

Diary of World War I nurse Ella Osborn, 1918–1919

Introduction

At the outbreak of World War I, Ella Jane Osborn was a surgical nurse at Mount Sinai Hospital in New York City. In January 1918, she volunteered to serve with the American Expeditionary Forces as a member of the Red Cross's nursing service in Europe. Initially, nurses were to work only in hospitals far from the front lines. However, the need to have medical treatment available near the fighting changed these plans, and Osborn was assigned to Evacuation Hospital Number 1 at Sebastopol Barracks in France, just seven miles from the front. Sick and wounded soldiers were sent from the front lines to evacuation hospitals for initial treatment or surgery. They would then be sent to base hospitals located farther behind the lines, or returned to their units if they were healthy. Evacuation Hospital Number 1 had been established in February 1918, with the capacity to care for 1,000 men. By September, that number had increased to 2,800.

Osborn documented her experience in the diary she kept for the duration of her service (January 18, 1918–April 3, 1919). Her short entries, which appear to be written at the end of the day, provide glimpses into her life and duties in France. She briefly describes caring for sick and wounded men, air battles, and the deaths of several patients who had an impact on her. When off duty, Osborn visited local towns, had picnics in the woods, went to the movies, and attempted to live as normal a life as possible.

Women's service in World War I helped alter preconceptions about what women were capable of doing. Women had been stereotyped as being too delicate to handle high-stress situations and the carnage of war. But, as Osborn describes, the nurses saw and dealt with many of the horrors of battle, including the catastrophic results of new chemical weapons like mustard gas.

The excerpts below include selected entries from May and June 1918.

Excerpts

May 11 Sat. Slept poorly. Had a hard thunder shower.

The Germans sent over Gas. 36 dead & 90 in Field Hosp. 104. Many of them are badly gased. . .

Mon. May 20. Nearly died last night for want of sleep. Major Lufbery¹ of the flying Corps was buried today with all military honors, he was considered our best flyer. The Aviators flew over & drop flowers over his grave. The german who shot him was afterwards caught by the French. When the French got wind that Lufbery (whom they were very fond of) had been killed they started out and said they would

¹ Major Raoul Lufbery (1885–1918) was an American and flying Ace who served with the France's Lafayette Escadrille from 1916 to 1917. He transferred to the US Army Air service 1917. He was shot down in battle on May 19, 1918. *World War I Flying Ace Raoul Lufbery*, <https://connecticuthistory.org/world-war-i-flying-ace-raoul-lufbery/>.

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get the German if they had to go into Germany. The Frenchman caught him & ramed right into him with his machine. There were three in the German machine.

There is great activity in the air tonight. . .

May 27. Mon.

Went to bed early & had a good sleep, there was a drive on and we received many patients. I am in the officers war[d] but like taking care of the boys much better, Admitted Lt. Lynn Harriman—he was on duty at the front in France on May 27, 1918. Enemy put over a barrage followed by an attack. In the struggle he was hit by the Enemy's bullet & wounding him in the left shoulder, and passing downward thro. lung, he lie in the trenches unable to move (paralysed from waist down) for two hours, while lying there a bunch of Germans came along with large clubs & carrying bombs, realizing he could not move he made believe dead, and when the Germans had gotten a distance away he opened fire on them dropping one or two & causing the others to flee. Another similar incident took place a little later. He was given the Croix-de-Guerre.

Fri. May 31st. Lt. Harriman died today. Just after he died word came from General Pershing he had been given the D.S.C. [*Distinguished Service Cross*]

Capt. Frank from our base was up here & came to the window to see us. Nearly 400 of our boys were gased last night and are at 102 field Hosp. some are very bad. Some say it was Phosgene gas and others say Mustard. . .

June 10. Mon.

Miss Lister came in after I got to sleep & told me I was off night duty. I got up did some washing & Ironing. Miss Lent, Forsythe Rothman & I went for a walk but had to come back early to a lecture given us by the colonel, he gave us quite a raking over, and said in a nice way we would have to come under army discipline. . .

