

Hopkins Goes to War: The Saga of the 18th General Hospital

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Introduction

In the years immediately preceding America's entrance into World War II, the U.S. government ordered prominent teaching hospitals to prepare members of their staffs for deployment overseas to care for wounded soldiers. One such institution was the Johns Hopkins University Hospital, which was asked to supply enough men and women to staff two complete field hospitals. Nearly two hundred Johns Hopkins doctors, nurses, and other medical professionals quickly volunteered, forming the 18th and 118th General Hospitals of the U.S. Army Medical Service Corps. After the Pearl Harbor attack in December 1941, both units were sent to the Pacific theater with only rudimentary military training. Once there, the 18th and 118th served overseas for almost three years, providing critical care to thousands of uniformed men and women.

This paper will attempt to assess what the wartime experience was like for the members of the 18th General Hospital by considering the perspectives revealed in three different primary source bases. The paper will begin with an introduction to the 18th General Hospital, spanning from its inception in 1941 to its deactivation in 1945. It will then discuss the memoir *L.O.D.—Yes*, a factually

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complete history of the 18th. Then the paper will examine *The Fijitive*, the newspaper published by the 18th for internal consumption. Created for entertainment purposes, it offers a lighthearted yet informative take on the unit's tenure in the Pacific. In addition to detailing what the unit's members did during their considerable free time, the newspaper clues the reader into the 18th's emotional state. Next, a close look at letters from one member of the 18th will reveal a unique perspective, one that is able to fill in considerable gaps in the historical narrative left by the other sources. The paper will conclude by attempting to determine the legacy of the unit's experience during World War II. In doing so, the paper will answer the following questions. Did members of the 18th General Hospital view their experience as a disappointment? Were their lofty expectations regarding the nature of their service met? Finally, is the generally negative portrayal of the 18th's experience in both primary and secondary sources justified?

Of the three source bases discussed in the paper, only the memoir is used in secondary literature in any capacity. Both *The Fijitive* and the letters are completely absent from secondary accounts of the Hopkins medical unit. By examining the perspectives offered in these two "new" sources, we may achieve a fuller picture of the 18th General Hospital's experience during its overseas odyssey in World War II.

The 18th's War

The Second World War officially began in September of 1939, when Nazi forces invaded Poland. This unprovoked attack triggered the bloodiest war in human history and put the United States on a collision course with the Axis powers. Back in Baltimore, however, the Johns Hopkins Hospital and Medical School were largely untouched by the opening of hostilities. In his history of the two institutions, however, historian Thomas Turner writes that they soon "began to stir; energies and thoughts began gradually to be diverted from teaching and research and to be fixed on some problem believed important to the war effort" (471). More tangible signs of Hopkins's involvement could be seen in the winter of 1939-1940. Hopkins employees in the Army and Navy reserves were pressed into active duty and entire laboratories in the medical school were appropriated by the military for war-related research (Turner 472).

In early 1940 it became clear that Johns Hopkins would become directly

involved in the war effort if America did in fact enter the conflict. In March, the Army Surgeon General asked Johns Hopkins Hospital to ready a portion of its staff for deployment overseas. Several weeks later, the Army informed Hopkins that it would need to part with nearly two hundred doctors and nurses to staff not one, but two entire general hospitals. According to Mary Condon-Rall and Albert Cowdrey, authors of a history of the military's medical services in the Pacific theater, such hospitals were the largest and most valuable in military service, often containing the best medical professionals available. General hospitals were typically located many miles from the front lines and tasked to "provide comprehensive care for severe cases throughout a theatre of war" (71). The Army designated the two Johns Hopkins units the 18th and 118th General Hospitals respectively, the former's unit number meant to pay homage to the Johns Hopkins medical unit that served during World War I (Turner 472). But without a formal declaration of war on the part of the U.S. government, the 18th existed only on paper, and life at Hopkins returned to normal for the next several months (Turner 483).

The Pearl Harbor attacks of December 7, 1941 brought this period of relative calm to an abrupt end. Both Hopkins units were activated soon after America's entrance into the war, and their constituents ordered to report for active duty. On April 20, 1942, the forty-five doctors and sixty nurses of the 18th left Baltimore's Pennsylvania Station, heading by train south to Fort Jackson, South Carolina. There the Army, according to Turner, attempted to "make soldiers of these civilian physicians and nurses" but only achieved "limited success" (484). At Fort Jackson, the unit learned the basics of military discipline and secrecy. Each member also had to fill out of reams of paperwork, or as one of the 18th's officers remembered it, the "repetitious filling out of multitudinous blanks" (Tilghman 4). After two weeks in South Carolina, the 18th was shipped to San Francisco, California. From this the unit inferred that it was heading to the Pacific theater, but the Army did not reveal its exact destination. In late May 1942, the 18th General Hospital boarded the *U.S.S. General James Parker* and headed west across the Pacific Ocean (ibid).

