



REMEMBERING A WARTIME (1944) USO HOSPITAL TOUR

*Letters of Evelyn Thomas,
with commentary by S. Bernard Thomas*

During our forty-plus years of marriage, Evelyn would occasionally share her tales of youthful adventures in southern California in the early 1940s. She had gone there from New York in 1941 as an aspiring and talented! young actress, hoping to make her way in tinsel town. She did get know some of the film names of the day or later (a young Hume Cronyn was one) as teachers and mentors in acting classes and labs in Hollywood. She did a bit of drama teaching at UCLA, and some acting stints with local theater groups. All in all, a respectable, if modest start.

But very soon, along with most Americans, Evelyn was swept in the all-embracing emotions and commitments of post-Pearl Harbor, war-mobilized America. She became a Navy wife (a first marriage), and took on defense jobs—would you believe, for a time as an inspector of incendiary bomb components.

Still, Evelyn was able to include the theater in her wartime activities. As one of the Hollywood community's many volunteers, she performed in shows at various southern California military training camps. These were arranged through the Hollywood Victory Committee, in coordination with the national USO (United Service Organizations) Camp Shows. A "GI Circuit Honor Roll," put out by the Victory Committee,

lists her name (then Evelyn Green) alphabetically just below film luminaries Betty Grable, Cary Grant, and Kathryn Grayson—as close as she was destined to get to those stratospheric heights.

Evelyn still has some of the Army's letters of thanks she received after these appearances. An appreciative, if slightly overblown one in June 1943, from a Major Mardros at the Desert Training Center declared, "Your



participation in these shows is helping to build a better Army of the United States". The warm reception by the troops, he added, on a less lofty note, "must have repaid you for the long hard trip." The commanding officer at Camp Irwin, Barstow, California, wrote in August 1943: "We hope you caught the spirit of this place, and realize that most of the thousands of men whom you entertained, are now already 'over there,' and perhaps some day you will meet some of them again."

This last might well have been a prescient remark. As America's battle casualties streamed back home the next year, filling military hospitals across the land, Victory Committee – USO Shows shifted from training camps to hospitals. It was on a USO-sponsored national tour of such facilities that Evelyn would have her most deeply etched and fulfilling experience of the war years. And it would come vividly, if vicariously, alive for me (a veteran of the war in the Pacific), when she recently unearthed, and began reading to me the stack of letters she had written to family during that six-week tour in November–December 1944. The men (and women) she met, who had been, as the phrase now goes, "in harm's way," exhibited almost always a low-keyed grace and quiet humanity. Her letters reflected a still seemingly simpler, though perhaps transi-

tional America, engaged in a great, self-transforming world struggle. In its small way, her account illustrates one of the many forms of women's important contribution to that effort.

Yet there are brief glimpses also, of the racial shadows on the American landscape. Evelyn refers to a performance in a "Negro ward"—evidently segregation in the armed forces at that time extended to military hospitals as well. And a decorated Japanese-American officer from the European front, quietly noted to her the hostility he had often encountered on the home front.

Evelyn was one of a six-woman troupe, organized under the auspices of the Hollywood Victory Committee. They were provided with transportation (train), and spartan expenses, and were expected generally to be fed and housed at each facility along the way. (When they were put up at one of the "best hotels" in Denver, Evelyn remarked on the "extravagance" of the \$2.75 per day room charge.) The troupe left from Los Angeles in early November (1944); their itinerary called for a first stop in Utah, continuing on across the country to a final destination in the Boston area. They had a prepared package of song and dance numbers, skits, and standard routines and repartee (Evelyn the M.C.). There was always room for variations and requests, suited to the audience and locale.

Evelyn and I (a historian) both felt this was a story worth sharing, and here it is in her own unadorned words.

November 5, 1944. On board train for Utah:

We passed through Las Vegas about an hour ago, and will soon arrive in Ogden, Utah.