June 17. Total of cases admitted yesterday 148. I went to bed & took a good sleep. The boys were very badly shot up the worst wounded yet. One boy has 16 big wounds. 12 died six prisoners brought in, one died later. . .

June 26 Had a half day. Miss Forsythe & I went over to the farm for milk & Eggs and after supper Miss Lent & I went over to Bruley with Sgt Drake, he rode his horse over & I rode it back. About midnight we were awoken by bombs and they sounded to be right in our yard but the next morning they said they were just outside of Toul.

June 27. After work Miss Lent & I started over to the woods to write letters & saw a lot of troops passing, so we rushed over to the main road & saw thousands of boys go by, some on trains, some walking looking very tired & some in camions & some on horse back. They were the 82 Div going up to relieve the 26th Div. We had just gotten nicely settled in bed when we heard the machine guns & out we

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jumped & there was an air battle going on right over us The search light from St Micheal hill was wonderful we could see the black smoke of the german shells in the air. They dropped bombs which struck quite near the Hosp. and shook our house, It was the nearest battle we have had the areoplane went right over us. The search light turned their light on the plane & the germans shot right down the light at the search light.

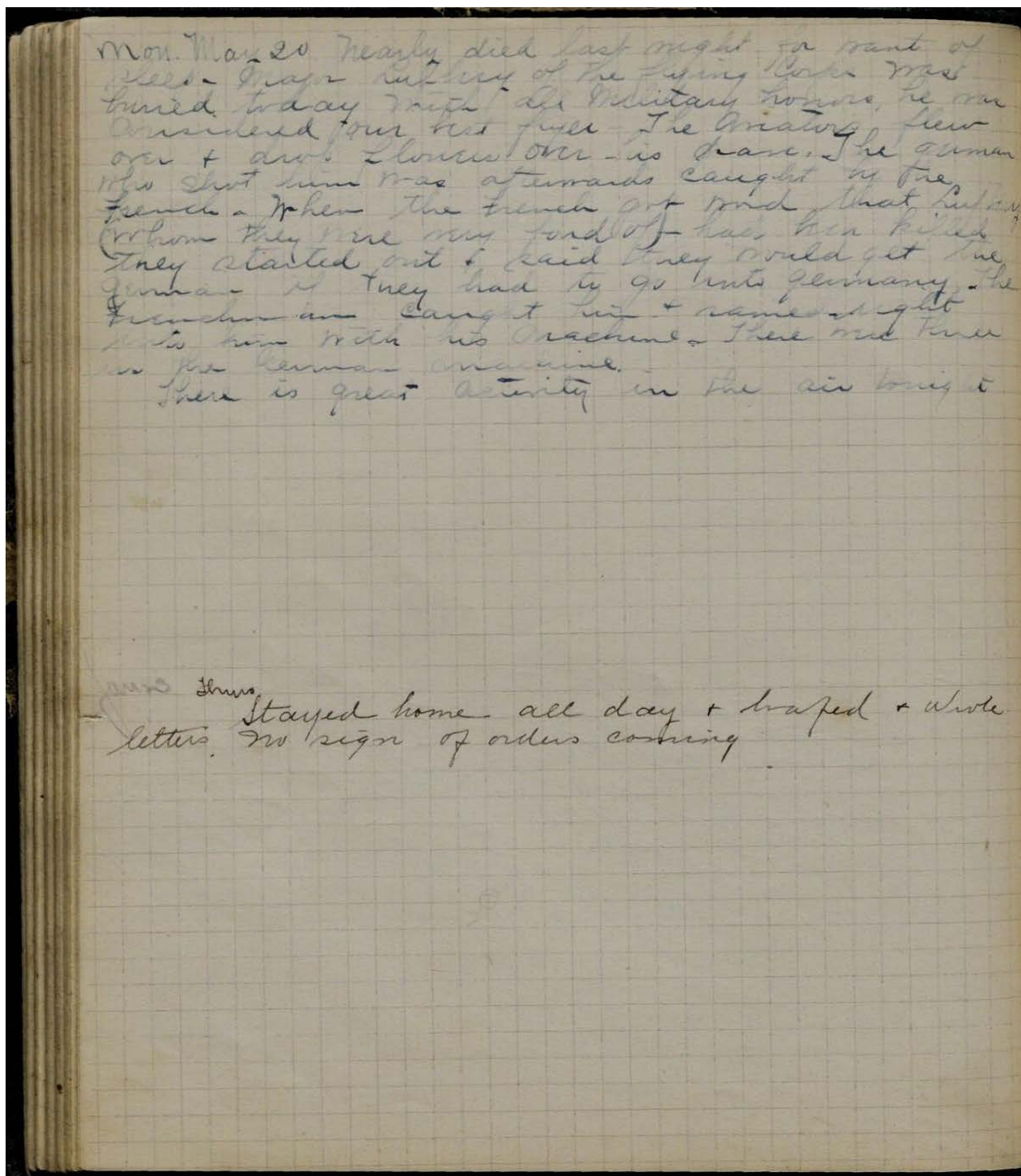
Questions for Discussion

These questions refer to both the excerpt and the longer transcript at the end of this packet. Questions in **bold** may require the full transcript.

1. What were some of the risks that women faced while serving in WWI? Why were they willing to do so? Cite textual evidence to support your answer.
2. **On a couple of different occasions Ella mentions four leaf clovers. Why do you think she took the time to mention such a seemingly insignificant item?**
3. Amidst all of the sickness, death, and carnage it seems that Osborn found time to see some of the “beauty” around her. Find an example of when she was able to do this and explain why it was so important to do so.