The 18th General Hospital, along with a division of Marines, landed on the island of Fiji on August 3, 1942. Instead of quickly becoming operational, the unit was beset by problems from the very start. First, the Army had not assigned the unit a location to set up a hospital. After days of "excruciating delay," the 18th's commanding officer chose an unassuming site: the athletic field

of a local boarding school (Tilghman 5). Second, the medical equipment needed for the hospital to function had not yet arrived, and would not arrive for an additional three weeks. In the meantime, the members of the 18th, along with a unit of Army Engineers, began enthusiastically constructing the hospital's first facilities. According to Colonel Carmichael Tilghman, one of the unit's doctors, the 18th's members "engaged in this endeavor so aptly that they were known as the '18th General Engineers'" (10). Nevertheless, the 18th General Hospital was unable to receive patients until October 1942, nearly five months after leaving San Francisco. This lengthy delay grated on the unit's members, who were frustrated that their professional skills went unutilized for so long.

The initial patients the hospital received were battle casualties from the Guadalcanal campaign. While the nurses and doctors cared for them, Army Engineers and other members of the 18th rapidly expanded the hospital's facilities. Colonel Tilghman writes, "ward tents were pitched while cement was being poured for the floors," and "the doors and windows were installed only after the patients had been admitted" (14-16). Even in the surgery ward, "the carpenters hammered and the surgeons operated side by side." By the end of 1942, the hospital had running water, adequate electricity, and cement walkways and floors, all essentially provided by the unit's own efforts. One of the unit's nurses, Elizabeth McLaughlin, wrote: "Those [cement] walks are tread upon reverently, for we have watched and done the pouring of every square."² After several more months of work, the hospital became "Fiji's Hopkins."³ By mid 1943, it was a sophisticated and self-sustaining installation, complete with a surgery ward and X-ray machines.

Through the first half of 1943, the 18th General Hospital continued to receive many patients. During this time, the hospital tended to an average of seven hundred patients at once, and the census even peaked at a thousand, quite a load for a five-hundred-bed hospital. During this period usually every bed was filled and many ambulatory patients were housed off-site, either in tents or native-style *bure* huts. The great skill of the Hopkins doctors and nurses was readily apparent, as only eleven patients died during the hospital's first year of operation. However, only a small portion of these admitted patients were battle casualties, due to the fact that the nearly uninterrupted stream of American victories had pushed the front lines further and further away from Fiji. Consequently, most of the patients suffered from relatively mild and pedestrian ailments such as jaundice, fungal infections, and ruptured eardrums, a

fact that was quite frustrating for the highly skilled Hopkins doctors. According to Colonel Tilghman, much of his professional work in Fiji was “never very inspiring” (Tilghman 25).

The patient census dropped dramatically beginning in late 1943, due to Fiji’s increasing unimportance in the war effort. During the final six months of the unit’s stay in Fiji, the average patient census was just over a hundred, and battle casualties were no longer brought to Fiji. Due to the lack of professional work, the 18th undertook extensive measures to combat boredom. In 1943 the unit, with the help of Army Engineers, built a five-hundred-seat amphitheatre. Called the Kava Bowl, the amphitheatre was host to daily events. Movies shown three times a week were “enthusiastically patronized” by both members of the 18th and its patients, and musical performances by unit members and natives drew large crowds.⁴ The 18th also partook heavily in athletics, forming basketball, football, baseball, softball, and volleyball teams. The 18th also began publishing its own newspaper, *The Fijitive*, and held a full-fledged “County Fair and Field Day” twice during its stay in Fiji. But even these could only do so much. Tilghman states that the “monotony of the tropics combined with enforced idleness, after two years of foreign service, became increasingly difficult to endure” (27).

In June, 1944, the Army, recognizing that the 18th General Hospital was woefully underutilized in Fiji, decided to redeploy the unit to the India-Burma theatre. On September 16th, 1944, the unit left Fiji, accompanied by mixed feelings. Some did not like being moved further from home, but others were hopeful that the “professional skill and ability of the Hospital Staff might be utilized to the fullest after all” (Tilghman 28). This was not to be, however. The unit arrived in Bombay, India, and promptly boarded trains heading to Assam. After a weeklong trip on “uniformly antiquated, dirty and uncomfortable” trains, the unit reached their station in Ledo, Assam (Tilghman 31). To the unit’s dismay, they found that two other general hospitals were already operating in the area, and “no plan for the [18th’s] use had been evolved” (Tilghman 32) by the Army. Even so, the 18th was ordered to construct basic facilities and to prepare to receive casualties. The members of the unit did just that, but they saw very few patients. According to Tilghman, “the professional activity of the 18th General Hospital had reached a low level of stagnation” (35). The unit continued in this state for several months, until it was notified by the Army that all Hopkins-affiliated members of the unit were being rotated back

to the United States. On March 22, 1945, the Johns Hopkins doctors and nurses departed their hospital in India-Burma, beginning their journey home. From this point onward, the 18th General Hospital ceased to be a Johns Hopkins-affiliated outfit (Tilghman 39).

The Official Take

The most complete account of the overseas experience of the 18th General Hospital is *L.O.D.—Yés: an Odyssey of the Army's 18th General Hospital*. Written by Richard Carmichael Tilghman, one of the 18th's doctors and its official historian, *L.O.D.—Yés* (*L.O.D.* standing for "line of duty") was intended to be the definitive work chronicling the 18th General Hospital. In the memoir's preface, Tilghman writes, "primarily it was written as a memoir for members of the outfit, secondarily for others that they may have some conception of the environment and the three years overseas service in World War II" (Preface). Published in 1949, Tilghman's memoir is the only memoir of the 18th General Hospital known to exist and is by far the most factually complete source concerning the unit, precisely chronicling its travels and exploits.

