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# The 56<sup>th</sup> Evac Hospital

## Letters of a WWII Army Doctor

Lawrence D. Collins, M.D.

Introduction by Carlo W. D'Este

War and the Southwest Series  
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Photo on previous page: Sign for the 56th Evac Hospital. This and other photos, unless otherwise noted, are taken from *The Story of the 56th Evac*, ed. B.A. Merrick, printed around 1945, copy in the Texas Collection of Baylor University, Waco, Texas.

## War and the Southwest Series

The University of North Texas Press has undertaken to publish a series of significant books about War and the Southwest. This broad category includes first-hand accounts of military experiences by men and women of the Southwest, histories of warfare involving the people of the Southwest, and analyses of military life in the Southwest itself. The Southwest is defined loosely as those states of the United States west of the Mississippi River and south of a line from San Francisco to St. Louis as well as the borderlands straddling the Mexico-United States boundary. The series will include works involving military life in peacetime in addition to books on warfare itself. It will range chronologically from the first contact between indigenous tribes and Europeans to the present. The series is based on the belief that warfare is an important if unfortunate fact of life in human history and that understanding war is a requirement for a full understanding of the American past.

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## Preface

This odyssey is a transcript of selected letters saved by the wife of a young doctor serving in World War II for thirty-two months in an affiliated army hospital unit overseas. The affiliation was with Baylor Medical College in Dallas, Texas.

Prior to Pearl Harbor Day, the surgeon general of the United States Army had approached the nation's major medical colleges with a request that they organize medical staffs for army hospital units. These staffs would be made up chiefly from their own roster, ready for mobilization as a unit whenever called. The army could provide administrative and enlisted personnel very quickly for such a nuclei of physicians, so the idea was a good one. Ours was such a unit.

On March 17, 1942, the Baylor Unit was ordered to active duty. Its medical officers and nurses reported to Fort Sam Houston, Texas, near San Antonio where its ranks were filled up. The Commanding Officer assigned to our unit had served twenty-odd years in the regular army and was convinced that a medical officer was qualified to serve in any capacity that conditions might require. He was prone to shift junior medical officers from one major service to the other from time to time medicine to surgery and vice versa to the general confusion of all concerned. In fairness to him, however, the reader should bear in mind that all any army requires of commanding

officers is that their units function. The Baylor Unit did so in an exemplary manner. Years after this was written, the author learned from his former executive officer that theirs was the most highly decorated medical unit in the U.S. Army in World War II.

None of the letters refer to events between the unit's activation in March and its arrival a year later at Camp Shanks, New York, on April 3, 1943. The truth is that with the exception of three months on Louisiana maneuvers, the doctors and nurses had been practically idle for a year. The letters from overseas confirm my growing anxiety as a junior officer over frequent shifts from surgery to medicine and back to surgery. I had no desire to do surgery in civilian practice, and was ill-fitted for unsupervised surgery. After receiving our first casualties following an air raid in Bizerte, it seemed obvious that during times of stress we would have to break down our three-man surgical teams into single doctors assisted by a nurse. I dreaded the inevitable day and welcomed every opportunity to acquire any degree of surgical skill possible.

My own gripes were frequently judgmental and were particularly negative at times regarding my superiors. Please bear in mind that I usually held them in high esteem. But war is a miserable thing most of the time, and acutely so some of the time. War is too impersonal to blame for one's misery, and one's superiors who are right at hand catch the blame. This is probably a ventilatory mechanism to relieve the misery.

All letters mailed from overseas had to be censored by an officer. This tended to result in terse communications for we certainly did not want to tell anything we weren't supposed to. We had been told not to reveal our locations immediately after a move and never to reveal troop units in our sections at any time.

Thus, while short letters may not tell anything but the truth, they should always be viewed with some skepticism, since they did not tell the whole truth. Also, when the letter writer was in obvious personal danger, his letters might deny the fact in order to reassure home folks. Such denials were frequent in my own letters from Anzio. Associated Press releases had divulged our location and described our plight within a few days of our landing on the beachhead. The letters written between January 27, 1944, and April 9 do certainly demonstrate the denials when compared with the summary I wrote on April 15.