November 7. Bushnell Hospital, Ogden, Utah:

We were met by an army car at the station. We gave our first booking in the neuropsychiatric lounge for about 100 patients. Afterward, we talked with many of them. One, a nurse lieutenant, seemed in the worst condition. Didn't respond to anything, it was quite heartbreaking. After that, we had dinner in the mess hall and had an opportunity to get acquainted with a

swell bunch of fellows. They were all orthopedic cases, leg or arm amputees. Their spirit was amazing, it just floored me. It turned out they would be the audience for our next show that evening in the auditorium. I made a point of remembering their names, and used this in the show. When I got on stage for the opening, I asked if Carl, Howard, Gene, and so on were out there. They shouted back "here we are," which lent a good spirit to the show. One of the men later came back and said that even if we had come and done nothing, they would be happy just to look at and talk with us. One boy with both legs amputated was able to walk on artificial legs. He told us he was being discharged on Sunday, to which I replied, "that's swell." Then he began to talk openly about his legs. He mentioned all the things he was able to do, even horseback riding last week. All the men seem able to talk about their condition. It was hard to leave them.

Back in our rooms, we listened to Norman Cousin's program with the President. It was thrilling!

November 8. (bound for Glenwood Springs, Colorado):

We played four shows at Bushnell before leaving this evening. Each patient's case seemed the worst. After a while, you begin to accept it—the way the guys kid each other. You can't allow yourself to show your feelings. One boy with two artificial legs asked me how tall I was. I said five feet. He said he was three feet. I got what he meant, and passed it by.

November 9. Denver, Colorado:

Arrived yesterday at the U.S. Naval Hospital, Glenwood Springs. Met at train by Ensign Connard. This hospital is for convalescents, so the guys were in pretty good shape. We did one show for an audience of about 250. They enjoyed it very much.

They took us around the grounds, which have sulfur spring hot baths (in which the guys swim all year round), surrounded by beautiful snow-peaked mountains.

We left this morning for Denver. In the club car we met two pilots returned from the south Pacific, one of them, after fifty-five missions. We were so thrilled when he got off and met his wife and kid for the first time in eighteen months.

We got into Denver and found we were put up in a hotel, one of the best in town, \$2.75 a day! Unpacked and to bed.

Continued next day:

We just finished a performance in a ward here at Fitzimmons Hospital. There were two Italian prisoners in this ward, and they are treated beautifully. They sang songs for us. We also played a TB ward and a psychiatric ward. The Negro TB ward was our best audience. They just loved it. We were horrified to learn that about two of them die each week of TB, the result mostly of a very poor childhood.

I'm beginning to add a new joke (if you can call it that) to each show, and am learning to put it over with ease.

We leave tomorrow for Topeka, Kansas.

November 13. Topeka, Kansas:

Arrived at Topeka station 6:15 a.m. We were put up in the hospital (Winton General) nurses' quarters, and had wonderful meals in the officers' mess.

We did five ward shows and an auditorium show today. After the auditorium show I had a good conversation with one of the boys who had been wounded in Normandy.

Felice [a member of the troupe] had promised a soldier at Bushnell that she would call his girlfriend when we got to Denver. The guy, a leg amputee, was very good looking. The girlfriend (Gail) told Felice she had written him, but no reply. She clearly did not know the full extent of his injuries. Felice simply told her, he looks wonderful, and that she envied Gail having such a handsome guy. "I know it," Gail replied.

(next morning):

One of the nurses seemed unnecessarily curt with us last evening. We later learned from another that she had just recently lost her husband overseas. She'll be better in time, this nurse felt.

The doctors often have more to contend with from parents and sweethearts than from patients. Very often an amputee is well adjusted in the hospital. Then his folks come in, start to pity him and weep, which makes the guy feel worse. All they

want is to be treated normally. The doctors say it would be a good idea to have an orientation course for parents.

We leave in two hours for Springfield, Missouri.

November 14. Springfield, Missouri:

We just finished doing four wards here at O'Reilly General Hospital. The first was a ward for brain-injured men, and were some of the worst cases we've seen. The second was a plastic surgery ward—what a terrific job this hospital is doing!

When we arrived, the Special Services officer had mail for everyone but me, so he said he was going to write me a letter. This morning he had a little note for me—with two letters that had arrived!

One show to do tonight, a couple of wards tomorrow, and a show tomorrow night.

We stay at a hotel here in Springfield, but eat at the hospital.

I met one of the sweetest guys here today. This, though he has lost both legs and is blind. The nurses too tell me he has the nicest disposition despite everything. He was so grateful for our show—I could just keep from crying. Gosh, the courage these boys have is incredible.

November 17. Morning:

We just arrived in St. Louis, quite a burg—looks like New York on a dull day. Will be leaving tonight for Clinton, Iowa.

We're quite popular on trains—six girls for U.S.O. We could practically get away with murder.

November 17. 9:30 p.m.:

At O'Reilly Hospital the Special Services officer was a peach. We ate wonderful meals at the officers' club, and he gave us a carton of cigarettes when we left.