4. In May 1918 Major Raoul Lufbery, an American flying in the French Fighter Service, was shot down and killed by a German fighter pilot. Osborn reports that the French vowed to catch the German at any cost and that the French “caught him and ramed right into him with his machine” thus avenging his death. Was/is this reasonable to believe that the death of one can be vindicated by the death of another? Explain.
5. In reference to her May 27 entry why do you believe that Osborn prefers “taking care of the boys” rather than the officers?

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Image



Ella Jane Osborn, Diary, January 1, 1918-April 29, 1919. (The Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC06570, May 20, 1918)

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Sun June 16. Miss Forsythe Miss Pottman Miss
 Kent & myself planned to go to Lucy for supper
 but Miss Forsythe awakened with "bluffs" & was
 very sick news came the Germans had
 shelled Royanville & many hurt so we
 were told to take no other time off.
 volunteered to help out part of the night and
 was sent to the operating room and
 worked all night until after seven the
 next morning.

1st 20. Stayed in bed but felt better today.
 We are supposed to run into
 a storm tomorrow. All the things that have
 happened to this boat on its different voyages is
 all interesting they were a drift for six days
 at one time on account of engine trouble then
 in a storm the judder would not work a
 rope ect.

Ella Jane Osborn, Diary, January 1, 1918--April 29, 1919. (The Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC06570, June 16, 1918)

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Transcript

[Excerpt from the World War I diary of Ella Osborn, France, 1918. Diary entries for May and June 1918]

May 1st 18 nurses were ordered back to their base to day and 18 new ones came—was busy & did not get any time off.

May 2. Thurs. One of the new nurses came on to help me. We had our pictures taken for the movies. We were all in an unfinished stone building and when the word was given we all came out & the picture was supposed to be nurses escaping from a Bombed building.

May 3. Weather fine—The sun is really shining which is most unusual here, and the wind is something awful. Ward is heavy & we are working hard. Do not suppose we should kick about the rain for when the sun shines and the air is clear the Germans get in a lot of their dirty work, and their aeroplanes come over.

