The Army Nurse Corps

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Historical Background

When the United States entered the war in Europe in April 1917, almost three years after it began, the Army Medical Department was better prepared for war than ever before, but its preparation fell short of the demands that lay ahead. Initially, the department was unable to answer the call for medical assistance from Britain, a nation that had been at war since 1914.

The War Department had begun a reorganization of the Army's Medical Department on February 2, 1901, that included the creation of an Army Nurse Corps of trained female nurses, responsible for the care of sick and wounded soldiers. This action freed the enlisted men of the Hospital Corps to fill positions in field medical units and hospitals as well as in infantry and cavalry regiments, thus improving the quality and efficiency of military medical care.

Jane Delano, who had first become involved with the Red Cross as a volunteer nurse during the Spanish-American War, was appointed the second Superintendent of the Army Nurse Corps in 1909. She was also named chairman of the National Committee on Red Cross Nursing Service that same year. Delano began developing the Red Cross Nursing Service and recruited a growing list of volunteers who could later enroll as either an Army or Red Cross nurse. In 1912 she resigned her position as Superintendent to focus solely on the Red Cross, a move that strengthened the affiliation between the Nurse Corps and the American Red Cross.

Despite the continued growth of the Medical Department, no regular Army hospital units were yet ready for departure at the outbreak of World War I. However, a number of 500-bed Red Cross Army Base Hospital units were trained and ready for service. Six of these units (Base Hospital Nos. 2, 4, 5, 10, 12, and 21) were ordered to France in May 1917 to support the British Expeditionary Force.

Chief Nurses

"Chief nurses were not to be appointed as such, but were to be selected by promotion from the grade of nurse. A chief nurse invariably was to be assigned to duty when two or more nurses were serving at the same station. On the other hand a chief nurse was not to be assigned to duty permanently, except by the Surgeon General, upon the recommendation of the superintendent of the Army Nurse Corps. Nor was a nurse to be assigned permanently to duty as chief nurse until after she had passed a satisfactory examination.

"Nurses who exhibited marked executive ability, good judgment, and tact were to be recommended to the Surgeon General by the commanding officer of a hospital or other Medical Department formation with which they were on duty for examination for promotion to the grade of chief nurse." (*The Medical Department of the US Army in the World War [hereafter, The Medical Dept in the World War], Vol. XIII, p. 288*)

"[W]ith the rapid opening of new camps and cantonments in 1917, and the assignment of nurses to the hospitals there, a great many chief nurses had to be appointed. In so far as it was possible to do so, candidates for chief nurseship were selected from women already in the corps, but during the earlier months of the war such a source of supply could not begin to meet the demand. Fortunately, hundreds of leaders in the nursing profession in civil life eagerly responded to the summons and entered the Army Nurse corps either directly or through the American Red Cross nursing service." (*The Medical Dept in the World War, Vol. XII, p. 295*)

"When the Great War ended, Jane Delano, the stalwart of the Red Cross, could look back on her almost superhuman efforts, which included the registration of 18,989 graduate nurses for Army, Navy, and Red Cross service during the war." (GAVIN, P. 62)

In 1914, Dora E. Thompson distinguished herself as the first regular Army nurse to become the Superintendent of the Army Nurse Corps, and the first Superintendent to lead the Corps during a war. She was also the first Superintendent to lead Army nurses under the organization's new title, Army Nurse Corps (ANC). Thompson entered the Army one year after the Nurse Corps was authorized by an act of Congress on February 2, 1901. The Corps she joined had only 100 nurses when it began, and no provision for awarding military rank to Army nurses existed at that time.

Thompson once told an audience that the creation of the Nurse Corps had been a "rather up hill battle" and that they received much opposition, as many people thought women were not suited for work in Army hospitals. Moreover, they believed female nurses would be more of a burden than a help.

Under her leadership, the ANC grew from less than 400 to 21,480 nurses serving in the United States, Europe, and the Philippines. She received the Distinguished Service Medal in November 1919. In December, 1919, Thompson resigned as Superintendent of the ANC, a post that Julia C. Stimson then assumed. Thompson died at age 77 in 1954 and was buried at Arlington National Cemetery. *(Pocklington, pp. 25–29)*

(Opposite and Right)
Dora E. Thompson
(1876–1954)

Julia C. Stimson (1881–1948) received her bachelor's degree from Vassar College in 1901. While considering the study of medicine, she completed graduate work in biology and medical drawing at Columbia University. She entered nurse training at New York Hospital in 1904. After graduating in 1908, Stimson served as superintendent of nurses at the newly-opened Harlem Hospital until 1911.

During World War I, Stimson sailed for Europe as chief nurse of the Red Cross Army Unit from Washington University, St. Louis, which became known as Base Hospital No. 21. She served in this post until April 1918, when she left to become head of the Red Cross Nursing Service in France and later Superintendent of the Army Nurse Corps (a title that changed to "Chief" during her tenure) in December 1919. She stayed in that position until 1937.

Julia Stimson was awarded the Distinguished Service Medal for her service in France. In 1920 she became the first woman to achieve the rank of major in the U.S. Army.