Lieutenant Colonel Richard Carmichael Tilghman was a man of many titles. He was a one of the unit's ranking medical officers ("doctors," in military parlance), serving as its Chief of Medicine and Executive Officer of the Hospital (Ross). As mentioned above, he was also appointed by those in the unit as the 18th's official historian. As such, Tilghman took dozens of photographs and shot over two hours of film, in addition to writing and publishing *L.O.D.—Yés*. But what made him beloved to many in the unit was his love of a good time (Ross). He served as the 18th's Special Service Officer, which meant that it was his duty to keep morale up by providing the unit with entertainment. He organized numerous concerts, movie-viewings, and USO shows.⁵ He was the driving force behind the two County Fair and Field Days, which others in the unit regarded with particular fondness ("Tattler" 3). The naming of the streets of the 18th's facility in Fiji after prominent Baltimore thoroughfares such as Charles Street and Broadway was his idea.⁶ Likewise, it was Tilghman's idea to bring to Fiji the Toad Derby, a time-honored Johns Hopkins tradition in which participants raced wild toads for sometimes considerable amounts of money ("Tattler" 3).

In *L.O.D.—Yes*, Tilghman expounds the history of the 18th General Hospital in painstaking detail, beginning with the events that led to its creation in 1940 and ending with the rotation home of the unit's last Johns Hopkins members. The author never fails to use exact dates, to list the full name and rank of every person mentioned, and to include the proper names of every country, region, city, town or even village that the unit stayed in, passed through, or visited. Tilghman even manages to include the designations of every other unit the 18th encountered and stated names of every ship the 18th either rode in or was escorted by. For example, this is how Tilghman describes the 18th's departure from San Francisco Bay in May of 1942:

On Sunday, May 24, 1942, the 18th General Hospital (45 officers, 60 nurses, 275 enlisted men, and 7 Red Cross workers, dietitians, and physical therapists) was among the 2000 troops embarking on the U.S. Army Transport, The General James Parker, recently converted 14,000 ton luxury liner, the S.S. Panama. In convoy with The Parker were The President Coolidge, The President Monroe, The General Tasker H. Bliss, The Uruguay, The Santa Clara and The Santa Lucia, bearing the entire Task Force 6429. Escorted by one destroyer and one heavy cruiser, The San Francisco, the convoy passed through the Golden Gate at 1330 hours, 26 May 1942. (4)

This degree of specificity is unparalleled. No other source comes remotely close in *L.O.D.—Yes* in this regard, likely explaining why it has been the sole source used in the secondary literature on the subject.

A striking example of Tilghman's obsessive attention to detail is when he describes the common diseases and injuries treated by the 18th's medical staff during the war. As befitting a doctor, he spends a considerable amount of space enumerating these ailments, filling nearly four pages doing so. It may not seem possible, but here he went into even further detail, bringing his considerable medical knowledge to bear on the subject. To illustrate, here is an excerpt from Tilghman's evaluation of the condition of a group of Marines wounded in the Guadalcanal campaign:

Uniformly there was malnutrition, many having lost as much as forty pounds in weight. Malaria, jaundice and psychoneuroses were

the outstanding medical conditions necessitating evacuation of the patient from the combat area. Many blast injuries and compound fractures were present. Noteworthy were the severe comminuted fractures of the calcaneus [heel bone], sustained by seamen standing on deck when their ship was torpedoed under them. The acute psychoneurotic evacuee imposed one of the most difficult problems. (19)

Tilghman's *L.O.D.—Yes* is a supremely detailed source, providing just about every objective fact one would like to know about the 18th General Hospital. The author may have treated his subject matter too objectively, however; the surprising lack of emotional content leaves Tilghman's prose feeling rather sterile and uninspired. In short, *L.O.D.—Yes* is a factually illuminating, yet somewhat superficial account of the wartime experience of the 18th General Hospital.

The Fijitive

Starting in early 1944, The 18th General Hospital began publishing *The Fijitive*, the unit's own internal newspaper. Subtitled "Escape From Boredom," *The Fijitive* was created in order to keep the unit busier and to improve morale. The newspaper was published weekly and featured highly entertaining and often humorous reporting. To outsiders, however, *The Fijitive* provides more than entertainment; it offers the reader substantial insight into the thoughts, feelings, and daily life of the 18th General Hospital.

