

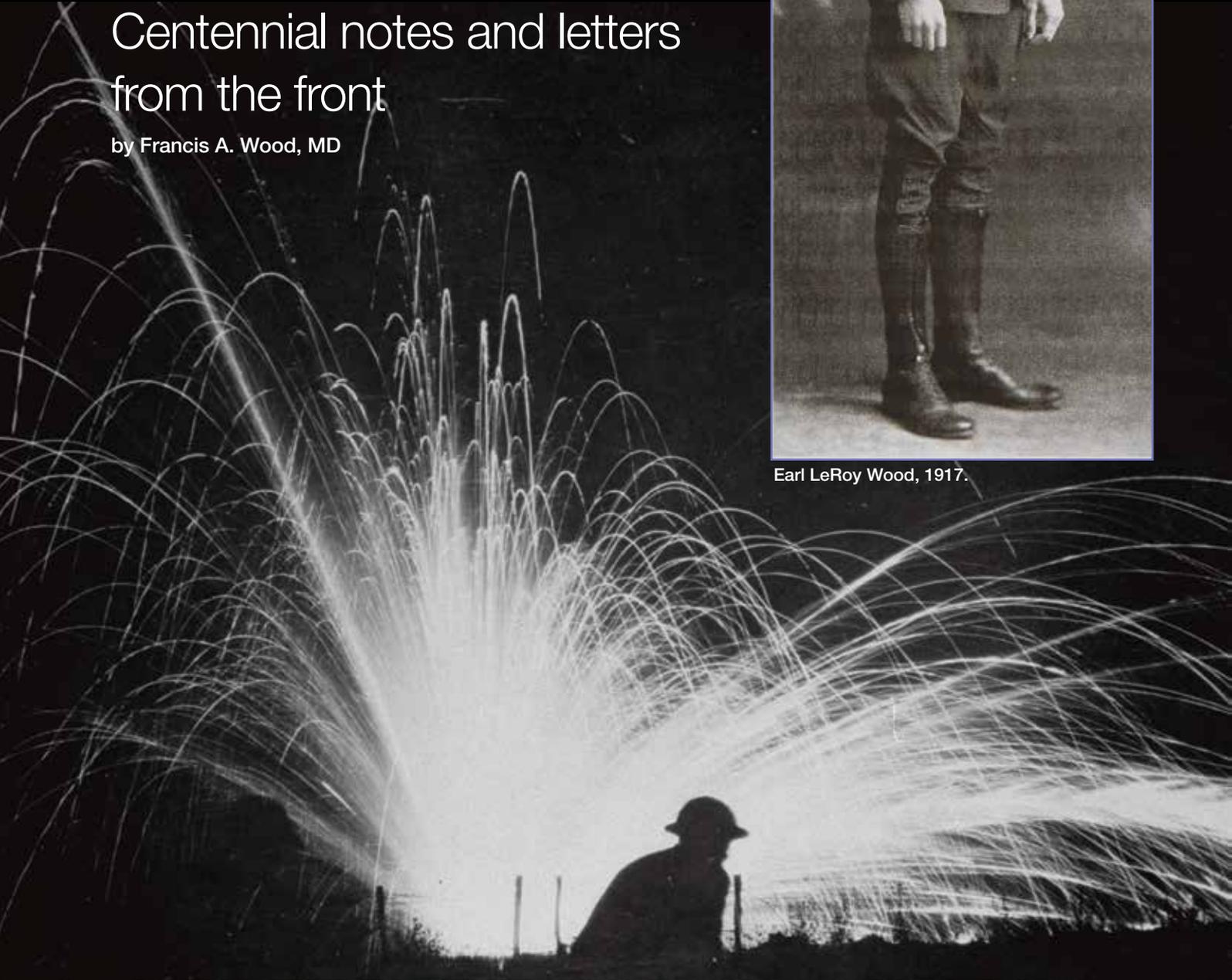
# The Army Medical Corps Reserve in World War I:

Centennial notes and letters  
from the front

by Francis A. Wood, MD



Earl LeRoy Wood, 1917.





Earl Wood, 1940

Dr. Wood (AQA, Weill Cornell Medical College, 1950) is a retired private practice neurosurgeon. He was a Diplomate of the American Board of Medical Examiners in 1952; a Diplomate of the American Board of Neurological Surgery in 1960; and a Fellow of the American College of Surgeons in 1962.

