

Florence A. Blanchfield: A Lifetime of Nursing Leadership

The U.S. Army hospital at Fort Campbell, Kentucky, was named for army nurse, Colonel Florence A. Blanchfield—making it the only current army hospital named for a nurse.

Florence Aby Blanchfield was born into a large family in Shepherdstown, West Virginia, in 1882. Her mother was a nurse, and her father was a mason and stonecutter. She grew up in Oranda, Virginia, and attended both public and private schools. Following in her mother's footsteps to become a nurse, she attended Southside Hospital Training School in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and graduated in 1906. She moved to Baltimore after graduation and worked with Howard Atwood Kelly, one of the "Big Four" along with William Osler, William Henry Welch, and William Stewart Halsted who were known as the founding physicians of the Johns Hopkins Hospital.

After what must have been a remarkable experience with the innovative Kelly (inventor of many groundbreaking medical instruments and procedures, including the Kelly clamp), Blanchfield returned to Pittsburgh. She held po-



sitions of increasing responsibility over several years, including operating room supervisor at Southside Hospital and Montefiore Hospital and superintendent of the training school at Suburban General Hospital. Looking for adventure as well as service, she gave up her positions of leadership and headed to Panama in 1913 to become an operating room nurse and an anesthetist at Ancon Hospital in the U.S. Canal Zone.

As America prepared for its probable entry into World War I, Blanchfield joined the Army Nurse Corps (ANC) at age 35 to serve with the Medical School Unit of the University of Pittsburgh's Base Hospital 27. She arrived in France in October 1917 and became act-

ing chief nurse of Base Hospital 27 in Angers, Maine et Loire department. She also served as acting chief nurse of Camp Hospital 15 at Coëtquidan, Ille et Vil department.

Blanchfield returned to civilian life following World War I for a short period but returned to active duty in 1920. Over the next 15 years, she had several assignments within the continental U.S. and overseas in the Philippines and in Tianjin, China (formally known in English as Tientsin). In 1935, Blanchfield joined the Office of the Army Surgeon General in Washington, DC, where she was assigned to work on personnel matters in the office of the superintendent of the ANC. She became assistant superintendent in 1939,

acting superintendent in 1942, and served as superintendent from June 1943 until September 1947. During World War II, she presided over the growth of the ANC from about 7,000 nurses on the day Pearl Harbor was attacked to more than 50,000 by the end of the war. She was awarded the Distinguished Service Medal for her contributions and accomplishments during World War II.

Blanchfield, a long-time senior leader in the ANC, was instrumental in many of the significant changes that took place during and after World War II, including nurses gaining full rank and benefits. This was an incremental process that culminated with passage of the Army

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and Navy Nurse Corps Act of April 1947, with nurses being granted full commissioned status. As a result of this act, she became a lieutenant colonel and the first woman to receive a commission in the regular army.

Blanchfield remained active in national nursing affairs after her retirement from the U.S. Army. At a time when many believed that nurses did not need specialty training, she promoted the establishment of specialized courses of study. In 1951, she received the Florence Nightingale Medal of the International Red Cross.

Blanchfield died on May 12, 1971, and was buried in the nurse's section of Arlington National Cemetery with full military honors. In 1978, ANC leadership began a drive to memorialize Blanchfield by naming the new hospital at Fort Campbell, Kentucky, in her honor. A successful letter writing campaign by army nurses inundated the senior commander at Fort Campbell. The Colonel Florence A. Blanchfield Army Community Hospital, which was dedicated in her memory on September 17, 1982. ●

About this column

This column provides biographical sketches of the namesakes of military and VA health care facilities. To learn more about the individual your facility was named for or to offer a topic suggestion, contact us at fedprac@frontlinemedcom.com or on Facebook.



Army Nurse Corps recruitment poster created by Stu L. Savage for the U.S. Army Recruiting Publicity Bureau, 1944.