The Fijitive was the brainchild of Sergeant Abe Abramowitz, one of the 18th's enlisted men and a veritable Renaissance man. Proficient at playing both the bass cello and the fiddle, the chaplain's assistant also organized a charitable foundation for Fijian boys and acted as the unit's rabbi. In early 1944, Sergeant Abramowitz decided to do something about the sagging morale of his unit. With the approval of the 18th's commanding officer, Colonel George Finney, Abramowitz began working on a newspaper for the outfit. The Sergeant recruited several other members of the 18th and his project soon became *The Fijitive*.⁷

Abramowitz and his ad hoc staff published *The Fijitive's* first issue on March 26th, 1944. Although quite brief at only two pages long, subsequent

issues soon doubled, and then tripled, in length as the newspaper's scope and popularity grew. The first issue featured extensive coverage of the 18th's sports matches (against other units on Fiji), local entertainment listings, and "The Tattler," the newspaper's gossip column. *The Fijitive's* staff quickly expanded the newspaper to include editorials, letters to the editor, and comic accounts of notable events from the unit's tenure in the Pacific. Its contributors also weighed in on more serious topics, such as news of the war's progress and significant developments back home. After a successful six-month run, publication of *The Fijitive* ceased in September, 1944, just before the unit redeployed to the India-Burma theater.

The mission of *The Fijitive* was twofold. According to Colonel Richard Graham in the first issue, the 18th created the publication in order to meld the 18th General Hospital into a more cohesive outfit by "bringing to the attention of all, informal and personal news items of interest" (1). The 18th's officers felt that a unit newspaper would strengthen the bonds between the medical officers, nurses, and enlisted men so that they could all better perform their duties. Although not explicitly stated by Col. Graham, *The Fijitive* had another reason for existing. As indicated by its subtitle, "Escape From Boredom," it was also created to boost the *esprit de corps* at a time when it was particularly low. According to Daphne Doster, one of the unit's nurses, "One way to keep busy and keep morale high was to publish our own paper—*The Fijitive*." The editors and contributors of the periodical achieved this end by using humor to great effect and gearing the reporting towards entertaining subjects, such as athletics and gossip.

During *The Fijitive's* six-month publication, the 18th General Hospital admitted very few patients, so its constituents generally had very little to do. The 18th's newspaper serves as a record of the myriad activities unit members partook in order to fill their excessive free time. These activities included playing sports, attending movies, concerts, and dances, throwing fairs and carnivals, and taking trips to the beach. Many members of the 18th elected to use their time a little more productively, taking courses and lessons in everything from trigonometry to ballroom dancing. The breadth of these activities and the gusto with which they were undertaken were astounding. By revealing how members of the unit spent their idle moments, a subject conspicuously absent from Tilghman's *L.O.D.*—*Yes, The Fijitive* can help outsiders better understand the true nature of their wartime experience.

The Fijitive also provides outsiders with insight into the trappings of life in uniform. For example, the July 6th edition includes an article concerning the ramifications of the recently passed G.I. Bill, and the August 31st issue contains a notice listing the possible punishments for being caught out and about after curfew. Also, the “A Letter to the Editors” section was home to persistent complaints about the lack of both mail and furloughs home. Even more enlightening are the brief memoirs submitted to the paper by unit members. Much about military life can be learned from these accounts, which almost universally described horrendous experiences (usually for comic effect). For example, in the May 26th edition, Sergeant M. Kehoe described his “greatest” memory of the war: being shipped across the Pacific Ocean in a hideously overcrowded vessel. The Sgt. amusingly recounts the ghastly experience where “intimacy was the keynote” (4).

More significantly, *The Fijitive* provides a window into the emotional state of the 18th General Hospital and the feelings and attitudes of its members. Although the paper is unfailingly upbeat, negative emotions occasionally emerge through the façade. One such feeling is restlessness. After being essentially trapped on a small island for roughly two years, and being idle for much of that time, many people in the 18th were itching to leave Fiji. For instance, in his article about the horrors of seaborne transportation in the military, Sgt. Kehoe wrote that if he were allowed to leave the next day on that same ship, “you would find me scrambling up the side before they could place the gangplank” (ibid.). In addition, the reader quickly gets the sense that the 18th’s members were generally unhappy with their role in the war and wished that their considerable skills were not so underutilized. This sentiment is stated most clearly in a May 26 editorial in which a Colonel George Finney wrote that many members of the 18th General Hospital felt that they were not doing their part in the war effort (Finney 1).

Though only intended to be read by those in the unit, *The Fijitive* has much to offer readers today. In addition to providing ample comic relief, the newspaper illuminates aspects of the 18th’s experience that are ignored in Tilghman’s *L.O.D.—ÿes*, and to a lesser extent in letters home. Hence, while not offering a comprehensive narrative, *The Fijitive* is revealing in its own right and is essential for a more complete understanding of the wartime service of the 18th General Hospital.

Letters from the 18th

Letters written by members of the 18th General Hospital, most of which were published in *The Johns Hopkins Nurses Alumnae Magazine*, are also invaluable sources of information. The 1943 and 1944 issues of this quarterly publication featured letters written by several of the unit's nurses. Almost all of these letters, and by far the most compelling of them, were authored by Elizabeth McLaughlin. A 1937 graduate of the Johns Hopkins School of Nursing, McLaughlin signed up to serve the 18th General Hospital in 1940. She also volunteered to be a "special Alumnae Magazine correspondent" of the *Nurses Alumnae Magazine*, which meant she was tasked with writing letters to the magazine for publication, providing its readers with news of the overseas unit.⁸ She performed this task admirably, keeping the Johns Hopkins community abreast of the 18th's exploits. More than that, however, her charming series of letters sheds further light on the wartime experience of the 18th General Hospital, primarily due to her unique perspective.