As to the importance of censoring, the commanders of German wolf packs (submarines) had nearly won the war of the Atlantic prior to March, 1943, from information leaked through the mail of soldiers and

by longshoremen on the New York docks. German U-boats were taking a toll of Allied shipping that threatened the outcome of the war. The commanders knew the whereabouts and departure dates of almost every convoy out of New York. The source of their information had to be stopped at all costs. In March, the U.S. Secret Service decoded the German communication code known as "Enigma." Also in March, according to Sister Pascalina of the Vatican, a meeting between President Roosevelt and the head of the Mafia in New York was arranged by Cardinal Spellman. Sister Pascalina claimed a deal was made for the Allies not to bomb Rome in exchange for the Mafia's stopping leaks of information on the convoys.

Landing at Casablanca, some of us were greeted by our unit members who had crossed on a fast steamship, beating us by a couple of weeks. Two unusual experiences awaited us. The first was doing MP duty on the streets of Casablanca. Exuberant paratroopers had just returned to Casablanca after surviving the battles of Kasserine Pass and Mateur. They were whooping it up, and our assignments were to patrol until we each made ten arrests per day for misconduct of any sort, including such minor infringements as an unbuttoned pocket flap on a shirt.

The other experience was our learning to drive the 2 1/2-ton trucks we rode into Bizerte, Tunisia. The Atlantic base section (in addition to having a louse of a commanding general) had an assembly plant that was putting together the fleet of trucks needed to transport our unit's equipment and personnel. They had about finished the assembling but did not have the drivers equal to the task. Our CO rose to the occasion by ordering all officers below the rank of lieutenant colonel to learn to drive those trucks. Some enlisted men were also taught, thus providing some two hundred drivers. After we'd had a week's training, we got the convoy of trucks and were loaded and off in short order. Our route was over the Atlas Mountains and on to Bizerte, Tunisia, a thirteen hundred mile trip.

Sadly but clearly, the letters do reveal a progressive ennui as the months turned into years. Optimism did yield to pessimism, and idealism did yield to cynicism. It is a bit hard for me to accept that we who disembarked wet cheeked at Casablanca would cast dice for tokens of a grateful nation's appreciation just thirty months later, but we did. So be it. It was a war and General Sherman had a word for war, but every schoolboy knows about that.

LAWRENCE D. COLLINS>



## Introduction

The historiography of the Second World War is rich in first-hand accounts of its participants. Very few, however, depict war from the perspective of those whose task it was to treat the sick and wounded, and to save lives.

The dedicated men and women who staffed the evacuation hospitals were a key link in the medical chain. The seriously wounded who survived the first step of life-saving treatment by a medical corpsman at the front or at a nearby aid station were immediately transported to the rear area, where the U.S. Army field and evacuation hospitals were established to treat as many as 1000 patients per day.

From the time the first histories of the war began appearing in the 1950s and beyond, the Mediterranean Theater of Operations has never received the attention of historians that has been focused on the European Theater of Operations. The ETO began with what is arguably the best known military operation in military history, D-Day, June 6, 1944, when Allied forces invaded Normandy in the first important step in the liberation of France and the eventual defeat of Nazi Germany. Operation Market-Garden, the dramatic and costly Allied airborne operation to seize the Rhine bridges at Arnhem, and the Battle of the Bulge were all events which have attained an aura of mystique. Only in recent years has the Mediterranean begun to receive the historical attention it deserves.

By comparison, there was little in the bloody but otherwise undistinguished battles and campaigns in the Mediterranean to compare with those in the ETO. Yet, the war in the Mediterranean was the longest series of battles and campaigns fought by the Anglo-American alliance during the Second World War. It consumed two and one-half years, and was fought from French North Africa, to the island of Sicily and along the entire length of Italy from the boot to the Alps. Unfortunately, the Mediterranean remains as well known for its negatives as for its accomplishments: Kasserine Pass in February 1943; Sicily, where the Allies needlessly permitted the escape of a veteran German army corps to Italy; the near-run debacle of Salerno; and the tragedies of the Rapido, Monte Cassino and Anzio.

It is therefore appropriate that this book is set in the Mediterranean Theater of Operations, and coincides with the major campaigns fought in North Africa and Italy from early 1943 to the end of the war in May 1945. Lawrence D. Collins was a young doctor assigned to the 56th Evacuation Hospital, a Texas-based medical unit that was activated in March 1942 and largely staffed by men and women who trained at the Baylor University College of Medicine in Dallas. Often referred to as the "Baylor Unit," the 56th Evacuation Hospital was a mobile tent hospital (similar to the M\*A\*S\*H units of Korean War fame), and one of several such army hospitals organized at various medical colleges for service during World War II. During its tenure in the Mediterranean, the 56th Evac treated over 73,000 casualties, which may have been a record for medical units in the Mediterranean and ETO. How many lives were saved by the men and women of the 56th Evac will never be known, but suffice to say, many were spared who might otherwise have died.