On April 6, 1917 the United States declared war on Germany and officially entered World War I, also known as The Great War. Woodrow Wilson had just been re-elected President of the U.S., using the campaign slogan, “He kept us out of war,” to appeal to those voters who wanted to avoid war in Europe. However, an intercepted telegram from German Foreign Minister Arthur Zimmermann to his ambassador in Mexico promising support for Mexico’s acquiring U.S. territory in the southwest in return for its joining the war on the German side infuriated Americans when it became public. It became no longer possible for President Wilson to keep U.S. troops out of WWI.<sup>1</sup>

The British immediately asked for doctors since they had already been in the trenches for three years, and needed replacement personnel. A call went out for young American doctors to join the Army Medical Corps with the understanding that they would be assigned to service with

the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) in France. More than 1,400 physicians volunteered, including Earl Leroy Wood.

### **A history of volunteerism**

Thomas Jefferson Wood was born January 31, 1843. He was 18-years-old at the onset of the Civil War, and enlisted with the North. He initially signed up for a three-month tour of duty, but after the battle of Bull Run, called Manassas in the South, it was obvious that the war was going to last more than just a few months, and soldiers were encouraged to re-enlist for three years. Wood did so.

He was First Sergeant of Company I, Second Regiment of Delaware Infantry, and fought at Antietam and Gettysburg, where he was wounded. After the war, he was married three times (widowed twice). Amusingly, each of his wives was named Mary, and two, unrelated, were Mary Miller!

Earl LeRoy Wood, born in 1894, was the child of Thomas’ third marriage. Thomas was killed in a railroad accident before Earl was born, and his widow, Earl’s mother, moved to Newark, NJ, where she worked as a school teacher.

Earl graduated from high school in 1913, and was accepted by New York Medical College. At this time, young men could graduate from high school and directly enroll in medical school—a college degree was not required.

Earl graduated from medical school in 1917, and answered the call from Washington to join the Army Medical Corps Reserve. He reported for active duty August 2, 1917.

Throughout his deployment, Earl frequently wrote home to his mother in Newark, NJ, often twice a week.

### The U.S. Army Medical Corps Reserve of WWI

The early physician volunteers were sent to Fort Benjamin Harrison in Indiana, Fort Riley in Kansas, or Fort Oglethorpe in Georgia, for a few weeks of training that included map reading, field sanitation, litter drill, wound care, basic French, and horseback riding. In the British army it was customary for officers to be assigned horses for transportation.

After their training, the volunteers, now officers, went to England, generally in small groups, with a few days stop at Halifax, an assembly spot for crossing the Atlantic in convoys. The trip from Halifax to Liverpool, depending on German submarine activity, could be interrupted by a stop in Ireland. From Liverpool, the doctors entrained for London.

Of the physicians in the Medical Corps Reserve, the more senior ones, especially those on medical school faculties, were organized into six general hospital units. The others, about 1,200, were assigned to combat units as battalion medical officers or field ambulance personnel.

Of the 1,427 Medical Corps volunteers who signed up when the U.S. entered the war, 37 were killed in the line of duty, 250 were wounded, and a number were captured and held as prisoners of war. Earl was among those wounded, and along with 163 others, received the Purple Heart.

Soon after arrival in London, 1st Lieutenant Wood, along with one other American doctor, was assigned to duty at the Cherry Hinton Military Hospital, a 700-bed hospital in Cambridge, staffed by 10 doctors.

Wood's letters from this period highlight the difference between the daily customs of British and American officers. The British wore the Sam Brown belt and spurs, and carried canes, which Wood wrote, "Make the men look much more like officers than the American officers do."

Wood was able to take advantage of some of the differences offered by the British army, such as:

One thing that officers in the British army have that is absent in the States is servants [*sic*]. Each officer has a servant to polish his boots, puttees, belt, etc., keep his clothes in condition, and to run his errands. This saves me time and drudgery, as of course, I have one over here.<sup>2</sup>

The servant was an enlisted man, called a "batman," and was a fixture at the front in France as well as in England.

Wood and another American physician shared quarters in a boarding house in Cambridge.

The old lady who runs the house where I live is a very dear old woman. She has adopted me and is doing her best to mother me. Last night I washed a dozen handkerchiefs and left them to dry. When I came home this evening I found that she had ironed them all for me. I got my first wash back today from the laundry and she cautioned me about putting on fresh underwear right from the laundry as it might be damp. She told me to let her have it to warm and dry before a fire lest I get the rheumatism. And she wants to see that all the buttons are sewed on. Isn't that nice of her?<sup>2</sup>

In addition to his hospital duties, Wood, like many other soldiers, had the opportunity to tour Cambridge and the surrounding area, attended lectures, and was often invited for dinner by British officers and their wives.

