

# **A Contemporary History of the U.S. Army Nurse Corps**



# **A Contemporary History of the U.S. Army Nurse Corps**

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*To the long line of Army nurses, serving yesterday, today,  
and tomorrow, heroines and heroes all.*

*Luck is what happens when preparation meets opportunity.*

Seneca  
Roman dramatist, philosopher, and politician  
5 BC - 65 AD

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# Foreword

The U.S. Army Nurse Corps has a long and extraordinary history. Mary T. Sarnecky's recounting of our history in her 1999 volume, *A History of the U.S. Army Nurse Corps*, was superb. Now, we are delighted to release her exciting next analysis documenting the Army Nurse Corps history from the end of the Vietnam War to the year 2000.

Here Sarnecky addresses a remarkable episode in the organization's evolution, a period characterized by a series of progressive steps empowering our officers to assume key command and leadership positions in the Army Medical Department. Once this momentum was established, it challenged the limitations of the proverbial "glass ceiling" so prevalent during this period.

Sarnecky's new publication also explores the vital roles of the Army Nurse Corps in supporting and sustaining high-level military operations that began with Operation Desert Storm. Professionalism, clinical competency, adaptability, and flexibility remain the hallmark of the Army Nurse Corps, clearly illustrated in this long-awaited volume. In tandem with her previous work, Sarnecky offers us a wealth of scholarly research narrated in her unique, straightforward style imparting a rich institutional history of which all professional nurses should be exceptionally proud.

It is imperative that we review the "lessons learned" from this period in our nursing history and utilize the experiences, knowledge, and leadership of these extremely talented and dedicated professional nurses. The foundation that previous Army nursing leaders had built allowed this new period to be fruitful and exciting. I am confident that because of these nursing leaders, professional nursing will continue to flourish in America and around the world.

GALE S. POLLOCK  
Major General (Ret), CRNA, FACHE, FAAN  
22nd Chief, U.S. Army Nurse Corps



## Preface

This book focuses on an organization, the U.S. Army Nurse Corps, which I have been privileged to be affiliated with—in one way or another—for the greatest part of my adult life. As an active duty officer, I had first-hand knowledge about the Army Nurse Corps inner workings and spent the last years of my Army career (from 1992) researching and writing the Corps history. In 1998 I completed the first volume of the history, subsequently published by the University of Pennsylvania Press in 1999. Several years after my 1996 retirement from active service, I agreed to extend the written history of the Corps beyond the conclusion of volume one. This insider/outsider perspective, albeit with a heavier emphasis on the internal point of view, gave me a unique advantage in tackling a historical examination of the organization's recent past. The resultant volume two focuses on the time frame from the early 1970s to the turn of the 21st century.

My objectives in publishing this history remain unchanged from those articulated in the preface of volume one. The passage of time has not altered their essence. Ten years ago I wrote:

The intent of this volume is to outline the historical framework of [the] seemingly perpetual issues related to nursing, particularly in the Army of the United States of America. It describes how those who have gone before have faced and occasionally resolved familiar challenges. Hopefully, this story will enrich the U.S. Army Nurse Corps sense of pride, identity, and continuity while highlighting threads common to the fabric of Army nursing across the ages. This work also aspires to offer affirmation and encouragement to those who have experienced comparable dilemmas in the past and those who presently face similar concerns. Additionally, the book functions as a resource for those negotiating the minefields of today and offers a historical background for those responsible for future decisions and actions. Finally, the history of the Army Nurse Corps should remind us of the importance of the past, which has determined the present and will continue to affect the future. In summary, this work documents the history of the Army Nurse Corps while simultaneously providing a wealth of pragmatic information.<sup>1</sup>

Another goal in researching and writing this history was to intrigue and provide a sense of gratification for the reader. It certainly has fulfilled this promise for me. I have found the exploits of Army nurses endlessly amazing, fascinating,

poignant, and personally rewarding. It is my wish that all who read this book be similarly captivated and entertained!

However, this volume is not intended to stand in place as an apologia for war. Some civilians—be they nurses or not—erroneously equate service as an Army nurse with advocacy for war. In truth, very few if any Army nurses have ever espoused the resolution of political differences through the means of combat. Instead, their higher aspirations have been to provide care to the sick or injured soldiers serving on the battlefield. No one who has witnessed the carnage of war can reasonably champion it.