May 4 Sat. Saw the trench shooting at a Bosh aeroplane. Lt Antell came to the window & spoke to me & we went for a walk after supper and talked over our day. At Mt Sinai. Lost such a nice boy today by the name of Fyfe—he was badly shot up. terrible wounds.

May 5. Sun. Came off for time at 3³⁰, first time in several days. Went to church this Evening, had to iron an Apron to wear tomorrow. Ward is Light.

May 6. Attended the Funeral of Fyfe. It was a military funeral with bugle & taps. Some of the boys from his company up the line came down. Afterwards found a big patch of four leaf clovers.

May 7. Tues. Miss Forsythe, Miss Bean & myself had a half day, we started for a walk & along came a truck driven by two privates and asked us to ride, they took us to Manil-le-tour and brought us back; then we went on with them a couple of miles expecting to walk back but along came a Hand Car driven by a Frenchman but four U.S. boys on, they asked us to ride & brought us home. It was great fun, the boys were the 101st Engineers and we were first the American girls they had seen. picked Narcissus. Thunder Storm tonight.

May 8. Wed. Word came to Evacuate tomorrow.

Went to a French concert this evening, guess it was good but it was all French & could not understand.

May 9. Thurs.

Evacuated this morning 6 to Base, 4 to duty only five left, spent the day cleaning the ward & getting ready for the next lot, went to movies tonight

May 10 Went on night duty. The night Supervisor opened up an empty ward for me to sit in. Miss Lister came along & made Sgt Reinhart close it. when he found I was using it, he unlocked it but I was as stubin & would not go in for I disliked Miss Lister any way, and guess its mutual. I have four wards to look after.

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May 11 Sat. Slept poorly. Had a hard thunder shower.

The Germans sent over Gas. 36 dead & 90 in Field Hosp. 104. Many of them are badly gased.

May 12 Sun. Slept part of the day. Miss Forsythe & Miss Bean had their P.M. It is raining as usual. I went over to ward a with a message for miss Forsythe & it was pitch dark, I ran into the corner of the building & bruised my nose & forehead and strached the lens of my glasses. Orders to Evacuate again Tuesday.

May 13 Got up Early & did some ironing. There were six areoplanes over head when I went down stairs. The areoplanes are very active these days.

May 14. Tues. Miss Forsythe & Miss Bean had their P.M. so I got up at 10'clock and we all went for a walk. We first went to Bruley. Went into the church there, found a 4 leaf clover right out side the door, saw the La Grotte-de-la-Vierge, which was back of the church, here also was an alter made from the natural rock. We rested here awhile and took a path up a steep steep hill, we were all panting when we reached the top but it was well worth it for the scenery of the surrounding country was beautiful. We walked around & saw the places they have made to mount their large guns & places for storing ammunition, and then we came to the observation place of the French, they let us look through their telescope at Mount Sec—the hill of the Germans' strong hold & in front of Metz. We saw the smoke of a German Gun & then they took us down in one of their real dug outs made of cement. Then we walked down the other side of the hill which was just as steep & so wet & slippery. We came down into the village of Lucy, there we found the streets full of soldiers, horses & guns & were told they were just coming in. We went into a little place here to buy some post cards & the woman was so nice. She took us tho a long hall with wine vats on both sides, it was a dirty place but we came out into the most wonderful flower & vegetable garden. She gave us flowers to bring home. We were late for supper so I ran over & took my night report and came back & had lunch in our room.

May 15 Things are very quiet tonight & not much to do. We are all feeling pretty old and stiff from our long tramp yesterday. Went to bed early.

May 16 Got up early and went for a walk with Miss Lent found a Crows nest. (a tree with steps up to the top & used for observation) also saw the base for big guns, the woods are full of such mysterious things, found quantities of Lily-of-the-Valley which grow wild here.

May 17. The officer of the day told me one of the Majors from our base was here and it proved to be Major Beer. Miss Forsythe and I saw him in the morning and in the Evening he & miss Forsythe came over to see me after the dance and we had a nice visit it sure was good to see him and have him with us.