### The 38th Field Ambulance Company

In December 1917, Wood, his roommate, and several other Americans were sent to LeHavre, France. Upon their arrival they were required to attend gas school. "We were given a gas mask, taught the use of it and then sent into the real German poison gas as a test. If you come out all right you know your mask is OK. If the gas kills you, you know the mask is defective. Rather a good way of finding out, don't you think?"<sup>2</sup>

From LeHavre, via Rauhen, Wood was sent to the 38th Field Ambulance Company.

In 1917–1918, the BEF was composed of squads, platoons, companies, and battalions. The basic numbered and named units were the battalions with 600–800 fighting men at full strength, commanded by a Colonel. Each battalion had two or three line companies, plus a headquarters company to which a medical officer (MO) was attached. Each MO had his batman, a sanitary inspector, and a few aid attendants. To assist the MO, several riflemen in each company received instruction in first aid.

Battalions formed brigades, brigades formed divisions, divisions formed corps, and corps formed armies. Each division had nine battalion MOs, and each brigade was signed a Field Ambulance Company commanded by a Lt. Colonel, and consisting of four to six MOs, and supporting personnel. The Field Ambulance Companies evacuated the wounded from the battalion aid posts, where the battalion

Dear Sir,

April 12 1918

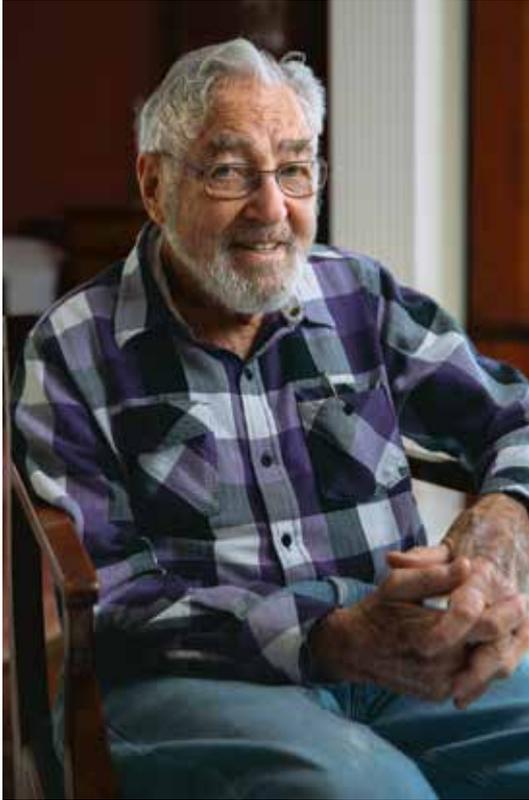
Today I received your letter of March 20 which was pretty prompt. I shall make a sworn statement before the ad. board tomorrow and unless it will then I can come out of the line and get into a decent job of something very profitable. Things can change from nothing but to a solid business. I suggest it is the best that has been thought of that makes some slight promises seem heavy. It is not in the way of a contract for a year or two, but a definite and certain one. If you can not do this or else alter the period you may propose, and the books should be read as continuously. The best business is to be made and I wish all of us to expect that and would have been glad to do so and get out of it all. Then we were relieved and the weather cleared. We came back to a camp and there we were then staying and about 1000 men were sent to the line. The sun was in the air and we had some snow on a hill or so. In the world, we are camped on a beautiful hillside and when the sun is up it is so warm that we just had to lay the gun down in it. We had all our meals in the open. Yesterday the Colonel and I went for a walk, we went off the road and walked across beautiful fields, hearing the detaches. There is a splendid house I had difficulty in reaching that two days before I was in a trench. It has never been purchased or the land. It is a good thing that we found our camp promptly and only need our provisions.

The business thing came to my mind today. The ad. board is complete. You will be glad to hear that I have had my own and will be glad to see you for an interview about the condition of the army as it stands. The sun today is bright and when I get it to be bright it goes to the front. I have some who and it is straight to the front. I had greater (the famous British) and it was that report. I think that got us out of the line.