Although the subject matter of her letters and *The Fijitive* overlap considerably, McLaughlin addresses several aspects of the unit's experience on which *The Fijitive's* contributors neglected to report. Namely, she discusses the appearance and layout of the hospital facility and living quarters, the rapid and improvised construction of said buildings, the sweltering and at times tempestuous weather of Fiji, and devotes a considerable part of her correspondence to describing the native Fijians with whom members of the unit frequently interacted.⁹

She characterizes Fijians as primitive yet joyful people "who have bodies like Greek statues and who walk like gods."¹⁰ She finds their lack of self-consciousness endearing, though she admits that their laid-back ways could sometimes cause frustration, such as when the unit's Fijian domestic help, after being told that the inspectors were en route, decided to take a leisurely stroll instead of cleaning the living quarters.¹¹ In addition, McLaughlin reports on some of the native customs that initially bewildered the Americans. One example is the tradition of burying a placenta under a tree immediately after childbirth in order to keep track of the child's age.¹² She also describes the drinking of *kava*, a beverage derived from the root of the Kava plant that is customarily imbibed in a ceremony welcoming visitors. When a member of the 18th would come upon an indigenous village he or she would have to partici-

pate in a ceremony where “one at a time, the participants, seated in a circle, drink the *kava* from half coconut shells to the rhythmic clapping of hands.” Immediately after drinking, “one is expected to spin the cup on the ground and utter a grunt of deep satisfaction.”¹³ Although the drink was purported by the Fijians to have a sedative effect, McLaughlin wrote that she was unable to detect anything of the sort.¹⁴ It is her discussion of topics such as these that makes her letters so compelling and allows them to stand out from the other sources.

The way in which McLaughlin writes her letters is further illuminating. Her writing style is quite descriptive, and the depictions of daily life for the 18th General Hospital are eminently detailed and vivid. To illustrate, in the July 1943 issue of the *Nurses Alumnae Magazine* she takes the reader on a tour of the unit’s encampment, beginning with the medical wards:

Walking down toward “Tent City” we see in addition to some remaining tents, long frame wards, each holding sixty patients. The high pitched whistle you hear being blown by a patient walking from ward to ward is the mess call for ambulatory patients. In a moment, shining mess kits in hand, the boys will run, not walk, to the long tent furnished with well scrubbed boards and benches. Keggy Lewis’s tented “field kitchen” does a boom-time business with gasoline stove and GI cans.¹⁵

She next escorts the reader past the enlisted men’s recreation hut, the physiotherapy tent, the officers’ area, and finishes at the nurses’ quarters. McLaughlin’s writing style allows the reader to easily and vividly visualize the places she is describing. In this regard she is unmatched; no other author of a primary source concerning the 18th did this as well as she.

The fact that McLaughlin is a woman likely contributes significantly to the narrative of the 18th General Hospital’s experience overseas. This is because she discusses what are traditionally considered “feminine” subjects that *The Fijitive* and *L.O.D.—Yes* completely ignore. For instance, she describes the standard-issue army nurse’s uniform in some detail (“blue wool skirts and not-so-white blouses,” oversized raincoats and rubber boots for the rain) and wonders if the fashion preferences of the nurses would change as a result of wearing the same uniform day in and day out.¹⁶ She additionally illustrates for those read-

ing at home the clothing and hairstyles worn by the Fijians as well. In her usual vivid style she describes the latest native hairstyles:

With the Fijian, beauty starts at the top. In 1944 the style of Fijian men is to have the hair cut three inches long all over the head except for the back which is trimmed like an English wig. The three inches stand straight up, —the grizzlier the aspect the better. The women model their hairstyles after the men, but they retain more of the natural kinkiness. They are enthusiasts for variation in the color scheme. Red hair comes from the juice of the mangrove bark. Limed hair originated from the necessity of overcoming bug infestation when lime mixed with water was used. Besides eradicating the bugs, the new light color delighted the hosts.¹⁷

These are topics other sources do not even touch upon, and yet McLaughlin discusses them in significant depth. Consequently, McLaughlin's feminine perspective may have had a role in her correspondence's ability to fill in the holes of the 18th's wartime experience left by the other sources.

In her series of letters, McLaughlin attempted to grant those not part of the unit a window into the lives of the unit's members. While they offer neither the wealth of detailed information of *L.O.D.—Yés* nor the comic relief of *The Fijitive*, her letters are uniquely informative. By revealing aspects of her daily life that other sources ignore, Elizabeth McLaughlin's letters to *The Johns Hopkins Nurses Alumnae Magazine* help provide a fuller picture of the experience of the 18th General Hospital during World War II.

The Legacy of the 18th

Clearly evident from these sources is the fact that the wartime experience of the 18th General Hospital did not go as its members had hoped. They wished to do something similar to the lifesaving medicine performed by their forebears in World War I, and wanted all of the glory, intensity, and satisfaction that go along with such work (Turner 488). But as the reader well knows at this point, this was not to be. For much of the war, the 18th General Hospital saw few patients, even fewer wounded soldiers, and spent much of its time professionally idle. But the 18th's service was certainly not a wasted enterprise. Even

though the unit was largely unable to do what it had set out to do, its circumstances, actions, and accomplishments were remarkable nonetheless.