O'Reilly Hospital is doing amazing work in neuro and plastic surgery. We heard the story of an officer who, after the Americans had taken over a village from the Germans, moved to restore the water supply. But the Germans had mined a dead soldier and placed the body in the village well. The officer pulling the body up was seriously wounded when the mine exploded. His face was practically blown to bits. Well, he's got

new ears, new nose—they've even been able to grow eyelashes. The nurse tells us he looks fine. It's just fantastic.

A Red Cross recreation worker (Harriet) took us around. Just adorable, chubby, full of life and love for everyone. The boys adore her—they call her "Shortstuff."

Harriet watched all our ward shows, and gave us tips about the patients. For example, in the brain surgery ward, whereas I generally ask for requests when we have extra time, I just announced the numbers, since in most cases these patients had lost control of their speech. When Felice did her songs, she got no reaction from one guy until the third song, when a broad smile came across his face. It was so thrilling!

We've seen some terribly disfigured faces, but Harriet told us that in the main, they don't go home until they're in pretty good shape.

November 19. Schick General Hospital: Clinton, Iowa:

We went over with a bang at this place, and this afternoon we leave for Galesburg, Illinois. At least a dozen people came over to us to say that we gave the best show this hospital ever had.

Last night, after our performance, I got to talk to one fellow who was in the CBI [China-Burma-India] theater for 2 years. He wasn't wounded but got malaria and lost 55 pounds. He liked the Indian people, and says the Americans and British there didn't get on too well because of the Americans' sympathy for the Indians.

While we were waiting in the lobby of the hospital, a woman came in snuggling next to her son. This was the first time she had seen him in 20 months. When she saw us, she said, "This is my boy, isn't he beautiful?" We just watched this wonderful mother who had eyes only for her boy. And he kept saying, "Aw ma, you're embarrassing me." Well, we just stood there, all choked up. We all just wanted to kiss that soldier and his mother.

(later):

In last night's show, I thought I would die. When I got on, I tried to lower the mike, but I couldn't tighten it enough. As I got into my nurse number, the darn thing started lowering. So

as part of the gag, I started talking down with it, and the boys just howled. As long as it got a yak.

(later):

Here I am in a hotel in Galesburg, Illinois. Will be going to Mayo General Hospital tomorrow morning, then leave for Chicago.

November 21, Vaughan General Hospital: [outside Chicago]:

Staying in the hospital guesthouse. I have a small, cozy single room. Lined up on the steam radiator are three pair of underwear just washed [pre-washer-dryer times], a slip and a bra. On the door, I've hung two pair of hose. Two suitcases are lined up neatly on the floor, opened. The third is on the chair, and there's just room for me and the bed.

One of the wards we played yesterday [Mayo Hospital] was the worst we've ever gone into. The odor was beyond description, but of course we pretended everything was normal. The cases were all stomach, ulcers, intestines, etc. Most of the boys were being fed by tubes. They were all bedridden, and looked like skeletons. Despite their physical weakness and pain, they were so appreciative. Well, that was the toughest ward.

We met a real honey—a 19-year-old kid, was in the army a short time, shipped overseas, and wounded right off the bat. This kid was adorable. He never had a girlfriend, and was very impressed with Helene. When she gave him her picture, he was so thrilled. When we left, he stood outside the hospital gate and waved and threw a kiss at us. It was so sweet.

One guy was all hep about doing a rumba—because, as he said, it may be a long time before he dances again. He's having another head surgery today. I wish you could see the way he kidded about it.

We always find that when we do wards during the day, the evening show is a tremendous success. The ward patients spread the word, and we have a swell audience at night. (Other shows often skip the wards, doing only an auditorium show.)

November 22. Vaughan Hospital:

Today we had a really full schedule. Six wards in the morning and four in the afternoon. For the first time, we played for wounded nurses.

In most of the hospitals, KP [kitchen-mess hall work] and gardening is done by PWs.

November 24. Battle Creek, Michigan:

We had a turkey dinner in the GI mess, served by German PWs, at Custer Hospital in Battle Creek. It was irritating to see how well they were treated and fed. [Note Evelyn's vastly different attitude toward Italian PWs.] They are fed first, paid, \$22. a month. They look about 15 years old.