In your letter you said that you would try to have the army advanced for us and get the temporary to the line soon. I know that I have the word and the word temporary job had a look can have but after that is something fascinating about it unless you are well in the trenches. You had really see the war and have that advantage. Having that really know what we can do. I have you got and again the quality of your knowledge and preparation is much more quickly you appreciate of your preparation when you have any. It is a real merit to be an infantry officer at the front. There are many that come out and that last long and that would be a quality of which the army is not used to. It is not to be any further in the matter. It is not to be in the line course. I think all will and that. It is not to be that concerning many promises but just because some things and things are going badly. I will be glad to put up a white flag and ask for an easy job. If I have a rough position and hold it over. If I am asked when it all over I can say that I am good. I am not sure if I can more for a month than the other fellow. It is all a matter of life. I could get an easy job free from danger. If I would accept my self respect but I would not fight in the trenches yet and if I come through I'll have my reward in knowing that I have seen my real outburst. The army is becoming known to us. I have seen many fine men go and I would like to see them. I have seen that we will be doing a great thing as beautiful that it is beyond our conception. Let us stick where we are with the way to had to give myself some and get my part in it.

With the greatest love  
C. G. B.





The author, Dr. Francis A. Wood (ΑΩΑ, Weill Cornell Medical College, 1950), is the grandson of Thomas Jefferson Wood, and son of Earl LeRoy Wood.

MOs worked. Ideally the battalion aid posts were some distance from the frontline, but at times of intense fighting, if the frontline retreated, it could approach or even overrun the aid post.

Much of the work of the MOs took place at night, when the line was subjected to intense bombardment and gas shells. The MO and his assistants had to work wearing gas masks, often for hours at a stretch.

By March of 1918 the vast majority of MOs serving combat units in the BEF were Americans.

One of the bravest MOs was William J. McGregor, MD, of Wilkesburg, PA, who lost both of his legs during battle.

At Haverincourt Wood, just east of Bapaume Road near Cambrai, McGregor was serving with a machine gun battalion in March 1918, during a major German offensive. McGregor was dressing his wounded as were countless other doctors on this front, seldom eating and never sleeping. Slowly retreating, working like mad to take care of those men who could not get themselves back before the Germans came upon them, McGregor was soon working wherever and whenever he could, his battalion of machine

gunners having long since been dispersed, their guns captured or destroyed, and the personnel having been assigned to various infantry organizations as they came along.

On the 29th of March one of the salvos of 5.9s, which came over, landed on McGregor. Although severely wounded in both legs he did have the good fortune to be rescued before the Germans got him. Wounded at 6:00 pm, he was operated on the following morning and sent to England.<sup>3</sup>

The battalion MO often found himself on the front line, supervising evacuation of the wounded. When German prisoners were taken, it became customary to have several of them pressed into service as stretcher bearers.

### MOs also family practitioners

BEF volunteers also cared for local French citizens. During January and February of 1918, when the front was relatively quiet, the field ambulance company to which Wood was assigned was encamped some miles behind the frontline, and Wood was called to serve as family practitioner to the local French population. He held sick call, delivered babies and did a few operations. In January 1918 he wrote:

This certainly is the job as headquarters medical officer. It suits my taste more than anything I have had so far. I am absolutely my own boss but have lots of work to do. The work however is of the kind I like, and is more like civil practice than anything else. I hold office hours three times a day at 9:15, 2 and 6 p.m. At these times the soldiers and French people can come to see me. In between times I visit the cases that notify me. I have really more of the French population to treat than British. And they vary to include everything. I had two babies today among others, a French officer, numerous French men, and one *mam'selle*. She was inclined to be a bit hysterical, and the old game of holding her hand and soothing words, although she couldn't understand them, worked even over here. One of the high strung French men whose hand I had to lance this morning fainted on me three times before I could get him out of the office. So it goes. I shall be sorry when this ends. I think I enjoy treating the civil population, and talking my poor French to them, more than anything else.<sup>2</sup>

Four days later he wrote:

I am enjoying this job more than anything I have had since I left England. It is more like general civilian practice than anything else. I had one case of insanity come in today. I

visit the four week old baby every day, and it is doing nicely. I operated on the foot of a nine year old boy today and he was certainly a brave little *poilu*. The generals and colonels are coming along nicely.

I was very much shocked when I visited the baby today by a French custom which I discovered. The mother has more milk than the baby will take but she explained "*J'ai un petit chien, ii est necessaire,*" meaning that she has a puppy dog and she nurses that on one breast and the baby on the other.<sup>2</sup>

But all good things eventually come to an end, and Wood was reassigned as a battalion MO in the 7th Suffolk Regiment, where he was wounded.

