

Army Nurses' Perspective of the War

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Image - "Lady Haliburton's Scrapbook Diary"

THE LADY HALLIBURTONS

It was 10:30 on the night of September 4, 1944, that we left La Guardia Field on our way overseas. Dressed in slacks and loaded down with pistol belts and canteens (mine being filled with coca-cola), musette bags crammed as full as possible, and numerous coats, bundles, boxes and radios, we felt no resemblance between ourselves and the trim, efficient-looking Army nurses as represented by the recruitment posters. The reason we were carrying such an assortment of bundles was obvious: our luggage was limited to 65 pounds, and we soon discovered that didn't include very much, but there were ways of getting around that, for what we ourselves carried wasn't included in the allotted weight. As soon as we found that out, we started filling our coat pockets with heavy cold cream jars and so on, and tucked surreptitiously away in a coat sleeve was a girdle, which after a bit, began to slip out a little! It was most unfortunate that where its owner was going, the proprieties of living did not call for girdles.

It was a surprise to most of us to learn that we were going to India, for the CBI theatre wasn't played up very much in the papers, and we had previously decided that surely we could go to the Southwest Pacific. All that we had heard about India had been told us by a returned nurse, who had lived a luxurious life in a big hotel in Karachi.....and our later experiences in no way paralleled hers.

Many of us had never been in a plane before, so it was a new and exciting experience to find ourselves strapped in our seats of the big C-54, looking down over the rapidly disappearing city. It seemed strange, after 15 months in a station hospital, to be really on the way, for, being a passionate reader of Richard Halliburton's books for years, I knew I'd never be satisfied spending my army career in one place. Ah, Richard, you cheated me. To you, all far-away places were glamorous, exotic, exciting.....you forgot to mention the heat and the mud, the squalor and the filth, the poverty and the destitution, the malaria and the dysentery.

After we flew over Boston we were over the ocean and there being nothing else to look at but the inky blackness below, in spite of the excitement of it all, the altitude was beginning to take effect, so we spread our blankets on the floor, and packed like sardines, we were soon sound asleep. Before daylight we were in Stevensville, Newfoundland. After a big breakfast of hot coffee and fried eggs (our last for a long time), we were in our plane again, and left at 6 A.M., on the part of the journey which would make us full-fledged "short-snorters". When we awoke we could look down and see the white clouds, with here and there a patch of the bright blue of the Atlantic. We spent the time playing rummy, and almost before we knew it we were in the Azores, along the shores of which we saw the bluest water we had ever seen.

We were not permitted to leave the airport, since there was an epidemic of bubonic plague among the islanders. Here we saw Ann Sheridan on her way home from a U.S.O. tour, and looking at our own disheveled hair and unpressed slacks, we were gratified to learn that even the glamorous Ann looked weather-beaten after riding in bucket seats. After a three hour hold-over while our plane was being overhauled and refilled, we again took off for the last lap of our journey across the Atlantic.

Casablanca! City about which we'd heard so much.....city of glamour, excitement and intrigue! It didn't take us long to learn that the movies had made the city something that it never was, nor, I'm quite sure, ever would be. A most appalling odor overcame us as the big door of the plane swung open and we stepped out....an odor which was everpresent throughout the city. But 4 A.M. was no time to dwell on such morbid thoughts, for we had other things to do: a briefing on malaria control, immunization papers checked, our baggage looked after, and our money changed into francs. We were warned about the black market in American money, and for that reason we had to have all our money converted. All during our stay we were repeatedly offered \$20 invasion bills for one good American dollar. Most of the offers were made by children.....they were less easily detected by the authorities, and could make a fast getaway if necessary.

It was 6:30 when we arrived at the Atlantic hotel, after a bus ride from the airport. Here and there we caught a glimpse of a white-robed Arab, but we weren't interested in seeing the sights when a shower and bed awaited us. We registered at the hotel, ascended the cage-like elevator which held only two passengers, holding our breath while hoping that it really would get as far as the third floor.