From there, we were taken by Army car to Percy Jones Hospital, a few miles away. We did five wards in this very lovely hospital. (15 minutes per show). Mostly amputee cases here. The nurse asked if we'd go to one room and perform for this one patient who could not be moved. It was so rewarding to see his face light up and overwhelm us with appreciation.

And then to bed and 12 hours sleep.

November 25. Hotel Lincoln, Indianapolis:

Arrived at hotel this afternoon. Rested up, slept, no shows today.

November 26. 10 p.m.:

We've moved from the hotel to the hospital—Billings. The stage show tonight was really a hit. The Red Cross nurse said she's never seen the boys so excited about entertainment. We've been put up in rooms in the WAC [Women's Army Corps] patients' quarters.

We have ward shows tomorrow and a stage show in the evening. They're arranging all these shows because they are so pleased with today's shows.

The patients like my "nurse" number. They start yelling for "nurse" after I finish the skit. They kid me, and say I'd make a wonderful one.

In the main, the WAC patients are not serious cases. Two got malaria overseas, the rest were in the States.

We were hungry after the show, and our WAC friend (Alice) got the key to the kitchen next door, and we all had a delicious snack of fruit salad, peanut butter, jam and bread. [Truly, a simpler time!]

November 28.

Tomorrow we go back to Indianapolis [from nearby Billings Hospital]. From there we go on to Wakeman Hospital [Columbus, Indiana].

It's been swell staying at this hospital. Somehow when you stay for so many days, you begin to know the fellows, and they get to know you. You sorta hate to start fresh at a new hospital. These guys look at you and thank you, and say, "please come back again." It hurts.

Since we're through for the evening, the boys and us are getting a jam session together. One fellow here plays the guitar, and there are other instrumentalists.

After our regular show routine, we generally ask for requests. The guys here didn't come up with any, so we gave them some numbers anyway. Later we learned they just got in from several years in the Pacific, and didn't know the pop numbers.

December 1. Indianapolis:

Here we are again in Indianapolis. We're staying at the YWCA—60 cents a night, and we have a whole dormitory to ourselves.

We did one day at Wakeman, and had a bang-up audience for the evening show. We'll next be heading for Louisville, Kentucky.

(later)

I'm now in my lovely room in the nurses' quarters at Nichols Hospital [Louisville]. At Wakeman, we were again a terrific hit! When we played in a plastic surgery ward at Wakeman, we saw a truly horrendous case. It really threw me. His face was completely disfigured, in an almost inhuman way.

Arrived in Louisville about an hour late. Dinner was waiting for us at the mess, and also our rooms were made up. Here it was 6:45 p.m. and we were scheduled to go on at 7! The Lieutenant asked if it was possible for us to go on at 7:30—which meant unpack, put stage make-up on, and get into our evening clothes. Well, don't ask. We were hysterical with excitement and laughter as we tore into our clothes. The curtain went up at 7:30, and there we were on stage!

I opened with, "Sorry we kept you waiting, fellows, but we just got out of our luggage." They loved us, but it sure was a hectic evening. The lieutenant was so appreciative. After the show, we went to watch the last quarter of a basketball game by the boys. It was fun!

December 2-3. Darnell Hospital, Danville, Kentucky:

We'll be through at 4 p.m. today, with a welcome day off tomorrow.

(continued, next day):

We met a major, a captain, a lieutenant, and a doctor-major, and spent a social evening with them. The major has been in the army for 25 years, is a good joe, full of stories. He has a spinal wound, and nothing can be done for him. Within a year, he may be totally paralyzed. Amazing how he joked about it. Very much in love with his wife, no children. Sad.

The lieutenant goes home tomorrow, back to his old civilian job. Getting married next week to a nurse he met in the hospital.

The captain was a swell guy, and kind of shy. Has a big family (five kids), and saw them for the first time in two years. He has a brain tumor, and is to be operated on in two weeks. (The doctor-major told us his recovery chances are not very good.) He's slowly losing his sight.

I danced with the captain three times, and he never said anything about his condition, but I could see how it preyed on him. I was a sad girl when I left the club last evening.

December 6.

In Cincinnati, and then on to Cambridge, Ohio. Am sharing a tiny hotel room with Felice and Helene.

To go back for a bit to Kentucky and Darnell Hospital—it handles only neuro-psychiatric cases. It is where the most serious ones go. A Japanese-American boy who was a tail gunner, sits all day and believes he's still shooting. but most of the patients are coming along, and should become well. One sweet boy I spoke with had lost his memory from shock, and had to learn to speak again. He's now well, and will be released in a couple of weeks.