I had the experience of being wounded...now don't get worried—wait till I tell you about it. I was standing outside my dug-out scraping a few tons of France off my boots when a shell burst close by and a piece caught me in the back right over the left kidney. I let out a yelp, straightened up for a few moments, and then finished my boots. It was quite trivial. When I took off my clothes to have my corporal fix it...it turned out not to be a serious wound—no fractured ribs, no penetration of the pleural cavity, but it caused a lot of pain for a while. It was a rather good thing to remind me that there is a war on.<sup>2</sup>

In March 1918, the Germans launched a major offensive in Flanders. Wood wrote:

Everything is going along nicely except that life isn't the most pleasant sitting in a shell hole with rain pouring down on top of you and bullets whistling by just scraping the top of your head. It is my opinion that the American doctors with the British army have seen more real fighting than any officer with the American army. I saw a *New York Times* a few days ago and found it very amusing to see a whole column given to six wounded soldiers in the whole army. My own battalion could have several times that and we'd think nothing of it.<sup>2</sup>

Relief of a battalion on the frontline was a heavenly experience. Lt. Cornelius McCarthy, who won the Military Cross for Valor, described the relief:

This relief was indeed trying. For several weeks in and out of the line with casualties equal to their entire strength, the men and officers of the division had been hammered and pounded, far beyond the ordinary conception of human

endurance. Yet, they performed as only those who were with them know.

The headquarters and aid post personnel were the last to be relieved. When everyone else was gone the Colonel, Adjutant, and doctor mounted their horses in the pitch dark of a moonless night and started for good food, clean beds and a night's rest. To the uninitiated, anywhere in France was dangerous and terrible. To the soldier on the line, a rest area five miles behind the front line was a paradise.<sup>3</sup>

On April 12, 1918, Wood wrote his own account of being relieved:

We have come out of the line and are now in reserve. Isn't it surprising how promptly things can change from positive hell to a sort of heaven? I suppose it's the hell that you've been through that make even slight pleasures seem heavenly. We were in the very worst trenches for seven days—deep mud and continual rain. Of course, we couldn't wash or shave all this period, or sleep properly, and the Boche shelled and gassed us continually. The whole battalion was sick, and I ached all over. We all felt dead beat and would have been glad to die and get out of it all. Then we were relieved, and the weather changed. We came back, got a wash and shave and some clean clothing, and above all, some proper sleep and became as cheery as could be. You would think we had never known a care or a worry in the world. We are camped on a beautiful hillside, and when the sun is up it is so warm that we just want to lie on the grass and browse in it. We eat all our meals in the open. Yesterday, the Colonel and I went for a ride. We went off the road and galloped across beautiful fields, jumping the ditches. I have a splendid horse. I had difficulty in recalling that two days before I was in as much of a hell as has ever been produced on this earth. It's a good thing that we forget our cares promptly, and only recall our pleasures.

One amusing thing came to my ears today. One night after I completed my tour of the trenches through the driving rain and mud, the Adjutant asked me for an informal report on the condition of the men, so I wrote him one. Today, I heard that when he got it he turned it over to the Brigadier General who sent it straight to the Army Headquarters, the famous General Byng, and it was that report of mine that got us relieved. [*Julian Byng became Governor General of Canada after the war. His wife initiated the Lady Byng Trophy for good sportsmanship in the National Hockey League.*]

In your letter you said that you would try to have Mr.



General Julian Byng.

Gray intercede for me and get me transferred to the American army. Really Mother, I don't know as I want him too [*sic*]. I know that I have the worst and the most dangerous job that a doctor can have, but again there is something fascinating about it. Unless you are right in the trenches you don't really see the war, and I have that advantage.... And again, the greater your hardships and privations so much more greatly you appreciate your pleasures when you have any. It takes a real man to be an infantry officer at the front—there are many that come out and don't last long and I don't want to be a quitter if I die in the attempt. I don't want to ask for any favors in this matter. If I am relieved in the due course of time—all well and good—I'll take anything that comes my way normally but just because I am in danger and things are going badly I'm not the one to put up a white flag and ask for an easy job. If I have a tough position and hold it down—if I am spared—when it's all over I can say that I am just so much more of a man than the other fellow. It's all a gamble with life—I could get an easy job free from danger if I would sacrifice my self respect but I haven't lost faith in the Almighty yet, and if I come through I'll have my reward in knowing that I have run my race and finished the course as He would have me do. I have seen many fine men go but isn't it possible that

they go from a small life that we hold so dear to a greater being so beautiful that it is beyond our conception? Let me stick where I am—and when the way is hard I'll drive myself forward and put my faith in Him.<sup>2</sup>