> "We have had less than a week's notice to get ready for mobilization for service in France, and so it has been a rushing week. . . . Of course this order for foreign service is playing havoc with the personnel of the Unit, so few expected to be called for duty abroad. In fact, no one expected a call of this sort at all. I have been quite disgusted with the quitters who, for one reason or another, have begged to be excused. I have had about ten drop out, but I am finding substitutes who I think will be much more desirable than such weak-kneed individuals. I am to have a detachment of Kansas City nurses attached to my corps. . . . Two whose names I submitted I have had to drop by orders from Washington because they were born in Germany." *(May 4, 1917, Stimson, Finding Themselves)*

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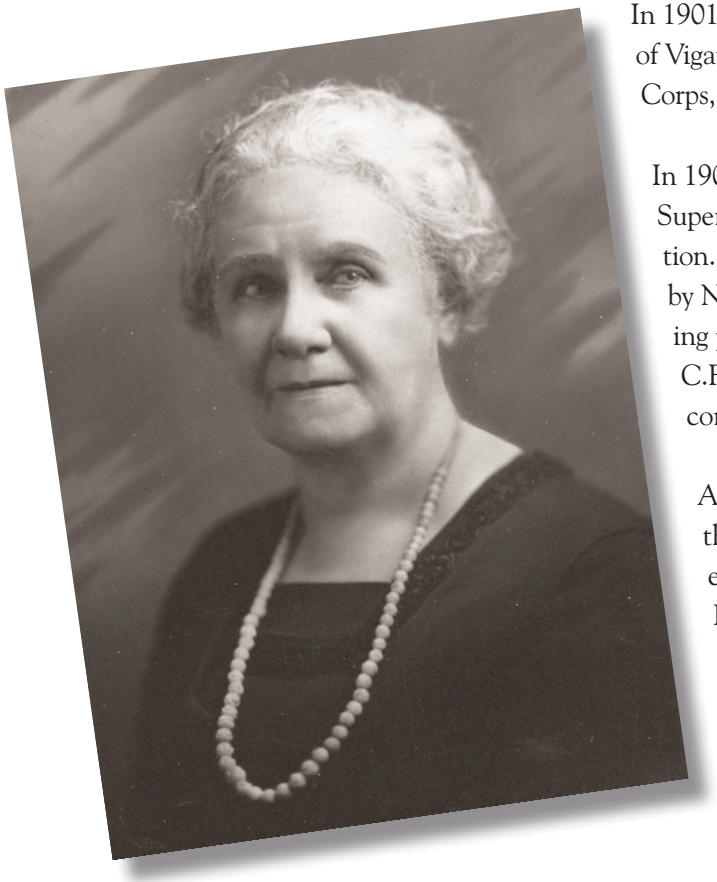
(Opposite) *"Miss Taylor and I are in our cozy office waiting for the time for the evening report. . . . We have both been to first supper and will now rest ourselves a little for this half hour. I wish you all could see how nice our office is. We have the tiniest coal stove that ever existed, and yet it is just the right size for this place. We have been having a fire in it for the past few days, for it has been very cold and raining almost every day."* (October 14, 1917, Stimson, Finding Themselves)

(Above) *Julia Stimson in officer formation.*

Esther Voorhes Hasson was born in Baltimore, Maryland, on September 20, 1867. She was well educated and came from a family dedicated to military service: her father served as a surgeon during the Civil War and her brother graduated from the U.S. Naval Academy at Annapolis.

The Spanish-American War, which predated the establishment of the Army Nurse Corps by three years, required contract nurses to serve in the absence of an established military nurse corps. Hasson supported the war as one of six contract nurses who sailed on the maiden voyage of the Army hospital ship *Relief* in July 1898.



In 1901 she served in the Philippines at the Army hospital in the historic town of Vigan. Hasson was also one of the founding members of the Army Nurse Corps, but the length of her tenure in the Corps is unknown.

In 1908 the Navy Nurse Corps was founded and quickly received a suitable Superintendent. Hasson was one of three women who applied for the position. She was selected and appointed on August 18, 1908, at the age of 41, by Navy Surgeon General Admiral P.M. Rixey. In 1910 Hasson began having personal disagreements with the new Navy Surgeon General, Admiral C.F. Stokes, and by 1911 she could no longer tolerate the vitriolic working conditions and resigned.

After leaving the Navy, Hasson reentered the Army Nurse Corps through the reserves. She was activated when the United States entered World War I and assigned to Base Hospital No. 12, then Army Red Cross Hospital No. 1 and Provisional Base Hospital No. 1. She was awarded the French *Medal d'Honneur des Epidemics* for her performance in the war. Hasson died in Washington, D.C., on March 8, 1942. *(Photograph courtesy of Navy Bureau of Medicine and Surgery Archives)*

Chief Nurse Vashti Bartlett (1873–1969) was a 1906 graduate of Johns Hopkins University. Her nursing career included service in Labrador, Newfoundland, Siberia, and Haiti, but from March 1915 to January 1916, she served with the American Red Cross in France and Belgium. From March 1917 to August 13, 1918, Bartlett served as Clara Noyes' assistant in the Department of Nursing, Bureau of Field Nursing Service, at Red Cross Headquarters in Washington, D.C. Then, in August 1918, she returned to France to serve with the ANC as Chief Nurse of Base Hospital No. 71 until April 1919.