

Maude Frances Essig

By Molly Daniel, 2017

Maude Frances Essig was born 29 November 1884 on a farm near Elkhart, Indiana, daughter of Lewis Essig and Mary Eliza Leininger; she died 6 September 1981 at the VA Center in Dayton, OH at the age of 96.

She received her nursing education from Passavant Memorial Hospital School of Nursing (Chicago, IL), graduating in 1907. Prior to accepting a position at Elkhart General Hospital (Elkhart, IN), she worked for the Chicago Visiting Nurse Association as a school nurse, infant welfare nurse, tuberculosis nurse, and industrial nurse.

Maude was invited to join the "Lilly Hospital," a volunteer effort launched with an initial donation of \$25,000 from the pharmaceutical firm, Eli Lilly and Company, and later matched with a personal donation of \$15,000 from J.K. Lilly and substantial donations from the people of Indianapolis. Indianapolis hospitals provided much of the equipment and personnel, consisting of 22 physicians, 2 dentists, 65 graduate nurses, 153 enlisted men and several civilian employees (stenographers, others.) The Indianapolis Chapter of the American Red Cross provided generous support and coordination, and the War Department ultimately designated the "Lilly Hospital" as United States Army Base Hospital 32, destined for overseas duty in Contrexeville, France.

Membership among the medical personnel was by invitation only. Florence J. Martin, the superintendent of nurses of Indianapolis City Hospital was asked to identify qualified graduate nurses. She sought the enlistment of Maude Essig, who in June 1917, was employed as the superintendent of nurses at Elkhart General Hospital, Elkhart, IN. When Maude received the letter from Miss Martin to join the unit, she readily accepted.

Hotels in the spa town of Contrexeville were leased from the French health ministry and converted for use as hospitals. The Indianapolis unit arrived in Contrexeville at the end of 1917 and worked for three months to prepare the hotels 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, organized in southeast Iowa and arriving in Contrexeville three months later, 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.

After her death in 1981, Maude's nephew found among her belongings an unpublished 68-page manuscript about her time in Contrexeville. He presented the journal to one of Maude's former students, who donated it to the archives of Illinois Wesleyan University, Bloomington, IL.¹ Her journal provides a descriptive and personal account of Maude's experience as a WW I nurse. A summarized timeline of her service follows:

7 September 1917 – Maude took her oath of office in Indianapolis

10 September 1917 – Maude and other nurses arrived in New York and were initially assigned barracks in the Bronx and later at St. Mary's Hospital in Hoboken, NJ.

4 October 1917 – the nurses of Base Hospital 32 (BH 32) took part in the Red Cross and Army Parade Day, along with more than 10,000 others (including 2,000 nurses) parading down Fifth Avenue. She noted in her journal: "Our unit wore blue dress uniform – (no wrap) and dress hat – It was a gorgeous sight.... It took 6 hours for the parade to pass any one point. The most wonderful sight I ever hope to see...."

3 December 1917 – The nurses, officers and enlisted men of BH 32 departed on the *SS George Washington* and reached Brest, France, after 20 days on a rough voyage. Maude had broken a tooth a month earlier, and she did not have time for adequate care before her departure. She dealt with pain and complications from this for another six months.

24 December 1917 – members of BH 32 disembarked and started their trip to Contrexeville, spending Christmas day on a slow-moving train across the French countryside. There were no toilets on board, and the nurses were given a bucket to attend to nature's call. They arrived in Contrexeville at 3:00 a.m. on December 26, in the midst of a snow storm. Cold, tired, and hungry, the group was disappointed in the lack of preparations for their arrival:

"We were told we could stay on the train until daylight or go to the hotel where we would be given coffee! Needless to say we all piled out, waded through snow to the Continental Hotel where about the coldest reception I ever hope to experience was received. We were told to be seated on benches in a great bare barn of a room where there were some home-made oilcloth covered tables, and a mite of a stove that gave off no heat but a super abundance of smoke, attached to the stove was about 50 ft. of stove pipe that finally ended through a tin pane in one of the windows at the rear of the room. After a considerable wait, two French soldiers appeared with a wash basket full of

¹ Another former student, Alma S. Woolley, published an account of Maude's experience with some excerpts from her journal. See Wooley, Alma S. A Hoosier Nurse in France: The World War I Diary of Maude Frances Essig. Indiana Magazine of History (a publication of the Indiana University Department of History), Volume 82, Issue 1, March 1986, pp. 37-68.

drinking glasses, later they passed some abominable stuff called coffee. No one could drink it.”