Sat May 18 Was off until nine oclock, so went to the movies.

Sun May 19. Came off washed my hair, Miss Forsythe Miss Bean & Miss Lent off to the woods with their lunch, I had just got settled when Dr. Beer sent a note up asking us to go for a walk. I dressed went over to the woods found the girls & we started about 1 o'clock, climbed the hill in back of Bruley, got caught

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in a thunder shower & had to wait in a dugout. Came back to Bruley had supper in the cafe at Bruley. one table filled with Frenchman drinking beer. Came home & went on duty without a wink of sleep.

Mon. May 20. Nearly died last night for want of sleep. Major Lufbery of the flying Corps was buried today with all military honors, he was considered our best flyer. The Aviators flew over & drop flowers over his grave. The german who shot him was afterwards caught by the French. When the French got wind that Lufbery (whom they were very fond of) had been killed they started out and said they would get the german if they had to go into germany. The Frenchman caught him & ramed right into him with his machine. There were three in the German machine.

There is great activity in the air tonight.

Tues. May 21st. Dr. Beer came over to the ward & we went to a concert at the YMCA. After it was over I took Miss Forsythe over a dose of C.O.

Our areoplanes are very active again tonight, when they start out or when they come near to a city or village they drop a rocket to give the signal that they are our planes, they change the color every night so the germans will not know the signal. It is great to watch them start out & return.

May 22 Wed. Miss Forsythe came up sick about nine oclock sick & I slept very little. Miss Roger was off until 10³⁰. Admitted 6 patients, two Aviators came in badly wounded & both died. The nurses came in late last night and was called before the C.O. today. Guess they wont come in again late.

May 23. Thurs. Went over to an Empty room to sleep, got up early & went over to my room, Recd letters from Emma Mae & Mattie; Relieved Miss Rogers until 1³⁰. Admitted a Lt. & a Major Walker. The other officers had a lot of fun with the Major when he was coming out of Ether, he was very foolish.

May 24 We moved from our nice little room to a down stairs room, more nurses were coming in & we were afraid it would be too hot right under the roof.

May 25. Miss Forsythe is still off duty and as there was no Empty room for me to go to I got very little sleep. Dr. Beer has asked us to go to Toul tomorrow to Breakfast.

May 26. Came off duty & went to Toul with Major Beer for breakfast. Miss Lister would not let Miss Forsythe walk so we got a truck to take us down. Walked part of the way back & was picked up by a touring car. So much noise I did not sleep.

May 27. Mon.

Went to bed early & had a good sleep, there was a drive on and we received many patients. I am in the officers war[d] but like taking care of the boys much better, Admitted Lt. Lynn Harriman—he was on duty at the front in France on May 27, 1918. Enemy put over a barrage followed by an attack. In the struggle he was hit by the Enemy's bullet & wounding him in the left shoulder, and passing downward tho. lung, he lie in the trenches unable to move (paralysed from waist down) for two hours, while lying there a bunch of germans came along with large clubs & carrying bombs, realizing he could not move he

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made believe dead, and when the Germans had gotten a distance away he opened fire on them dropping one or two & causing the others to flee. Another similar incident took place a little later. He was given the Croix-de-Guerre.

May 28. Had a hard night. Pts. very sick & needed lots of care

May 29. Slept fairly well. Went over to my room at 10 PM and had a fresh egg & cup of coffee with the girls. Rec'd a letter from Mattie.

May 30. Got up a[t] 1 o'clock and went over to the cemetery to Memorial services. First memorial services in France for our boys & they were most impressive, Flag was placed on each grave & there were speeches & patriotic songs. Major Coe wrote & recited "In Fair Lorraine & The Blue & the Gray. Band concert in the Evening."²

Germans are within 40 miles of Paris.

Fri. May 31st. Lt. Harriman died today. Just after he died word came from General Pershing he had been given the D.S.C.

