

Cadet Nurse Corps

A Shining Moment

By Capt. Carolyn Beth Lee, USPHS

Many members of the armed services are unaware that, in addition to the potential for transfer of the Commissioned Corps of the Public Health Service (PHS) to the Department of Defense by an executive order of the President, the PHS has served our nation's military in many other ways. The following article provides a sketch of one such program—the Cadet Nurse Corps.

Contrary to popular belief, World War II did not create a nursing shortage. As we pulled out of the Great Depression, there was a growing need for nurses due to the increased use of hospitals spurred by industrial growth and the associated expansion of medical and health insurance plans.

To increase the number of nurses available in our society, the 77th Congress was the first to appropriate funds for their training. This initial campaign was hampered by shortages of clinical facilities and

housing, inadequate classroom space, and too few instructors. Yet new indicators of growing need continued to appear as the Army called for first 10,000, then a total corps of more than 35,000 nurses. Concurrently, about 17,000 nursing positions were vacant in civilian hospitals.

Introduced Bill

On 29 March 1943, Cong. Frances Payne Bolton (R-Ohio) introduced a bill "to provide for the training of nurses for the armed forces, governmental and civilian hospitals, health agencies, and war industries through grants to institutions providing for training and for other purposes." This action ultimately created the Cadet Nurse Corps. In support of the legislation, Sen. Elbert D. Thomas (D-Utah) stated: "Beyond the immediate need, this aid to nursing education will serve to stabilize and improve the profession."

The Nurse Training Act (also known as

the Bolton Act) passed both Houses of Congress and was ready for the signature of the President on 15 June 1943. On 1 July 1943 it became Public Law 74. All state-accredited schools of basic nursing were eligible to apply, provided the three-year program was changed to 30 months and the school arranged for a period of student service (senior cadet) in a federal, non-federal, or other health agency. The law required the program to be open to all regardless of race, color, or creed.



Recruiting posters and publicity campaign resulted from efforts of Lucile Petry, Director, Division of Nurse Education, PHS—the first woman to head a major PHS division.



Nurses model the distinctive US Cadet Nurse Corps uniforms of the WWII era. The beret bears the Public Health Service insignia.

The Division of Nurse Education was established in the Public Health Service on 23 June 1943, and Lucile Petry was appointed its Director—the first woman to head a major PHS division. An Advisory Committee was appointed. In opening their work, Fr. Alphonse Schwitalla, Dean, School of Medicine, St. Louis University, said: “This is one of the first instances we have of government subsidies directly to the schools, and perhaps this is the most revolutionary point of the program. . . . We are dealing with an aid in the education of a profession rather than the taking over of financial responsibility for the profession.”

In an amazing demonstration of government action, only a few weeks after appropriations were available, the first school was approved for participation in the Cadet Nurse Corps program. In fact, the first payment was made on 14 August.

Recruitment for new enrollees began almost immediately. In one year, \$13 million worth of advertising space and technical service was donated. A film, *Reward Unlimited*, starring Dorothy McGuire,

was produced and released nationwide. Cadet Nurses appeared on billboards, in newsreels, and in over 5,600 newspaper columns. They adorned posters and the covers of *Collier's*, *Harpers's Bazaar*, and *Ladies Home Journal*. Because of the non-discrimination provisions, special efforts were undertaken to recruit minorities.

Distinctive Uniforms

The distinctive cadet uniforms, chosen 17 August 1943, included a winter jacket and skirt of gray flannel with silver buttons and insignia, and sleeve markings of a silver Maltese cross on scarlet oval. The beret bore the PHS insignia. The summer uniform was topped with a light-gray felt hat with a red band, and continued with a gray-and-white striped cotton blouse and skirt.

What was it like to be a Cadet Nurse? The final report of the Federal Security Agency described the experiences of a mythical Hannah Smith, a junior in high school in 1943, with no money for college due to the death of her father. While interested in nursing, she was discouraged by reports of long hours, low pay, and hard work.

She joined the Cadet Nurse Corps in June 1944 and began nine months as a pre-cadet, with academic course and clinical practice limited to 24 hours per week. Reaching junior cadet status during her second semester, she had classes cut to 28 hours per week with corresponding increases in clinical work. Now Hannah received the cadet uniform. During the first half of the third year, Hannah's classes covered seven hours per week. After sending her application to Federal Civil Service Commission, Hannah became a senior cadet in the middle of her third year. By now, Hannah's school had received \$1,860 in federal funds for her tuition, uniforms, stipends, and maintenance.

Military Service

Of the 116,127 senior cadets available during the program, 34,574 of them applied for six months duty as senior cadets with the federal services; 17,475 were accepted. However, nearly 73 percent served in the hospital where they trained. During its three-year enrollment period, over 170,000 young women joined the Corps but 55,986 withdrew before finishing. This loss of about 33 percent was slightly lower than the rate for all nursing schools during the same period and only four percent higher than the pre-war rate. During 1945, 85 percent of the nurs-

ing students in the country were Cadet Nurses.

As noted in the final report on this program, it was “not the intention of Congress to reform nursing education, but to train an augmented number of nurses in the country's existing schools.” The Corps developed new role models for nursing. It polished nursing's image in the mainstream of progress in health care. The accelerated curriculum forced priorities when choosing subjects or experiences; teaching was fresher; it opened doors to government support of nursing education and/or research in nursing. Specific gains in education and integration were made by black nurses as the number of black cadets exceeded 2,600.

Opponents of the Corps detected weaknesses in the Nurse Training Act: the federal aid was considered to be too generous for wartime service of student nurses and there was difficulty in controlling services of senior cadets and graduates as the Cadet Nurse Corps pledge was determined to be non-binding.

The Federal Security Agency in its final report on the Cadet Nurse Corps concluded: “Urgently needed nursing services have been provided and the training of nurses has been stimulated and improved. In the long view, this last aspect may prove as valuable to the nation's health as the Corps itself was to the war effort.”

Continuing the tradition of interservice cooperation, the PHS will coordinate year-long activities to commemorate the Cadet Nurse Corps. The Federal Nursing Chiefs (Army, Navy, Air Force, Veterans' Administration, and American Red Cross) join PHS Chief Nurse Officer RAdm. Julia Plotnick in celebrating a shining moment in nursing history.

• *Captain Lee, a Registered Nurse, is the Deputy Director of the Division of Scholarships and Loan Repayment at PHS Headquarters. She is also the coordinator of PHS activity concerning the Cadet Nurse Corps.*

Looking for Nurses . . .

If you were a Cadet Nurse, please send the following information:

Name and Maiden name
School of nursing, city, and state
Dates of training
Current address

to the Public Health Service at the following address:

USPHS/Cadet Nurse Corps
Parklawn Building, 5600 Fishers Lane
Rockville, MD 20857