

Army Nurse, Veteran of Five Campaigns, Relates War Experiences

Maj. Elizabeth H. Hay Spent 31 Straight Days in Foxholes

Special to The Union.

HAMPTON, March 22—One of the first nurses to land in Normandy following the invasion of France, Maj. Elizabeth H. Hay, ANC, veteran of five campaigns in the European Theatre of Operations as a chief nurse, has returned to her home on Dearbon avenue where she is now spending her terminal leave with her husband, James E. Hay.

Holder of the Bronze Star and wearing five campaign stars, Major Hay was serving as chief nurse at the 130th Station hospital in Heidelberg, Germany, when Gen. George S. Patton Jr., famous Third Army commander, was brought there suffering from what proved to be fatal injuries he received in an automobile accident.

Narrowly Miss Capture

Hard on the heels of the front-line troops most of the way across France, Belgium and Germany, Major Hay and her fellow nurses narrowly missed capture during the German breakthrough in the Ardennes, the famed "Battle of the Bulge," and were forced to make a hasty retreat at one time when the enemy tanks were reported "only a mile down the road" from the station hospital where Major Hay was in charge of the nurses.

So imminent appeared their capture, that Major Hay gave all her nurses final instructions as to what they should do should they be taken prisoners.



—Photo by Belcher

Maj. Elizabeth H. Hay, ANC, of Hampton, who recently returned home after more than two years of overseas duty, is shown above with her husband, James E. Hay, and the family's five-year-old spaniel, "Freckles." Major Hay was one of the first nurses to land in Normandy and was chief nurse at the Army hospital in Germany where General Patton was brought after being fatally injured in an accident.

Major Hay, who served as school nurse in Hampton and Rye, before entering the service, enlisted in the ANC in January, 1943 and received her early training at Camp Devens, Mass. She later went to Camp Rucker, Ala., where the 45th Field hospital unit was being activated. The group went overseas in February, 1944, the Hampton nurse being promoted to captain just before departing for England.

Three months were spent in training in England when the entire unit was sent to the marshaling area just prior to D-Day. They boarded their hospital ship on D-Day and cruised around in the channel until D-Day-plus-four when the landing was made and they were among the first group of nurses to set foot on French soil. Major Hay waded ashore in water waist deep and with her associates helped to set up the 42nd Field hospital. For this accomplishment, during which the group was constantly under fire, the Hampton nurse was awarded the Bronze Star.

"By her superb leadership and untiring devotion to duty, Capt. (now Maj.) Hay rendered an outstanding contribution to the cause of victory," the citation said in part.

During the Brittany peninsula campaign that followed, Major Hay spent 31 consecutive days in foxholes and recalls that it was on the 31st day that members of her unit received their first white bread in that entire period.

One of First to Enter

"We were usually one of the first units to enter the towns after they had been liberated by our troops," the major told The Union interviewer. "Often the towns were still smoldering in ruins and we had to roll up the windows of the ambulances to guard against heat from blazing buildings."

Major Hay recalled that it was during the Luxembourg and Belgium campaign in October, 1944, that one of her nurses, 2nd Lt. Frances Slinger of Dorchester, Mass., was killed by enemy fire and four others were wounded. It was while her unit was awaiting orders at the 107th Evacuation hospital at Clervaux, 12 miles northeast of Bastogne, Belgium, that word was received that the big German counter-offensive in the Ardennes was launched.

Referring to the retreat that was made at that time, Major Hay declared:

"After a hectic ride we arrived at the Chateau Roumond, near Libin, Belgium, which was to be our new home. The hospital we set up there could perform 150 major operations in 24 hours and frequently maintained that average, with never a letup, the report came through that the Germans, with tanks, were just a mile down the road. We had 10 minutes to dress and get to the trucks. We left in such a hurry that we had to leave behind all the hospital equipment and our personal belongings. We were able to safely evacuate all of our patients and personnel which more than compensated for our personal losses," she said.

Major Hay's unit next set up a hospital in a school at Carlsburg, Belgium, but remained only one day when orders were received to withdraw to Sedan, France where headquarters were established in a textile school. Because they were pushed so far out of the area controlled by the First Army, Major Hay's unit was later assigned to the Third Army.

Forward Drive Resumed

After the German offensive was halted and broken, the forward drive was resumed and on March 16, 1945 they set up the first hospital in Germany, in an orphanage at Mayen.

"On April 7 we crossed the Rhine on what was said to be the longest tactical pontoon bridge in the world," she said. "We then continued our path across Germany

and finally set up at Regensburg on the banks of the Regen river, a tributary of the Danube. We were there when VE Day was proclaimed but we were too busy to celebrate."

She described the condition of some of the soldiers brought in from German concentration camps and asserted that despite all we had seen previously of the horrors of war, this was the worst."

Major Hay later served as chief nurse of the 130th Station hospital at Heidelberg, where General Patton was received following his accident, and before returning to the United States, she was also sent on special duty to Paris to assist in teaching at the Chief Nurses' school established there.

A native of Windham, where her parents still live, Major Hay was graduated from Nashua High school and also was educated at the University of New Hampshire and Boston university before entering the Lawrence, Mass., General hospital from whose nurses' training school she was graduated.

Before entering the service, Major Hay was active in civilian defense activities and organized many Red Cross and first aid classes.