The profound disappointment felt by many in the 18th General Hospital certainly had much to do with unfulfilled expectations. What likely formed the basis of these preconceptions was the experience of a Johns Hopkins-affiliated hospital unit in the First World War. This unit, Base Hospital No. 18, was the first medical unit from a civilian university to embark overseas. In 1917 the U.S. Army dispatched the unit as part the American Expeditionary Force to northeastern France (Turner 32). Just a few tens of miles behind the western front, Base Hospital No. 18 provided lifesaving surgical care to wounded American soldiers around the clock. According to Johns Hopkins historian Thomas Turner, members of that unit found their work “exhausting, exhilarating, and satisfying” (33). When the unit returned home, its members were lauded as heroes and their valiant service soon became legendary in the Johns Hopkins community (34).

Due to this precedent, members of the 18th General Hospital, which was named in homage of their predecessors, could be forgiven for expecting something similar. Excitement began to build soon after the announcement came in 1940 that Hopkins would likely again send some of its own overseas to serve in the military (Turner 483). The fact that one of the two units would bear the same designation of the legendary World War I outfit generated further enthusiasm and was a source of great pride within the Hopkins community. It also, however, meant that expectations would be particularly high for the 18th, and its successes would be measured against those of its predecessor (Turner 484). Positions in the two units were quickly filled by eager volunteers who, excited to serve their country, hoped for an early activation (Jones 36). After the Pearl Harbor attacks they received their wish. On a rainy night in Baltimore, both the 18th and 118th General Hospitals departed to great fanfare, with everyone present hoping for something of a sequel to the heroics of twenty-five years prior (Turner 484).

Almost immediately, however, the 18th learned that their journey would differ significantly in at least one respect. Instead of heading for Europe, where the unit wished to serve, it headed west, towards the Pacific theater. This was a definite disappointment for the 18th because it would not be following in the footsteps of the previous Hopkins unit, and would be embarking for a

part of the world, according to Turner, “with which most of [its] members were unfamiliar and in which their interest was meager” (Turner 485).

Once the 18th arrived in Fiji, all indications were that it would be quite busy. The Army high command in the Pacific believed that Fiji would be of great strategic importance and that a Japanese invasion of the archipelago was a definite possibility (Tilghman 1). Also, the American invasion of Guadalcanal and Tulagi was scheduled to begin just four days after the 18th’s arrival. After landing in Fiji, however, the 18th was not able to accept patients for several weeks, due to the fact that a hospital facility had to be built from the ground up. When the hospital was finally operational, those in the 18th did get the chance to treat battle casualties and were quite busy. Within several months, however, casualties ceased flowing into Fiji and the 18th’s patient census fell drastically. Fiji was also never attacked due to the decisive American victories at Midway and the Coral Sea, which put the Japanese navy irrevocably on the defensive. By mid-1943, the war had simply passed the 18th General Hospital by. Many of the soldiers treated by the hospital at this point had already undergone the necessary surgery at a hospital closer to the front, and were sent to Fiji merely to recover from their wounds (Tilghman 12-24).

When the 18th was ordered to pack up and leave Fiji for deployment elsewhere, there was hope within the unit that they would now become more professionally active and involved in the war effort. Again, however, their destination was a disappointment. Instead of traveling northwest towards the Philippines and the Japanese home islands, where the major American offensives were focused, the 18th General Hospital was sent in a more westerly direction to India. Once the 18th arrived at their station in Ledo, Assam, in the India-Burma theater, morale sunk to new depths. After coming from an idyllic island paradise with a full-fledged hospital installation, the unsavory conditions and thoroughly dilapidated buildings in India were a difficult pill to swallow (Tilghman 28-34). Lieutenant Jean Hays referred to their new situation as “a mess after Fiji” and Major C.C. Troland, a medical officer in the 18th, described their new duty station as “really a bit of a hell hole” (Mura 276; Hill). Furthermore, there were already hospital units operating in the immediate vicinity that were more than able to handle the current patient load. Although the unit was somewhat busy in Ledo, it was only because they had to spend much of their time repairing their run-down facility. The members of the 18th General Hospital were professionally idle for almost the entirety of their stay

on the subcontinent and were saved from further frustration and boredom by a sympathetic General Frank Merrill, who, appalled at their plight, arranged for the rotation home of all the remaining members from Johns Hopkins University (Tilghman 34-38).

