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## Medicine, Surgery and Military Conflicts — Northwestern's Contribution to War Efforts

Since the founding of the medical school in 1859 the faculty, students, staff, and graduates have been ready to provide their medical and surgical expertise in times of strife and conflict.

[Edmund Andrews, MD](#) (1824-1904), one of the medical school's founders, acquired notable battlefield experience as surgeon in the First Illinois Regiment of Light Artillery during the American Civil War (1861-1865) when he saw heavy action during Grant's campaign in Tennessee.



Dr. Andrews' letters were published in the *Chicago Medical Examiner* during 1862 which described his observations of surgeries, conditions of the camps and hospitals, and overall health of the troops.

[Allen A. Wesley, MD](#) (1856-1929), was a graduate of the class of 1887 and one of the founders of Provident Hospital. During the Spanish-American War (1898), Major Wesley was appointed to the medical examining board for all medical officers serving in Cuba, the first African American to hold such a position.



*Major Wesley and other medical officers who were stationed in Cuba*

[Nicholas Senn, MD](#) (1844 to 1908), was a graduate of the medical school's class of 1868. In 1884, he was appointed Brigadier General of the Wisconsin National Guard. He founded the Association of Military Surgeons in 1892 and was appointed the Surgeon General of the Illinois National Guard in 1893.

During the Spanish American War he was commissioned Lt. Colonel and Chief Surgeon of U.S. Volunteers.



[Lucy Gaynor, MD](#), graduated with honors from Northwestern University Woman's Medical School in 1891. Dr. Gaynor was endorsed by the Friend's Missionary Board and in 1892 sailed to Nanking, China, to begin two decades of missionary work as the city's first female physician. She established a hospital and a training school for nurses.



On December 6, 1911, Nanking fell to revolutionary forces; by December 10, Dr. Gaynor and her staff opened an emergency field hospital where she contracted typhus and died on April 22, 1912.

#### World War I – France

In October 1916, Dr. Frederick Besley began organizing a general hospital unit to assist the Allied war effort in Europe. Medical officers were recruited from Northwestern University's medical school with others from Rush Medical College and the University of Illinois College of Medicine. The nurses were recruited from Cook County, Mercy, Augustana, and Evanston hospitals. Many of the enlisted men had been students at Northwestern and other universities in the Chicago area. This unit was called the United States Army Base Hospital Number 12.

Dr. Besley, commissioned a major, became director and chief of surgical services for the unit. It left Chicago on May 16, 1917, landed at Boulogne, France, on June 11, and set up headquarters at Dannes-Camier. The unit replaced the British Expeditionary Force's Base Hospital No. 18, freeing the British staff for duty closer to the front line.



Barracks at Dannes-Camier, France, 1917

For the next 22 months, the unit operated a 1,200- to 1,500-bed tent-and-hut hospital, treating some 60,000 patients, mostly British soldiers. Occasional German air raids in the area created dangers beyond

the usual hazards of disease and accident. Most of the officers, nurses, and enlisted men returned to the United States in April, 1919.

#### World War II – Algeria and Italy

J. Roscoe Miller, MD '30, dean of the medical school, and Michael L. Mason, MD '24, PhD '31, were responsible for the re-activation of Base Hospital No. 12 as the 12<sup>th</sup> General Hospital in 1942.

Dr. Mason had served the unit in World War I as sergeant in charge of orderlies. Alumni and faculty were the nucleus of the 2,000-bed general hospital, which included eight operating rooms.

At home, the medical school curriculum was accelerated by scheduling continuous classes.

The Northwestern unit was stationed at Ain-EI-Turck, Algeria, December 1942-December 1943; and in Italy, successively at Naples, Rome, and Livorno. The personnel worked in rehabilitation of casualties, infectious disease, and combat and war fatigue. The unit was inactivated September 15, 1945.

A letter from U.S. Army Surgeon General Kirk to university administrators sums up the role Northwestern faculty, students, and alumni played in World War I and II:

“I realize what a serious deprivation it has been for your University to meet its manifold responsibilities with so many of its ablest members in the 12th General Hospital...that your contribution has been of inestimable value to the Army Medical Service, particularly to our soldier patients.”

Unfortunately, the medical school has little or no history of the men and women who served in the Korean and Viet Nam conflicts or those who may have been involved in Operation Desert Storm, Iraq, or Afghanistan.

Anyone willing to share photographs, recollections or personal histories?

That's all for now,

Ron

Information provided courtesy of Galter Health Sciences Library at Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine

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