Capt. Frank from our base was up here & came to the window to see us. Nearly 400 of our boys were gassed last night and are at 102 field Hosp. some are very bad. Some say it was Phosgene gas and others say Mustard.

Sat June 1st. Went right to bed. Word came to Evacuate as many patients as possible.

Sun. June 2. Evacuated this morning have five officers and two pvt's left in my two wards went over to my room and had tea & toast with the girls.

June 3 Mon

Miss Rothman, Miss Lent & I went to Bruley for something to eat but could not get anything, the place was filled with colored troops never saw such black black men. Came home from Bruley with two privates in a wagon.

June 4 Went to bed early but heard the Anti Air Craft guns so got up, saw the Bosh plane go over & saw the shells bursting in the air, but the Bosh kept on going as far as we could see.

June 5. Wed. Went to bed early. Miss Forsythe had her P.M. so did not sleep, got up early. We were sitting out on the steps when we saw a red Balloon come down, The kind used by the Germans so we

² Note: "Major [E. K.] Coe was the first commissioned officer called from Duluth at the beginning of the World war. As an officer he built Camp Lee in Virginia. In November, 1917, he went overseas to France and there was engineer in charge of the construction of a line of hospitals. In the early fall of 1918 he went to front line duty at the headquarters of the first American Army and had a part in the great battle of the Argonne. After the armistice he received home orders and returned to America early in 1919." Walter Van Brunt, ed., Duluth and St. Louis County Minnesota: Their Story and People, vol. III (Chicago and New York: The American Historical Society, 1921), p. 1059.

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chased it about a mile & just before we got to it along came a French kid & picks it up. It had not bursted but the message had been taken off before we reached it by the French.

Admitted Douglas Campbell to day The first "All American Ace". Shot in the back by a German while flying. Quite some excitement in the air tonight. Also the serch lights & Star Shells could be plainly seen.
June 6. Thurs. Miss Lent & I went for a walk & picked flowers.

June 7. Miss Lent & I took one of the officers for a walk first we went to the cemetary and then took a walk through the woods. Lt. Finn climbed a crows nest. We had to come home early as I had to go on duty. We heard today, the balloon we chased contained a message from the Germans to the people of Toul saying they would be in Toul Sunday.

Orders to Evacuate on Sunday.

June 8. Misses Forsythe Rothman, Lent & myself walked to Toul this P.M. I did some shopping, we bought some strawberries & new potatoes. I dropped the straw berries on the side walk & broke the bag.

We had supper at the Hotel Metz. As soon as I went on duty Miss Miller reported off sick so I have the whole pavilion. The report of the Americans at the front is very exciting & pleasing.

June 9. Sun.

Went to church in the morning & for a walk with the girls this after noon.

June 10. Mon.

Miss Lister came in after I got to sleep & told me I was off night duty. I got up did some washing & Ironing. Miss Lent, Forsythe Rothman & I went for a walk but had to come back early to a lecture given us by the colonel, he gave us quite a raking over, and said in a nice way we would have to come under army discipline.

June 11. Tues. Stayed in bed. Miss Forsythe & Miss Bean got my breakfast for me & then I got up & dressed and Miss Forsythe & I went to Nancy Did a lot of shopping had dinner with Lt. Antell and a friend of his at Stanislaus. It cost them 16 dollars for the four of us, bought some strawberries paid 80 cts. per qt.

June 12. Wed. Went on duty & made supplies, in the afternoon Miss Lent & I went for a walk with one of the officers, and climbed Bruley Hill & came down the steep path. Some times we were on our feet & some times we were not. We stopped at the foot of the hill & bought milk. It was the only thing we could get in the lunch line.

June 13 Thurs. Lt. Ferrin took Miss Lent & I to Toul for supper walked both ways, got home about 9³⁰.

June 14.

Went to a lecture, given by Judge Galloway on the History of France, it was most interesting.