The oppressively low morale that resulted from this clash of expectations with reality took its toll on the members of the unit. According to “The Tattler” in the August 3 issue of *The Fijitive*, a common complaint of those in the 18th was: “Another six months and I’ll blow my top.” Jean Hays wrote that in Ledo quite a few people in the unit seriously considered faking or exaggerating an illness in order to be sent home, and that some may have even done so (Mura 282, 294). Some in the 18th wrote songs and poems expressing their unhappiness and their strong desire to escape from their miserable situation, which was usually achieved via rotation to a stateside unit. One poem, written by Sergeant Al Weber, an enlisted man in the 18th, expressed these sentiments in rhyme:

Here I am waitin’
 Speculatin’ and debatin’
 Just when I’ll be ratin’
 Rotatin’!
 For Rotatin’ is belatin’
 And I’m being frank in statin’
 That I am really hatin’
 This waitin’!
 Rotatin’! Belatin’! – Hatin’!
 This waitin’!
 Answer? See Satan!!! (Weber)

By no means was their service all for naught, however. Although the 18th did not achieve what they had set out to do, their accomplishments were certainly notable. In addition for caring for American servicemen, the 18th served also as a hospital for both Fijian soldiers and civilians. The unit was designed to exclusively care for American servicemen, but due to the dramatic decrease in the patient load during 1944, it was able to provide valuable medical care for the islanders (Tilghman 24). In some cases, doctors and nurses of the 18th would accompany public health workers, who were usually British, to remote

villages in order to treat and inoculate those who were ordinarily too far removed from population centers to receive adequate medical care. The service provided to the Fijians was considerable. Indeed, Sir Philip Mitchell, the Governor of Fiji, sent a letter to the commanding officer of the 18th's task force expressing his deep gratitude for the services provided by the unit to the population of Fiji (Tilghman 25).

Doctors of the 18th General Hospital also made critical contributions to the medical knowledge of the time. First, they observed that all circumstances being equal, wounds healed just as well in tropical areas as they did in more temperate regions, an observation that went against the conventional medical opinion of the 1940s. Second, Captain Roger Lewis, one of the 18th's doctors, discovered a method of detecting the amount of atabrine in a patient's body. Due to the fact that quinine was non-existent in the Pacific theater, atabrine was the drug of choice for combating malaria, which was very common in the Southwest Pacific. A significant drawback of atabrine, however, was that it was dangerously toxic in high doses. Being able to determine the amount of the drug already present in a patient's bloodstream helped caregivers reduce overdoses to a minimum. As a result, Lewis's discovery was vital to the military's battle against malaria in the Pacific Theatre. Thus, although such contributions are overlooked amongst the overall backdrop of disappointment, they were certainly valuable to the war effort (*ibid.*, 22-25; Turner 486-487).

The fact that the 18th General Hospital was in a place like Fiji was extraordinary in and of itself. As mentioned earlier, the unit initially had little interest in an isolated and little-known group of islands in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. Few, if any, members of the unit had been to a location like Fiji previous to their war service, and were awed by its picturesque beauty as a result. Authors in the 18th such as Tilghman and McLaughlin wrote at length about the tropical paradise that was their home, in turn allowing their readers to appreciate Fiji's splendor.

Another noteworthy feature of the 18th General Hospital's three-year tenure overseas was the frequent and amiable interactions with people very different from the unit's personnel. Initially, the American hospital unit did not know what to expect of the native people of Fiji and wondered how westernized they had become as a result of British dominion over the archipelago. To illustrate, in one of her letters Elizabeth McLaughlin writes that upon arriving, "we expected to cut our way through the bush with care to avoid the head-

quarters of the cannibal industry.”¹⁸ This turned out not be the case. Although a somewhat primitive people by western standards, the natives were extraordinarily friendly towards the Americans from the start. Soon enough, the Fijians and the Americans developed a congenial relationship, associating so closely that some of the enlisted men often brought Fijian women to dances hosted by the 18th (the nurses, as commissioned officers, were off-limits to the enlisted men).¹⁹

As a result of the genuinely friendly relationship with the Fijians, the unit’s portrayals of them were overwhelmingly positive. First, by all accounts the Fijians were considered quite good-looking by the members of the 18th. For instance, a contributor to *The Fijitive* vividly remembered the first dance at which he was “introduced to the beautiful females of Fiji.”²⁰ Second, those in the 18th also appeared to have tremendous respect for the culture and way of life of the Fijian peoples. In the case of Elizabeth McLaughlin, her admiration for the indigenous culture caused her to doubt the supposed merits of her own. In her October 1943 letter, she writes:

There was probably never a lovelier world than that of the islands uncontaminated by the white man, who came uninvited to give them the dubious gifts of civilization: firearms, disease, and the mores of religion. After a year of observing the remaining vestiges of an old, idyllic civilization, we wonder about what we call “culture.”²¹

This degree of admiration for the Fijians on the part of the Americans is somewhat surprising considering that America was in many ways a racist society during this time, particularly south of the Mason-Dixon line, from which many in the unit hailed. Furthermore, in recent years the war in the Pacific has been classified as a race war, in which each side was fueled by racist hatred towards the other (Dower). In light of this as well it is both a surprise and a relief that such sentiments are not in evidence in any of the sources examined in this paper.

Another distinguishing aspect of the 18th’s experience was its members’ extraordinary penchant for finding and creating ways to entertain themselves. In addition to publishing a weekly newspaper, members of the unit organized both men’s and women’s teams in several different sports, and later formed

leagues in which clubs from the 18th would compete with those of like their military units stationed on Fiji.²² They staged and performed in dances, concerts, and plays, and held several much larger events like the two County Fairs and the Minstrel Show.²³ Many members of the 18th also would go on lengthy sightseeing excursions (sometimes a week or more) to beaches, other islands in the Fiji archipelago, or even to places as far away as Samoa.²⁴ In addition to being essential for the maintenance of any semblance of morale, these activities were a noteworthy feature of the experience of the 18th General Hospital.

