



Finding Helen: The Letters, Photographs and Diary of a WWI Battlefield Nurse

Brooke B. Cameron, Janice C. Collins

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For those of us interested in nursing history, this book is a treasure. From it we have a first-hand account of nursing on the front lines during the fighting in France and Belgium during World War I. Helen Bulovsky, a recent nursing school graduate, enlisted in the Army and became part of the American Expeditionary Force, assigned to Base Hospital 22 in France. From her first days in the army, anxiously awaiting transport from New York to her battlefield stations, to her arrival back home in Wisconsin, we are able to follow her journey, her fears, homesickness, and occasional illnesses through her letters home. She describes taking care of large numbers of patients, of bombing raids and running for shelter in the middle of the night, being cold with too little clothing, poor food, and lack of water. In spite of the hardships, she kept her sense of humor. Photographs of the camps, other nurses and doctors, and souvenirs she brought or sent home are included as well as some of her poetry. A few years later, only nine months after she was married, Helen, at age 27, died at home of an acute enlargement of the heart. Her death was marked by a number of articles in the local newspaper. At the gravesite, taps was played and there was a 21 gun salute.

This book was a labor of love for two cousins, who discovered that each possessed letters and memorabilia of their often talked about Aunt Helen. A lesson for all of us---to preserve such treasures for future generations.

Shannon E. Perry, RN, PhD, FAAN Professor Emerita,
San Francisco State University School of Nursing First Vice President,
American Association for the History of Nursing

From diary entries and over 100 intimate letters we learn of a dedicated young nurse's war experience as well as her ambitions, joys, and frustrations. She writes about her relationships with friends and colleagues and concern for her family back home. Helen's often humorous letters contain not only descriptions, insight and advice, but also expressions and attitudes of the time. Included are Helen's clever songs and poems, letters from friends, official letters, extra research and related information and Helen's own narrative, *Behind the Trenches*.

"Received Smallpox vaccine in left arm. Triple typhoid in rt. arm...At 5 P.M. felt sick as any wounded soldier. Roommates were very nice to me. Half the old maids in this world are teachers and the other half are nurses." - Diary, April 5, 1918, Lakewood, New Jersey

"It's a wild nightmare real war - trenches, entanglements & guns & worst of all, hundreds of patients. Pts. laying on the ground under trees - some on cots. No limit to our hrs. on duty. Damp ground and quarters. Take our clothes to bed to keep them dry. C.O. does nothing but cuss - said he hates women - Oh, it's lovely to be a woman in this man's army." - Diary, July 23, 1918, Sery-Magneval, France

"To reach this town was my greatest ambition." - Letter, July 22, 1918 Sery-Magneval, France

"It was some ride over the cobblestones and here we are in quarters well peppered with holes made by

Germans just seven days ago. On night duty in the shock ward-300 pts run thru, 10 expired" - Diary, July 31, 1918, Chateau-Thierry

"I had 5 German prisoners between 14 and 15 years of age and they were glad they were prisoners. Ruth and I decided that by next June we will either be in heaven, hell or Hoboken." - Letter, August 3, 1918

"No one can picture the horrors of the wee, small hours of the mornings in the shock ward" - *Behind the Trenches* "Are you a real American woman? How in God's name did you get into this bloody mess?" - *Behind the Trenches*

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