners of war. During the thirty-seven month captivity, the women endured primitive conditions and starvation rations, yet they continued to care for the ill and injured in the internment hospital. On Anzio, nurses dug their foxholes outside their tents and cared for patients under German shellfire. Their example bolstered the spirits of the soldiers who shared the same tough experience. By war’s end, 215 brave nurses died for their country.

Army nurses once again played a major role in support of combat troops when President Truman ordered United States forces into Korea in June, 1950. Army nurses cared for combat troops during the landing on Inchon; the advance across the 38th parallel into North Korea; the amphibious landing on the east coast of Korea; the drive toward the Yalu River; and the retreat to the 38th parallel. Throughout the Korean War, 540 Army nurses served on the embattled peninsula.

Mobility and increased patient acuity characterized service in Vietnam. Evacuation by helicopter brought wounded to medical units located within minutes flying time of the battlefield. The UH-1H helicopter ambulance, nicknamed the “Dustoff,” not only transported patient from battle locations fifty percent faster than in Korea, but also provided triage and resuscitative services for casualties. Trauma care specialization, as well as shock/trauma units, developed from this experience. The “chain of evacuation” from Vietnam was extraordinary. A soldier could be wounded on the battlefield one day and two days later be in an Army hospital in the continental United States. In Vietnam, of the nearly 5,000 Army Nurses who served in forty-four hospitals, eight women made the ultimate sacrifice for their nation.

During Operation Desert Storm, approximately 2,200 nurses served in forty-four hospitals. Two of every three nurses in the Arabian Gulf were from the Army National Guard or Army Reserves. This was the first major conflict that DEPMEDS, Deployable Medical Systems, were used. Another unique feature was that Army hospital staff coexisted with host nation personnel in fixed facilities forming joint national professional organizations. Before, during, and after the 100-hour ground war, U.S. forces sustained a disease and non-battle injury rate that was the lowest ever recorded in a conflict.

“The Army nurse is the symbol to the soldier of help and relief in his hour of direst need. Through mud and mire, through the mark of campaign and battle, wherever the fight leads, she patiently - gallantly - seeks the wounded and distressed. Her comfort knows no parallel. In the heart of all fighting men, she is enshrined forever.”
- General Douglas MacArthur, Dec 1944

Miss Anna Mae Hays, Student Nurse, later Chief of the ANC and America’s 1st female General. Courtesy of US Army Office of Medical History.

Looking ready for anything, Army Nurses board a ship prior to the invasion of Normandy. Courtesy US Army Office of Medical History.

Army Nurses in Vietnam provide care to Vietnamese children as part of the Medical Civilian Action Program (MEDCAP). Courtesy US Army Office of Medical History.
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Recent years have seen Army nurses active throughout the world both in armed conflicts and humanitarian endeavors. In 1983, they supported combat troops in Grenada; in 1989 in Panama; and in 1991 in the Middle East. Since December 1995, Army nurses have been deployed with medical units in support of NATO alliance troops in Haiti, Bosnia, Herzegovina and Kosovo. Nurses have continued to serve proudly during relief efforts following natural disasters such as Hurricane Mitch in 1998. Today, the legacy of these military nurses lives on. Currently, Army nurses serve throughout the world in support of multiple military and humanitarian actions in support of the Global War On Terrorism.

Throughout its history, the Army Nurse Corps has earned the deep respect and gratitude of the American people because of its dedication to providing the best possible care to our soldiers and their families while serving our country in war and peace. Army nurses have unselfishly come to the aid of victims of disaster and disease throughout the world. Over time, the mission has grown broader, yet there has been one constant - the devotion of the individual nurse in providing excellent nursing care.

Today, as our soldiers stand on point for our nation, defending freedom across the globe, they can rest assured, should they get wounded or ill, an Army nurse will be by their side during their hour of need. Because any time our nation calls: READY, CARING, AND PROUD, Army nurses always respond.

Sources

Article Courtesy of the US Army Medical Department Office of Medical History: Army Nurse Corps Historical Collection documents summarized by MAJ Debora Cox, Past ANC Historian (1 August 2001).