Although disappointment due to unfulfilled expectations is readily apparent in the writings of those in the 18th General Hospital, it does not paint a complete picture of the unit's overseas service. By looking past the backdrop of negativity the reader can recognize that the 18th's experience was a remarkable one. The unit made significant contributions to the war effort and health of the local population, resided in a singularly beautiful locale, was startlingly open-minded, and partook in an uncommon variety of leisure activities. Perhaps some of the disappointment felt by those in the 18th is unwarranted after all.

Conclusion

The plight of the 18th General Hospital is probably not what comes to mind when one thinks of a military medical unit. Its men and women do not fit the romantic image of the courageous medic braving enemy fire to perform first aid on his comrade, or of the battlefield surgeon saving gravely wounded soldiers from the brink of death in the midst of a warzone. For most of the war, those in the 18th simply sat idle on a pristine island paradise in the middle of the Pacific and devoted much of their time to pursuits other than saving lives. The fact that the experience of the unit went against the grain is what makes it so noteworthy and fascinating to outsiders.

This paper represents an attempt to capture a moment in time experienced by a particular group of people. Within it three distinct primary source bases, including two that have likely never been previously employed in scholarly writing, are used to construct both a richer and more cohesive narrative of the experience of the 18th General Hospital. In addition, the paper serves as a challenge to how this moment in time was perceived by those in the unit, and by extension the authors of secondary literature on the subject. Although

Thomas Turner, in his definitive history of the Johns Hopkins Medical Institutions, labels the 18th's overseas odyssey as an "unhappy saga" (488), this paper demonstrates that such an epithet does not do the unit justice. Whether the experience of the 18th General Hospital was typical of hospital units in World War II and whether parallels can be drawn to the experience of the 18th's sister unit, the 118th General Hospital, are questions that invite further research.

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Endnotes

- 1 Elizabeth McLaughlin, "Behind the Scenes with General Hospital No. 18."

The Johns Hopkins Nurses Alumni Magazine 42, no. 1 (1943): 16. Due to the number of citations from McLaughlin's columns, her work will be cited in endnote form.

- 2 Ibid., 13.
- 3 Ibid., 14.
- 4 Ibid., 16.
- 5 Elizabeth McLaughlin, "Hopkins News from the Armed Forces." *The Johns Hopkins Nurses Alumnae Magazine* 42, no. 4 (1943): 170.
- 6 McLaughlin, *The Johns Hopkins Nurses Alumnae Magazine* 42, no. 1 (1943): 15.
- 7 Elizabeth McLaughlin, "Behind the Scenes with General Hospital No. 18." *The Johns Hopkins Nurses Alumni Magazine* 43, no. 3 (1944): 84, 85
- 8 "Captain Stafford from General Hospital #18 Visits Baltimore." *The Johns Hopkins Nurses Alumnae Magazine* 42, no. 2 (1943): 12.
- 9 McLaughlin, *The Johns Hopkins Nurses Alumnae Magazine* 42, no. 1 (1943): 16; McLaughlin, "From General Hospitals 18 and 118." *The Johns Hopkins Nurses Alumnae Magazine* 42, no. 3 (1943): 96, 97.
- 10 Elizabeth McLaughlin, "Hopkins News from the Armed Forces." *The Johns Hopkins Nurses Alumnae Magazine* 43, no. 2 (1944): 44.
- 11 McLaughlin, *The Johns Hopkins Nurses Alumnae Magazine* 42, no. 3 (1943): 95.
- 12 McLaughlin, *The Johns Hopkins Nurses Alumnae Magazine* 42, no. 4 (1943): 169.
- 13 McLaughlin, *The Johns Hopkins Nurses Alumnae Magazine* 43, no. 2 (1944): 43.
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 McLaughlin, *The Johns Hopkins Nurses Alumnae Magazine* 42, no. 3 (1943): 96, 97.
- 16 McLaughlin, *The Johns Hopkins Nurses Alumnae Magazine* 42, no. 1 (1943): 15.
- 17 McLaughlin, *The Johns Hopkins Nurses Alumnae Magazine* 43, no. 3 (1944): 84, 85.
- 18 McLaughlin, *The Johns Hopkins Nurses Alumnae Magazine* 43, no. 2 (1944): 43.
- 19 Ibid., 45.
- 20 "The Tattler," *The Fijitive*, 26 May, 1944, 6.
- 21 McLaughlin, *The Johns Hopkins Nurses Alumnae Magazine* 42, no. 4 (1943): 168.
- 22 McLaughlin, *The Johns Hopkins Nurses Alumnae Magazine* 43, no. 3 (1944): 84, 85
- 23 "July 4th County Fair A Wow," *The Fijitive*, 6 July, 1944, 1.
- 24 McLaughlin, *The Johns Hopkins Nurses Alumnae Magazine* 43, no. 3 (1944): 83.