We have a new Y.M.C.A. man, who seems very nice, and hope he will take more interest in the boys than the previous one did.

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June 15.

Miss Lent & I went for a walk & picked flowers for the cemetery. She is on the committee to keep flowers on the graves of our boys.

Sun June 16 Miss Forsythe Miss Rothman Miss Lent & myself planned to go to Lucy for supper but Miss Forsythe awakin with "Plufus" & was very sick news came the Germans had shelled Roy Amieux & many hurt so we were told to take no extra time off. I volunteered to help out part of the night and was sent to the operating Room, and worked all night until after seven the next morning.³

June 17. Total of cases admitted yesterday 148. I went to bed & took a good sleep. The boys were very badly shot up the worst wounded yet. One boy has 16 big wounds. 12 died six prisoners brought in, one died later

June 18. Tues. Miss Forsythe still sick. I was sent to her ward to help & have many of the boys that came in Sun. We did dressings nearly all day—got off about 8 o'clock. It is a gray raining evening. Evacuated at 1 o'clock

June 19. Still very busy boys are very sick & we have a number of big dressings.

June 20. Thurs. Went with Miss Lent to meet the young man (Sgt Drake) her sister is Engaged to, he gave us each a sleeveless sweater

June 21.

June 22.

June 23. Sun.

We all went to church this evening. Chaplain Billings is a very good speaker & always gives us a good sermon.

June 24 Mon. Miss Lent & I went for a walk & to the cemetery. We counted 30 new graves.

³ "At the front last August [1918], before the influenza epidemic appeared, one encountered hundreds of cases of what came to be known as "three-day fever," a curious and very infectious condition which in the Toul sector, for lack apparently of a definite name, was designated as "plufus." This infection, which bore some slight resemblance to dengue, was characterized by sudden onset, with very severe pain in the back, coryza, bronchitis and conjunctivitis. The fever usually ran a three-day course, sometimes terminated by crisis, and was usually followed by prompt convalescence. Bacteriological studies failed to disclose anything unusual or characteristic. Occasionally bronchopneumonia occurred as a complication. Whether this disease was really mild influenza, first manifesting itself in our army, is still unsettled. Definite influenza appeared later and was especially fatal among those who did not promptly report at sick call but who remained at their post of duty for a day or two while feeling badly."

Transactions of the College of Physicians of Philadelphia, Series 3, Volume 41 (College of Physicians of Philadelphia, 1917) pg 122.

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June 25. Very busy, did not get any time off. News came of a great Italian victory, and that the Austrians are retreating in disorder.

June 26 Had a half day. Miss Forsythe & I went over to the farm for milk & Eggs and after supper Miss Lent & I went over to Bruley with Sgt Drake, he rode his horse over & I rode it back. About midnight we were awoken by bombs and they sounded to be right in our yard but the next morning they said they were just outside of Toul.

June 27. After work Miss Lent & I started over to the woods to write letters & saw a lot of troops passing, so we rushed over to the main road & saw thousands of boys go by, some on trains, some walking looking very tired & some in camions & some on horse back. They were the 82 Div going up to relieve the 26th Div. We had just gotten nicely settled in bed when we heard the machine guns & out we jumped & there was an air battle going on right over us The serch light from St Micheal hill was wonderful we could see the black smoke of the german shells in the air. They dropped bombs which struck quite near the Hosp. and shook our house, It was the nearest battle we have had the areoplane went right over us The serch light turned their light on the plane & the germans shot right down the light at the serch light.

June 28. Went in the woods & had a picnic. Miss Lent Sgt Drake Sgt Ellino & myself the boys brought the lunch, they had cooked the chicken themselves and we did enjoy it.

June 29. Sat.

The evenings are great It is light until about 10 oclock, and one has to watch the time when out for it does not seem possible that it can be so late, and we must be in when taps blow.

June 30. Came off for last time, wrote letters and went to church in the evening, had a patriotic service as it was so near the 4th.