Dr. Collins chronicles his experiences in the 56th Evacuation Hospital from its training in Texas, to the relatively uncomplicated early months in the Mediterranean, first in Morocco, later in Bizerte, Tunisia. All were merely warm-up exercises for the Italian campaign which commenced in September 1943. The unit was sent to Paestum, near Salerno, and following the progress of the Allies armies north to Dragoni as the bitter, stalemated winter campaign of 1943-44 set in around Cassino, and along the Gustav Line. Disaster was narrowly averted during the relocation to Dragoni when a truck transporting nurses took a wrong turn, and ended up in the Allied front lines before being flagged down and saved by a military policeman who said, "If you go further here, the next MP you meet will be wearing a swastika!"

In January 1944, in an effort to unhinge the Germans at Cassino

and break the deadly stalemate, the Allies launched an amphibious end-run at Anzio, thirty-five miles southwest of Rome. Its object was to so threaten Rome and the German lines of communication between the Italian capital and the Cassino front that the Germans would be compelled to abandon the Gustav Line. Anzio turned out to be a bluff that failed miserably. Instead of retreating, the Germans defended *both* Anzio and Cassino with a savagery unparalleled even in this terrible war. The result was continued stalemate, now on two fronts instead of one. Hitler was determined to crush the Anzio beachhead and drive the Allies back into the sea. In February 1944 the Germans launched a desperate counteroffensive to "lance the abscess" of Anzio. What turned out to be one of the most desperate campaigns fought by the western allies in the Second World War became the focus of Dr. Collins's life when the 56th Evacuation Hospital was sent to Anzio to reinforce the hard-pressed Allied medical services in the beachhead. What ensued forms the core of *56th Evac Hospital*.

The challenge facing the doctors, nurses, aid men, ambulance drivers, and others who comprised the medical service at Anzio was daunting. In no instance was the Hippocratic Oath more difficult to carry out than in the Anzio beachhead where the most significant part of Collins's story is set. As a Fifth Army medical historian has written:

Despite the violence which surrounds them, medical personnel must offer the reassuring example of their own courage to grateful patients. They must stay rooted in a ward tent, speaking words of comfort, even though their own minds pound with the awareness of danger. In an operating room, they must hold their hands steady even though their own bodies might be shattered more critically than the one lying stripped before them.... There was no escape for a medical battalion, a surgical team ... even an evacuation hospital from the artillery fire or bombing attacks.... The enemy could and did reach every part of the beachhead with his fire and the frequency with which he hit the congested corner occupied by the main medical installations were underscored in the name of "Hell's Half Acre" which the front line soldiers gave it.<sup>1</sup>

What Dr. Collins and his fellow medics of the 56th Evacuation Hospital endured at Anzio is beyond even his graphic descriptions of

their existence in one of the most dangerous pieces of terrain on earth. In "Hell's Half Acre," the hospitals that patched the broken and shattered bodies sent to them were all in the line of around-the-clock fire from the heavy guns of the German artillery in the nearby Alban Hills. No place was considered safe from these guns which could reach every part of the Anzio beachhead, including the three hospitals. In one of the oddest Catch-22s of the war, patients were known to go A.W.O.L. from "Hell's Half Acre" and return to their units at the front, where it was considered "safer" to reside in the extreme discomfort of a foxhole than at the rear, in a hospital.

