

## Nurses in the Military

### Army Nurse Corps: Anita Newcomb McGee, Acting Assistant Surgeon, U.S. Army <sup>1, 2</sup>



Dr. Anita Newcomb McGee – 1864 - 1940

In September of 1899 Dr. McGee presented a paper addressing her work with the Daughters of the American Revolution in the formation of the Army Nurse Corp. The following are excerpts from her paper:

“Dr. McGee suggested to the National Society of the Daughters of the American Revolution (of which she was a Vice President General) that that organization should act as an examining board for women nurses for the Government. The Surgeon Generals of both Army and Navy promptly accepted this offer of the "Daughters," and in April the "D.A.R. Hospital Corps" was organized, with the writer as-Director.”

“The work of 1899 has been to organize the "Army Nurse Corps" and to perfect the nursing records of the war. The applicants for appointment include large numbers of nurses who have, in previous service, become

familiar with army duties, and these applications are a most encouraging indication of the success of the work. The organization of the Corps is still incomplete in some details, but a satisfactory basis for its general regulation has been evolved from experience. The rules governing this matter were issued from the Surgeon-General's Office on June 20th last, and bore the approval of the Secretary of War. They provide as follows regarding the qualifications for appointment: “

“To be appointed in the army as a nurse must be qualified therefor, physically, mentally, and morally, as hereinafter provided:

1. She must present a physician's certificate of health on a blank form which will be furnished by the Surgeon General.

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.spanamwar.com/Nurses.htm>.

<sup>2</sup> McGee, Anita Newcomb, 1902, *The Nurse Corp of the Army*. Reprint from Journal of American Military Surgeons of the United States. Carlisle, Pa. (Downloaded from Internet Archives - <https://archive.org/>)

2. She must be a graduate from a training school for nurses which gives a thorough professional education, both theoretical and practical, and requires at least two years' residence in a Hospital.

3. She must be endorsed by the present Superintendent of nurses at the hospital from which she graduated and also by the one under whom she was trained. Blanks for these endorsements will be furnished by the Surgeon General and are to be returned directly to him.”<sup>3</sup>

Furthermore, in order to alleviate the shortage of make nursing personnel, McGee argued that Graduate nurses who had completed a hospital training program could be given special post graduate military course at one of the large military hospitals while at the same time teaching practical nursing techniques to Hospital Corp recruits. Dr. McGee envisioned these nurses to form a permanent teaching corps.<sup>4</sup> Dr. McGee also envisioned a large reserve nurse corps of about 2000 nurses.

### Formation of the Navy Nurse Corps

On May 13, 1908, President Theodore Roosevelt signed the Naval Appropriations Bill authorizing the establishment of the Nurse Corps as a unique staff corps in the Navy.<sup>5</sup>

The nucleus of this new Navy Nurse Corps was a superintendent Esther Hasson, a chief nurse Lenah Higbee, and 18 other women—all would forever be remembered as the “Sacred Twenty.”



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<sup>3</sup>For a chronological timeline from 1775 to 2000 see Highlights in the History of the Army Nurse Corps, Edited by Carolyn M. Feller Lieutenant Colonel, AN, USAR and Debora r. Cox Major, AN U.S. Army Center of Military History Washington, DC 2001. : <https://history.army.mil/books/anc-highlights/chrono.htm>

<sup>4</sup> McGee, Anita Newcomb, op.cit.p.6

<sup>5</sup> <http://navymedicine.navylive.dodlive.mil/archives/2834>

Beatrice Bowman, one of these pioneering nurses, and later superintendent of the Nurse Corps, recalled that these “nurses were assigned to duty at the Naval Hospital, Washington, D.C. There were no quarters for them but they were given an allowance for quarters and subsistence<sup>6</sup>

Until 1909, all Navy nurses had the choice of one duty station, Naval Hospital Washington, D.C. (sometimes referred to as the Navy Medical School Hospital). In 1909, BUMED began detailing its Navy Nurse Corps to medical facilities outside of Washington, D.C. Naval Hospitals Annapolis, Md., Brooklyn, N.Y., and Mare Island, Calif., were among the first hospitals to receive nurses. In spring 1909, Surgeon James Leys, commanding officer, Naval Hospital Norfolk, Va., requested BUMED to send “nurses” to his hospital. When three female nurses (Lenah Higbee, Ethel Swann, and Mary Nelson) reported for duty Surgeon Leys was aghast. He had fully expected to receive male hospital corpsmen and did not know how they could work in a hospital without a single female patient.

From the original 20 nurses that were selected as members of the Navy Nurse Corps, who became known as the “Sacred Twenty,” the size of the Navy Nurse Corps has grown over the years, peaking to 11,000 members during World War II.

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<sup>6</sup> <http://navymedicine.navylive.dodlive.mil/archives/2834>