Initially assigned a room on the eighth floor of Hotel Cosmopolitan (which became Hospital A, the main surgical hospital of BH 32), Maude spent a few nights there before being assigned to a detachment. She joined a group sent to Base Hospital 15 at nearby Chaumont to provide temporary relief for nurses there, who had been in France since July 1917. She found generally more comforts in Chaumont, but the sanitary conditions are not good and several of the BH 32 nurses became ill. Maude, assigned to supervise nurses from both BH 15 and BH 32, encountered pettiness and complaining from the nurses but ultimately gained useful experience for her later work. On January 6, she received her first mail from home:

“What a thrill and what rejoicing after one week in Chaumont. I was very happy and yet sad, too many memories of the home, folks, and we are so far from home. I cried and laughed and was downright hysterical, went to bed at 11 PM, but not sleep.”

4 February 1918 – When BH 15 received additional personnel, Unit P – a group of nurses from Tennessee, and the detachment of nurse from BH 32 are ordered back to Contrexeville. Maude was assigned lodging with other nurses in Hotel Jeanne Pierre, at the base of the hill, with duty in Hospital A, the main surgical building in Hotel Cosmopolitan at the top of the hill.

“The utility room opens into Mary Houser’s and my room. It is the only place where the 24 nurses living on our floor can congregate around a little stove (usually heatless) to take baths, wash, visit and such. It is like a continuous ‘coffee clotch.’ It takes an expert to keep even a semblance of a fire in the peanut of a stove. No rest in our room. But we do have some fun swapping yarns. A sheet strung across one corner of the room provides the bathing facility! The cord occasionally breaks and furnish[es] amusement for all but the bather.”

23 March 1918 – BH 32 received their first American patients, soldiers from the 42nd Rainbow Division, which had been fighting alongside the French at Baccarat. The wounds are mostly mustard gas burns. By the end of March, there were 91 patients on Maude’s floor.

“We have one star patient, Leo Moquinn, whose home is in Fond du Lac, Wis. He was horribly burned with mustard gas while carrying a pal of his $\frac{3}{4}$ of a mile to safety after the gas attack, his pal had a broken leg. [Except] for his back, Moquinn's entire body is one 3rd degree burn. He cannot see and has developed pneumonia and he is delirious. He never complains but seems worried about his home folk and wants to get well to finish the ‘Boche.’ (He did improve and finally after many months returned to his company before the Armistice was signed.) He asked to have a letter written to his

mother which Col. Clarke's secretary Miss [Charlotte] Cathcart did write. When she asked for his special message to his mother, he said tell her, 'I am just fine, the country is so beautiful and I am enjoying the singing of the birds and the fine people we have here,' and we who have so much, do complain so much."

Despite being known as a town with mineral springs providing water with healthful benefits, Contrexeville's water supply to the hotels does not meet the sanitary requirements of the AEF medical corps:

"We use endless surgical supplies and at this rate I don't see how we can keep going. We have no water in our building (frozen or turned off for the winter.) Every drop we use must be carried from outside – We try to keep one bath tub filled – heat what little we can on sterno stove, using denatured alcohol.... The orderlies have to work terribly hard – beside carrying the water up four flights of stairs they have to carry up all the food and the fuel for our fire place. Convalescents help as they can – but so far we have had few convalescents."

19 June 1918 – Like many nurses at the base hospitals, Maude is eager for duty at the front. She wrote in her journal, "More nurses have been ordered to be ready to leave on one hour's notice for service at the front. I wish I might be on the list but I am not."

June 1918 – BH 32's designation was changed to an evacuation hospital, and wounded arrived directly from the aid stations at the front. A number of German prisoners are patients on Maude's floor. She noted that they seem fearful:

"The Germans are in bad shape, and require much care. All have high temperatures, all very young, they seem to be afraid of me, one who talks English says they have been told repeatedly that if they landed in a US Hospital they would be poisoned."

24-29 July 1918 – American wounded from battles near Château-Thierry began to arrive at BH 32. In the surgical hospital, patients are carried down 7 flights of stairs to surgery and then back up 7 flights to recover in the ward. There are no elevators. During this time, Maude cared for 130 patients on her floor – with only herself and one orderly to provide care.

"These are busy nights and busier days. Miss Elder, charge nurse is anxious for me to get off night duty and relieve her, says she can't take it, our patients are coming directly from The Front and they say it is terrible, lying there waiting for help to come. All come in awful condition, no previous care has been given to their wounds. It takes a lot of soaking to clean their wounds, dried blood, filth and dirt and lice. The bath house is not able to cope with the situation and neither can our limited staff and walking patients. Four of our nurses left for the Front, conditions are worse there. We do have a roof, a floor and everyone is fed after a fashion. No one works less than 12 hours in 24 and

most of us do more. I see no one these days but my patients. I am happier than any time since in France, I feel I am really needed. No deaths yet.”