We awoke early in the afternoon, and decided to see what the city had to offer, so we went on a tour through the "Old Medina"---the oldest part of the city, and out of bounds, except on conducted tours. The squalor and the filth would be difficult to describe; to us innocent Americans, it was absolutely inconceivable. From here we went to the beautifully built government house, with marble floors, mahogany furnishings, and a huge patio. Built at a considerable expense to the citizens, it seemed incongruous in a city which needed sewers much worse. We were sorry that we couldn't see the Sultan's palace where President Roosevelt had stayed, but we were all too soon alerted, and couldn't leave the hotel. There were few places in Casablanca in which it was safe to eat, but we were billeted at a restaurant called the "Roi de la Bierre" (King of the beer)... our most vivid recollection here was the napkins: folded neatly beside the fork were tiny pieces of toilet paper!

At 8 P.M. on the following day we again boarded a plane.... a C-47 this time....and headed toward Cairo, stopping at Tripoli only long enough to refuel. It was nearly noon when we became acutely aware of intense heat, and looking downward, set among a vast ocean of sand, we saw the Sphynx and countless pyramids, and the sluggish Nile river. This was Cairo....that mecca of war correspondents; that lovely place we'd heard so much about by returning nurses (even more lovely because we could get ice-cold cokes), we really must see it, so after dinner we found a bus and rode to the city. It was a fairly modern city, with neatly-built homes, street-cars and automobiles in the streets, and fairly clean. We first went to Sheppard's hotel....and sure enough, sitting at a table on the verandah were two correspondents..... my faith was restored, Cairo was

living up to expectations. Time was too short to permit much sight-seeing so we returned to camp, spent the night at the hospital in a recently vacated venereal disease ward, and were awakened in the wee small hours of the morning.

We flew over the Suez Canal, but it was so early that the clouds obliterated our view completely. Then, while everyone else was asleep, I went up in the cockpit to get a good view. We flew over Jerusalem, over the Dead Sea, and far in the distance we could see Bethlehem. We saw the Jordan and the Tigris and Euphrates rivers; this....the cradle of civilization...was a rocky and barren-looking land.....and, to me, used to the lushness and overabundance of the Middle West, it seemed almost incredible that civilization had lasted so long here. We circled around Bagdad, with its many domes, and arrived in Abadan, Iran, at the head of the Persian Gulf. It was extremely hot here, and we were more than glad to resume our traveling.

At 11:30 on the night of September 9 we landed at Karachi, and had our first view of India. We were here over two weeks, waiting for our orders to come through, so we spent the time playing tennis, swimming in the ocean, and sight-seeing and shopping in the city. We exchanged stories of our experiences on the way over; the best one, we decided, was the story of how one plane caught on fire while one of the girls was in the cubby-hole of a latrine, so one of the officers went back amid the smoke to bring her out. While he pushed against the door, she pushed just as hard from the other side, and it was quite a struggle before she realized what was happening, coming out with her face about the same color as her flaming red hair.

We were told that we were going to the 20th General Hospital, "somewhere along the Ledo Road", and the tales we were told were enough to frighten even the strong-hearted. We were almost expecting to be living in leaky tents, sleeping on canvas cots, with a cobra under every bed. However, we were glad

to leave Karachi, so on the morning of September 22, we left at 4:30 A.M. and arrived at Agra in time for breakfast. We saw the Taj Mahal... the pilot obligingly circled low around it twice....and, in front, was the pool that Richard Halliburton had swum in in the moonlight.

My most vivid recollection of the entire trip occurred in Chabua, the next stop. As was our usual method of procedure, we facetiously asked for the "Powder room". The officer in charge apologetically informed us that, unfortunately, they had no ladies' room, but they had a lovely brand-new latrine, so he would have someone stand guard. From the way he talked we were expecting something extra-special, so we gingerly picked our way across the mud-puddles to visit the noble structure. Our shock could not have been measured in mere words....it took us five minutes to get our jaws back in place....for there, in the "nice, new" latrine, were merely four holes in the ground. We were more than ready to take the next plane back home.

It was pouring rain when we arrived at Ledo, and after hearing some more gruesome tales about this part of the world, we were packed in ambulances and taken to the 20th General. Life is always full of surprises, and not always pleasant one....and here we were supposedly glamorous Army nurses (it said so in the recruitment posters!) with the glamour slightly dampened by what appeared to be a cloudburst. We waded through mud ankle-deep, in our "Little Abner" shoes that we didn't think we would ever wear when they were issued us, and went to supper.....cold string beans and Spam. This was too much.....this was more than we bargained for....and as we settled down in our beds for the night....we were so tired that it wouldn't have mattered if they were comfortable or not.....it was with a prayer in our hearts that the wise were really right, and that tomorrow really would be another day.