

Grace van Evera

By Molly Daniel, 2017, maryjdaniel@outlook.com

Grace van Evera was born 9 January 1877, in Davenport, IA, daughter of Charles and Henrietta van Evera.

In 1912, Grace was a student at a Chicago university, where she received nurse's training and graduated with a completed degree. In 1917, she responded to the call for nurses to join Unit R, organized by Dr. J. Fred Clarke of Fairfield, IA. In Chicago, she joined other nurses from Iowa enroute to New York. They arrived 30 January 1918 and underwent additional training at Ellis Island. On 16 February 1918, the full contingent of nurses, officers and enlisted personnel of Unit R boarded *SS Carmania* and sailed for France to become part of US Army Base Hospital 32.

Base Hospital 32 was initially staffed with personnel from Indianapolis, who arrived in Contrexeville on 26 December 1917 and worked for three months to prepare the hotels in the spa town for hospital operations. Originally planned for a capacity of 500 beds, Base Hospital 32 was expanded to 1,250-beds before its first patients arrived. Unit R arrived in Contrexeville three months after the Indianapolis group and provided additional personnel for the increased capacity. When Allied casualties mounted in September 1918, the hospital was ordered to increase its capacity once again (with no additional personnel) to an "emergency capacity" of 2,115 beds. By the time it was deactivated in February 1919, Base Hospital 32 had admitted 9,698 patients from 31 nations, including 189 German prisoners and many members of the local population of Contrexeville. Grace she was assigned to Hospital A, the principal surgical hospital with 500 beds, and later Hospital C, a medical hospital with 125 beds.

In a letter to her mother (published in an unidentified Davenport newspaper in 1918), Grace expressed compassion for the soldiers and confided her longing for a place to keep warm:

"We sent another bunch of boys back to the front this morning. If only they could go once and then home. None of them had seen an American woman since they left the U.S. We have a Y.W.C.A. now, not fully ready to use, however, and we will be so glad when it is. Now we do not have a place to assemble, and chilly rainy afternoons there is no place to keep warm. They plan to have a fire and serve tea. The Y.W.C.A. secretary started a French class so the night nurses could attend. The Red Cross secretary has her French class at 7:30 p.m. just when night nurses go on duty. The Red Cross has gotten a Victrola for each hospital building, and how we enjoy them, especially the boys from the front who have heard no music for so long."

Though the lack of proper food was a frequent complaint among the service personnel, Grace told the folks back home that wastefulness was not tolerated when so many in the war zone were going hungry:

“Tell any who will listen that our plates are inspected now and any one leaving food is reported, especially bread.”

After she returned home, Grace shared her observations about the US soldiers (from the April 8, 1919 *Davenport Daily Times* newspaper):

“The American soldier on the battle front is wonderful,” said Miss Van Evera. “But the American soldier wounded in the hospital is more than that. I think there is no word. It is not only bravery that I am thinking of. You see at Contrexeville, about 30 miles south of Nancy, it is, we had over 2,000 soldiers who were wounded. And they were all so splendid. When they had recuperated a little, these half-recovered men would turn in to help. There was such cooperation. The hours were long, but we did not mind that. One does not think of time and one forgets all weariness.”

After the Armistice, Grace van Evera was granted two weeks leave (13-26 December 1918) and visited Nice, France. Shortly after Christmas 1918, Base Hospital 32 began packing up and transferring its patients. As others prepared to leave, Grace joined 15 other nurses who volunteered to provide temporary relief for nurses at Base Hospital 90 in nearby Chaumont (AEF headquarters.) She served there from 17 January to 5 February 1919.

Rejoining Base Hospital 32 in time to depart Contrexeville with the unit on February 19, 1919, Grace was homeward bound. Most of the group departed from Brest on board the *SS America* on 4 March 1919, but due to a lack of space, Grace and eleven others were asked to wait for the next transport – the *USS Louisville*, which left four days later and arrived in New York on March 22nd.

Following her war service, Grace van Evera served as a public health nurse in Scott County, IA (Davenport) from 1921 to 1930, when county supervisors abolished the post. Her starting salary was established at \$150 a month, with \$50 per month for expenses. Her responsibilities included “instruction of home economics and nursing in the farm homes and visits to the rural schools for the purposes of reaching the children.” [The Trained Nurse and Hospital Review, Volumes 68, August 1921, p. 162] During this duty, she was injured in a car crash while on her way to work, breaking her shoulder and requiring several weeks for recovery. In January 1934, she was appointed Jackson County nurse (Maquoketa, IL) and employed through a federal relief program of the Civil Works Administration (CWA.)

She was active in the Women’s Christian Temperance Union, assisted with the Junior Red Cross in rural schools, and in 1929 was elected president of the Iowa State Registered Nurses Association. She was a member of the American Legion for 42 years.

She died on 8 May 1960, in Davenport, IA and is buried in Summit Cemetery in that city.