At the time I began this work in 2000, I had significant misgivings in accepting what seemed both an honor and an extreme challenge, particularly the problematic issues associated with the practice of contemporary historical research.

I realized that recent history frequently represents fodder for revisionist historians in the days to come. Occupying the center of the bull's eye comes with the territory for a historian working on current issues without the perspective of time over the long term. Yet the act of blazing a new trail can yield constructive outcomes. It can also provide tomorrow's historians with a starting point and a foundation upon which forthcoming scholarship is based. It is my hope that this volume will also serve that function.

Another limitation to the practice of contemporary history that impacted the conduct of this study was mysteriously missing data. Like Voltaire's Pangloss, I optimistically believed that for some good cause (my research), there surely would be masses of valid and reliable evidence easily accessible to analyze and serve as the basis for this investigation. How erroneous that assumption proved to be! Although the Army has abundant regulations governing the storage and retirement of records, often the grassroots imperative to follow these directives yields to other higher priorities. I believe many of the never discovered records I could have utilized were either destroyed or are residing in dusty bottom file drawers in the back of remote offices. Then too, it has been my experience in the instances when records were properly retired to the National Archives and Records Administration, they typically languished there and remained inaccessible for decades, waiting in the queue to be "processed." Although there was a fairly broad sampling of available documentary evidence preserved in the Army Nurse Corps collection in the Army Office of Medical History in the Skyline complex in Falls Church, Virginia, I vigorously searched in vain for more specific answers to questions that arose from the available evidence. Fortunately, most of the lacunae in the recorded data were filled when I interviewed the actual participants—the key players who still live, are coherent, and are willing to tell their tales. Nonetheless, in the final analysis, the evidence I was able to gather and use sufficed, although it remains a mere glimpse in time and space.

As I advanced in this endeavor, a final drawback to researching contemporary history emerged. That handicap had to do with the limited hindsight that a researcher possesses while working in the abbreviated temporal period that separates the issues and occurrences being examined and the actual writing of a history. I fully expect that with the greater perspective of time, future historians will have much more to say about this exciting period as an ever expanding and dynamic pool of evidence emerges. I eagerly anticipate and welcome their forthcoming scholarship.

As with my previous volume, I regret that I could not study in any great depth and accurately include each and every example of patriotic service, heroism, dedication, leadership, readiness, and creative practice that dominated the Army Nurse Corps landscape. Neither could I include every instance of impropriety and each unfortunate misstep, dubious decision, or embarrassing controversy that transpired. However, I made every attempt to balance the predominant acts of diligent, morally upright service against the less frequent occurrences that reflected poorly on the Corps. The constraints of time, the limitations of other resources, and the hindrances of unavailable data have all left their mark on this book and rendered it something less than all-inclusive. I regret that reality.

I am the sole author of this book and I alone assume all responsibility for any inadvertent yet inevitable error that exists in these pages. Although I doubt anyone—myself included—has knowingly propagated any falsehood or misrepresentation, many have shared information as well as encouragement and sustenance.

I received considerable assistance along the way from a host of colleagues whose benevolent influence and support extend back in time. Retrospective to the mid-1980s, the then chief of the Army Nurse Corps, Brigadier General Connie L. Slewitzke, perceived the need to educate a nurse historian at the doctoral level to research and document the heritage of the Army Nurse Corps. Although it remains an arguable point whether I was the right person for the job, the school selection board did entrust me with that undertaking. Subsequently, when I was consumed with doctoral education from 1987 to 1990, Dr. Irene S. Palmer, another staunch advocate, graciously took me under her wing and over those three arduous years produced a fledgling nurse historian. After my education at the University of San Diego was complete, Brigadier General Nancy R. Adams and Colonel Terris E. Kennedy took the risk of freeing me of most of my earlier responsibilities and provided me with the wherewithal to concentrate exclusively on historical research in 1992. Their confidence in my ability was echoed by the chief nurses of Walter Reed Army Medical Center at that time, Colonels Mary L. Messerschmidt and Janet R. Southby and by the chiefs of the Nursing Research Service at Walter Reed, Colonels Valerie E. Biskey, Jean M. Reeder, and Cynthia A. Gurney. They

all tolerated my altered focus and my presence, not at Walter Reed, but at the Department of Medical History at the Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences in Bethesda, Maryland. Essentially they allowed me to occupy one of their valuable personnel slots in absentia. When detailed to the university for over four years, I spent my days in a tranquil little office off the third floor of the school library where I was surrounded by a superlative collection of military medical history tomes. There I researched and wrote under the aegis of two consummate mentors, Colonel (Dr.) Robert J.T. Joy and Dr. Dale C. Smith. Just prior to and after my retirement in 1996, Brigadier General Bettye J. Simmons and her assistant, Colonel Susan C. McCall, also added their sponsorship to my efforts and arranged a contract to put the finishing touches on volume one.