During the nearly five months of the Anzio campaign, 92 medical personnel were killed in action, 387 were wounded, 19 captured and 60 more missing in action. Among them were members of the 56th Evac. While the attacks on Allied medical facilities does not seem to have been deliberate, it was inevitable, given the negligible size of the beachhead and their proximity to nearby supply dumps that were prime targets. Thus, at Anzio even hospitals became casualties, such as February 10, 1944, when incoming shells wreaked havoc in the nearby 33d Field Hospital. Over the loudspeakers of the 56th Evac came the order: "All litter bearers report to the 33d Field Hospital area! All fire fighters proceed at once to check fire in that area!" The men and women of Dr. Collins's unit descended upon their crippled sister unit, from which there emerged a stream of patients, many of whom had been tending to the sick and wounded only moments earlier. In subsequent bombing raids and artillery bombardments, the 56th Evacuation Hospital was hit repeatedly, and suffered numerous casualties. After an artillery barrage rocked the hospital on April 4, it was decided to bring in a new hospital unit to replace the battered 56th. Despite their protests that they were ready and willing to carry on, they left the Anzio beachhead for new duty near Naples. As Dr. Collins writes,

Shells from both sides, by the thousands, screamed over our heads twenty-four hours per day.... I think it unlikely that any of us will ever again work such hours and at such a pace.... Still, very few grumbled and very few cried in spite of the fact that a great many died. Least of all did the wounded grumble, delayed treatments notwithstanding. They were completely committed to their task at whatever the cost. You could read it in their eyes. They would not have traded their

country, their comrades, their officers, their medics, their nurses or their doctors during those hectic days. Not for anything would they, nor we, have traded off the other, for those were days of complete commitment, complete cooperation, complete teamwork, and intense pride. Small wonder Churchill rated the ordeal of the English during the blitz as their "finest hour"! I've no doubt our stint at Anzio will ever remain as ours.

These memoirs also show another side of war: the frequent boredom, the griping that characterizes all soldiers whether they be front line infantrymen or surgeons; the hazards characteristic of life in a war zone; the lack of sanitation and discomfort of military life; and the simple pleasures of mail from home or a hot meal. Dr. Collins offers some wonderfully evocative descriptions of visits to some of the world's most exotic places, and its peoples. But above all, *56th Evac Hospital*, despite its dark moments, is filled with examples of how the human spirit survives under the dreadful conditions of war. More than a tale of war, the book is a fitting tribute to the men and women who comprised the U.S. Army Medical Corps and the Nurse Corps.

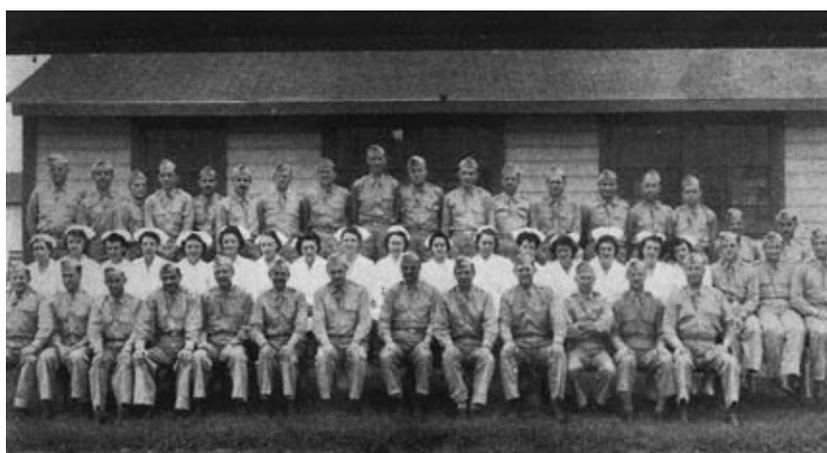
During the commemorations of the fiftieth anniversary of the Second World War, I am pleased to be able to introduce *56th Evac Hospital* and to avail myself of this opportunity to publicly acknowledge the important contributions of the U.S. Army medical service. This worthy addition to the lexicon of war literature is opportune and will, I hope, endure as yet another testament to the stupidity and futility of war.

CARLO W. D'ESTE  
CAPE COD, MASSACHUSETTS  
APRIL 1994

1 Extracted from "The Medical Story of Anzio," written by the Fifth Army Surgeon's office in 1944, unpublished manuscript in the U. S. Army Center of Military History, Washington, D.C.



The Collins family at Turtle Creek in Dallas, April 1942.  
Photo courtesy Lawrence D. and Margaret Collins.



Officers and nurses of the 56th, sometime prior to leaving for Louisiana maneuvers  
in July, 1942.



Officers on training march at Fort Sam Houston.



Lawrence and Margaret Collins saying good-bye before the 56th boards the train for Louisiana in July, 1942. Photo courtesy Lawrence D. and Margaret Collins.



Scenes from 56th Evac quarters in Mansfield, Louisiana. Photos courtesy Lawrence D. and Margaret Collins.