August 1918 – The hospital experienced a brief respite, and Maude is granted leave. She goes with others to the Alps and Paris. The trip was tiresome, with crowded trains and hotels, but the ultimate reward was a warm bath and sleep in a clean, comfortable bed. In Chamonix, from her window in the Hotel des Alpes, she watched the full moon rise over Mt. Blanc:

“Mt. Blanc in all of her majestic glory is in full view, the window in our hotel room looks out on all her beauty and gives me queer feelings of awe. Can it be Maude Essig or am I some one else? ... I sat at our window to await the full moon come up over Mt. Blanc, an eerie sight. I tried to waken the others but only the doctor came to watch and listen, I was so overcome I could not sleep. The nearest Heaven I ever hope to be in this world. The proprietor told me next morning that people make reservations months in advance just to see the full August moon rise over Mt. Blanc and we got it for no special effort and so unexpected.”

The group returned by way of Paris, and Maude wrote that she was actually “glad to be back” when they reached Contrexeville. “[We] retired to our hard old cots and [slept] the sleep of the weary.”

From the end of September to November, casualties from Meuse-Argonne were heavy and the hospital was busy. The census on Maude’s floor swelled to 190. Finally, news of the Armistice came and Contrexeville rejoiced:

“When the news became official at 11 AM the Mayor, through the Town Crier, declared a Holiday, flags were immediately displayed and there was much rejoicing and many tears were shed. The local people were sick at heart to realize their sons would never return. Our firing squad fired the twenty-one volleys as an Honorary Salute. The Mayor kissed Col. Clark on both cheeks, and their [sic] was much hand shaking, no shouting, no band and very little drinking, many of the local homes, lawns, doorways and roofs are decorated with colored lights and the whole town was lighted for the first time since our arrival. Everything looks festive, I was on duty, all day but made some divinity in evening to celebrate.”

The hospital continued to receive patients through December, but preparations began for ceasing operations. In mid-December, Maude received a token of gratitude from a local man:

“Yesterday, a former civilian patient, the husband of our floor maid presented me with a skinned rabbit, beautifully wrapped in a snowy white napkin, some one who knows said the gift would have cost \$4.00. The patient had a badly infected hand, I took care of him and he was satisfied with results. Mary Houser fried the rabbit on our wee stove. I will never know how, but it was delicious as were the fried potatoes. Bread, butter and cherry preserves, a real banquet!”

20 February 1919 – BH 32 personnel departed from Contrexeville. After a long, slow trip, the nurses arrived in La Baule on February 22. On March 4, most of the group boarded the SS *America* in Brest and headed home. (Due to lack of space, eleven nurses and one civilian employee were asked to wait for the next debarkation, which occurred four days later.)

13 March 1919 – Maude's ship arrived at the docks at Hoboken, NJ. She wrote:

“I was out on deck and missed nothing of our entry into the harbor. All so wonderful, what an experience for little ME!”

18 March 1919 – “Tuesday - we had our physicals and hope to leave soon. We had to turn in our Red Cross belongings, it broke my heart to turn in my precious cape, some simply said they were ‘lost in action’ but I could not say that, much as I wanted to keep it. History was all wrapped up in that cape, with all the holes burnt into the lower edge where it flipped against our little stoves. Never a day that it had not been on duty with me, my faithful friend.”

22 March 1919 – Return to Indiana – “A big delegation of family, friends and nurses were at the depot to greet me, I was really overcome! Mrs. Kuhn and Mrs. Dalton insisted on mother and me riding in their car out home. Alice and the boys rode out home with Dad, such an exciting time, I felt overwhelmed, everyone seemed glad to see me back and needless to say I am delighted to be back home.”

From 1920-1922 – Maude resumed duties as Director of Nursing at the Elkhart General Hospital, with a brief stint as an instructor of the training school of the Women's Christian Hospital in Jamestown, NY.

From 1924-1940, she served as the director of the Brokaw Hospital School of Nursing, Normal, Illinois; director of nursing at the hospital; then administrator of the hospital from 1930 to 1940.

During World War II, Maude served as the assistant director of nursing at Passavant Memorial Hospital in Chicago, from which she retired in 1948.

From 1952 to 1981, Maude Essig lived at the Veterans Administration Center in Dayton, Ohio, a retirement home for persons with military service. When she died on 6 September 1981, she was buried, at her own request, in the Dayton National Military Cemetery, Section 19, Site 1699. (In addition, a stone was placed in her honor in the Prairie Street Cemetery in Elkhart, IN.)

A digital edition of Maude Essig's wartime journal is available from Illinois Wesleyan University Historical Collection and can be viewed online at this link:

http://collections.carli.illinois.edu/cdm/ref/collection/iwu_histph/id/1247