Throughout the years that I have been engaged in studying the history of the Army Nurse Corps, I have enjoyed extraordinarily close and fruitful associations with a number of keen, enthusiastic Army Nurse Corps historians including Majors Cynthia A. Gurney and Winona M. Bice-Stephens, Lieutenant Colonels Patricia Wise, Iris J. West, and Cheryl Capers, and Majors Constance J. Moore, Debora R. Cox, Jennifer L. Petersen, Charlotte W. Scott, and Richard M. Prior. To this day, simply evoking the rapport we shared and their many acts of kindness gladdens my heart.

I began work on volume two in 2000 at the behest of Dr. John T. Greenwood and Colonel William T. (Tom) Gray of the Army Surgeon General's Office of Medical History. They continued to serve as benefactors as my efforts progressed. During that same period I also enjoyed the patronage of Brigadier General William T. Bester and Major General Gale S. Pollock and their respective assistant/deputy chiefs of the Corps, Colonels Deborah A. Gutske and Barbara Bruno.

As I began this manuscript, slowly advanced paragraph by paragraph, and brought the volume to its conclusion, many Army Nurse Corps officers played crucial roles, disclosing a diversity of facts that upon occasion corroborated existing documents and in other instances represented new information. Without exception, these contributors responded to my questions in good cheer and with extraordinary candor. Because there were so many of these individuals who generously revealed their insights, it is impossible to provide a litany of all their names here. However, their voices will resonate forever from the leaves of this book.

A collection of other individuals also facilitated this enterprise and contributed to the in-process and the final reviews. They included Major General Nancy R. Adams, Brigadier General Clara L. Adams-Ender, Brigadier General William T. Bester, Dr. Carol Byerly, Lieutenant Colonel Debora R. Cox, Dr. Edward Drea, Colonel Eily P. Gorman, Dr. John T. Greenwood, Colonel John M. Hudock, Colonel (Dr.) Bonnie M. Jennings, Colonel (Dr.) Robert J.T. Joy, Colonel (Dr.)

Terris E. Kennedy, Colonel Constance J. Moore, Dr. Sanders Marble, Colonel Susan C. McCall, Colonel Nickey McCasland, Dr. Elizabeth M. Norman, Major Jennifer L. Petersen, Major General Gale S. Pollock, Brigadier General Bettye J. Simmons, Brigadier General Connie L. Slewitzke, Dr. Dale C. Smith, Mrs. Lisa Wagner, and Colonel Iris J. West. Their very important critiques, suggestions, and commentaries all improved the accuracy of the manuscript and enhanced the overall quality of the finished product.

Others assisted in sundry other ways. Over the years, Office of Medical History archivist Lisa Wagner and her assistant, William Edmondson, also helped me to navigate various archives and locate elusive documents and photographs to illustrate this text. Annita Ferencz, the Office of Medical History's director of operations, provided much appreciated administrative support as well. Reference librarian, Emily Court, and technical information specialist, Yevetta White, of the Armed Forces Medical Library performed virtual miracles on my behalf—unearthing articles, scanning them, and forwarding them to me electronically within minutes. Marcia A. Metzgar, the volume editor, and Colonel (Dr.) Martha K. Lenhart, the director of the Borden Institute at Walter Reed, also played essential roles in the publication of this work. I owe an enormous debt of gratitude to each and every one of these various supportive allies!

Finally, I especially express my deep appreciation to my family whose advice, abettance, and affection are constant companions. I happily acknowledge my parents, the late William and Leona Weber, whose love and encouragement have sustained me all the days of my life. Requiescant in pace! Lastly, I am greatly obliged to my husband and three sons for their inspiration and sympathetic understanding. Throughout this lengthy process, they patiently listened to my thoughts, time and again ventured their opinions, and good-naturedly put up with one ordeal after another. Mere words cannot express my thanks to all four—George, Joe, Jim, and Bill!

Mary T. Sarnecky  
San Diego, California  
Autumn 2008