December 7. Fletcher Hospital. Cambridge, Ohio:

We have four ward shows tomorrow, after which we'll be headed for Cleveland

December 10.

I'm now at Camp Reynolds (Greenville, Pennsylvania). We arrived in Cleveland, yesterday morning, and our army pick-up was three hours late. We waited in the cold and dismal station. We then had a 70-mile jaunt by army car to this camp. We arrived a very tired, cold bunch of gals.

When we did our show last night, we had a packed house, despite Saturday night, when many get passes. Was much different from playing hospitals. We do one more show, and then for Butler, Pennsylvania.

December 11.

Snowing.

Will be heading for Deshon Hospital, Butler tomorrow. We saw "Hollywood Canteen" last night. Enjoyed it very much. We do one of their numbers ("The General Jumped") in our show.

December 12.

Deshon had to do without our show—snowed in.

We leave at 6 p.m. for Pittsburgh and from there to Utica via Buffalo. Am freezing already, thinking about it.

December 16. Lovell General Hospital, Fort Devens, Massachusetts:

F I N I S

We finished with a bang today, to a nice-sized audience. The show was a hit! Will be traveling to New York tomorrow, to spend holiday time with the folks, then back to California.

Back-tracking a bit:

We arrived in Utica [New York], and were greeted by a very swell Captain Prole, were treated royally, put up in the nurses' quarters, and had some wonderful meals in the nurses' mess.

We did two stage shows at Rhoads General Hospital in Utica. During a song number by Felice ("Embraceable You") a soldier with a leg wound hobbled on stage and began acting out

the song—somewhat amorously. Was tricky for a bit, but Felice handled it well.

At the officers' club that night, we met a charming Japanese-American, Captain Dick Mizuta. He was one the Japanese-Americans who recently fought in Europe, and had arm and leg wounds. Has all kinds of medals. He told me some fascinating stories, and also the problems he had faced because of his Japanese background. Even here in the hospital, one of the nurses treating him was unfriendly to him. He's glad to be in another ward, and will have some surgery soon. (The nurse in question is considered a real terror.)

From Rhoads we went on to Cushing General Hospital, near Boston. We came into Boston and saw the sun for the first time in weeks. The drive to the hospital was just beautiful. Cushing is like a resort right off the lake. What a luscious spot! We did five wards, and a stage show in the evening. Special Services didn't pay much attention to us after the show, but two of the patients got us ice cream sodas, and later, hamburgers.

We drove from Cushing to Lovell this morning. Arrived at 12:30 p.m., put on a stage show at 1 p.m. This was our last hospital. Did another show at 3 p.m., and that was the end. Afterward we all exchanged gifts, and farewells.

Tomorrow, I'll be in New York.

On the whole, I would say, I did pretty well. No, I'm not a Bob Hope by a long shot, but I've learned to be at ease with an audience, to ad lib with the boys while on stage, and to use a mike properly, which is very important. It's been a wonderful experience.

Postscript

In returning to the family home in Queens, New York, Evelyn did not leave the war behind. Her parents were now alone in their house. Her two brothers were away, one with the air force in the Pacific, the other in defense work in Baltimore. (Her sister now lived on a farm with her husband in upstate New York.) Evelyn's first evening home, her parents were invited to a neighbor's celebration—they had just been in-

formed that their son, earlier reported missing in action, was alive as a prisoner of war in Germany. But her Aunt Miriam had recently learned that her brother had been killed in action in France.

Nonetheless, it was a warm and happy holiday reunion with many friends and relatives. She noted, however, the strains on many of the women, with husbands and brothers overseas in Europe or the Pacific. (All these events reported in her more personal letters from New York.)

Back in California, as the war came to a close in 1945, Evelyn soon after contributed to the postwar boomer generation, with the birth of two sons in 1946 and 1948, (and our daughter in 1957). This, and growing domestic problems, diverted her from her theatrical aspirations. She returned to New York to be close to family, with primary responsibility for her children. But she remained in close touch, and had lifelong friendships with many of the film and theater people from California days. The stage remained always a now vicarious love, and she herself the spirited, warmly outgoing person who had journeyed west so many years ago.

Evelyn has truly been part of an American era that came through the Great Depression, took on the challenges and sacrifices of war, and then raised the postwar generation that has taken over. It surely merits some attention, as the nation looks back on “the generation that saved the world.”