However, the war went on, and the respite period came to an end:

We are back on the line again and having a rotten time. I am afraid that either I'm not old enough, or I'm not hard enough, but it makes me sick all over to see the two sides of the world competing against each other and using all their brains and ingenuity to devise the most horrible way of destroying one another. When I see what has been a happy man ten minutes before blown suddenly to the four winds of the earth I can't help but shudder. Still, will stick it out and do as He directs, though the Devil seems to be in command of the earth.<sup>2</sup>

In May 1918 Wood was hospitalized in Rouen for a serious case of scabies and trench foot—both the principle cause of disability in the front line troops. He was also suffering from recurrent attacks of sinusitis and headaches. These conditions necessitated Wood being sent to England, and admitted to a small hospital in London where he was seen by a specialist who recommended sinus surgery. However, Wood had lost so much weight in the trenches that surgery was postponed until he had spent several weeks in a convalescent hospital in Surrey, and regained some weight. His days in Surrey were not spent lying in a hospital bed, but were filled with tennis, golf, dances, visits to Parliament, and tea with the Duchess of Marlborough, Consuelo Vanderbilt. On August 16, 1918, he wrote:

I suppose you often wonder what I am doing just buzzing around this way, enjoying myself and leading a thoroughly enjoyable life when there is a war on. I worked very long and hard for months, very close to death at times, and when I am given the opportunity again for a little life I feel I'd be ungrateful if I didn't make the most of it.<sup>2</sup>

Wood underwent sinus surgery in September 1918, but the Medical Board felt he should not return to France, and assigned him to the Rochester Row Military Hospital. Although a military hospital controlled by the army, it was comparable to the Veterans Administration hospitals in the U.S.

In the spring of 1919 Wood was discharged from service with the British. He came back to the U.S. to an internship at

Newark City Hospital (how dull that must have seemed after all he'd been through!), and family practice in Newark. He trained in otolaryngology and learned bronchoscopy from Chevalier Jackson, MD (AQA, Raymond and Ruth Perelman School of Medicine at the University of Pennsylvania, 1928, Honorary) in Philadelphia.

Wood remained in the Army Medical Corps Reserve, took courses, attended meetings, went to summer camps, and advanced in rank. In the late 1930s, he was promoted to Colonel, and not long after Pearl Harbor he returned to active duty. He spent two years as station hospital commander in southern California, and the last year of World War II as commanding officer of a base hospital in New Guinea whose principal mission was to support MacArthur's Philippine campaign, which he also supported by traveling to Leyte to select sites for medical facilities.

After World War II, as the senior reserve medical officer in New Jersey, he assisted medical lieutenants and captains with their applications for residencies and hospital appointments.

In the early 1950s, Wood suffered two myocardial infarctions, and retired from practice. He developed an interest in opera, and on formal occasions was proud to wear his Purple Heart ribbon, and ribbon denoting service with the BEF in World War I. He and his wife, Flora, visited France on several occasions and made a number of friends, but Wood never mastered more French than the few words he used to console a hysterical *mam'selle* in Flanders half a century before. Wood died in 1982, at the age of 87.

American physicians who served with the BEF were an extraordinary group of men dedicated to helping and healing others.

Thirteen hundred medical men were selected from among the patriotic many who volunteered to fill our quota. They came from every portion of our country as soon as the need was made known. One and all, they realized that they were untrained as soldiers, and that they were to be placed side by side in competition with medical officers who had endured the hardships of two years of war—men who had earned promotion by long service, and who would outrank each and every one of them. Nor would they be privileged to serve with their own companions under their own flag; but one by one, individually, they would be ordered to serve with strangers, men of a different nation; and under a foreign flag....not one of these patriotic men hesitated for a moment. No one who had to do with this brilliant chapter of the volunteer army of the reserve corps in The Great War but was thrilled by the self-sacrifice of the young



Artist's rendition of the Royal Army Medical Corps on active service in WWI.

By Haydn Reynolds Mackey. Credit welcome Collection

doctors, their intense patriotism, and the magnificent and noncomplaining manner in which they endured their many hardships.<sup>3</sup>

Surely, this was a bright chapter in the history of American medicine.

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