

COMBAT NURSES OF WORLD WAR II



PHOTO EDITION




Wyatt Blassingame

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by Wyatt Blassingame

View of Pearl Harbor from Mobile Base Hospital #2
December 7, 1941

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To Kathi Diamant

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Front cover: U.S. Navy flight nurses walk across an airfield in Guam in April 1945. A Douglas R5D Skymaster aircraft appears in the background.

Back cover: Leaping from the ramp of their landing barge, women of the Red Cross hit the beach in Southern France. 71,000 Red Crosses nurses served during World War II. January 1945

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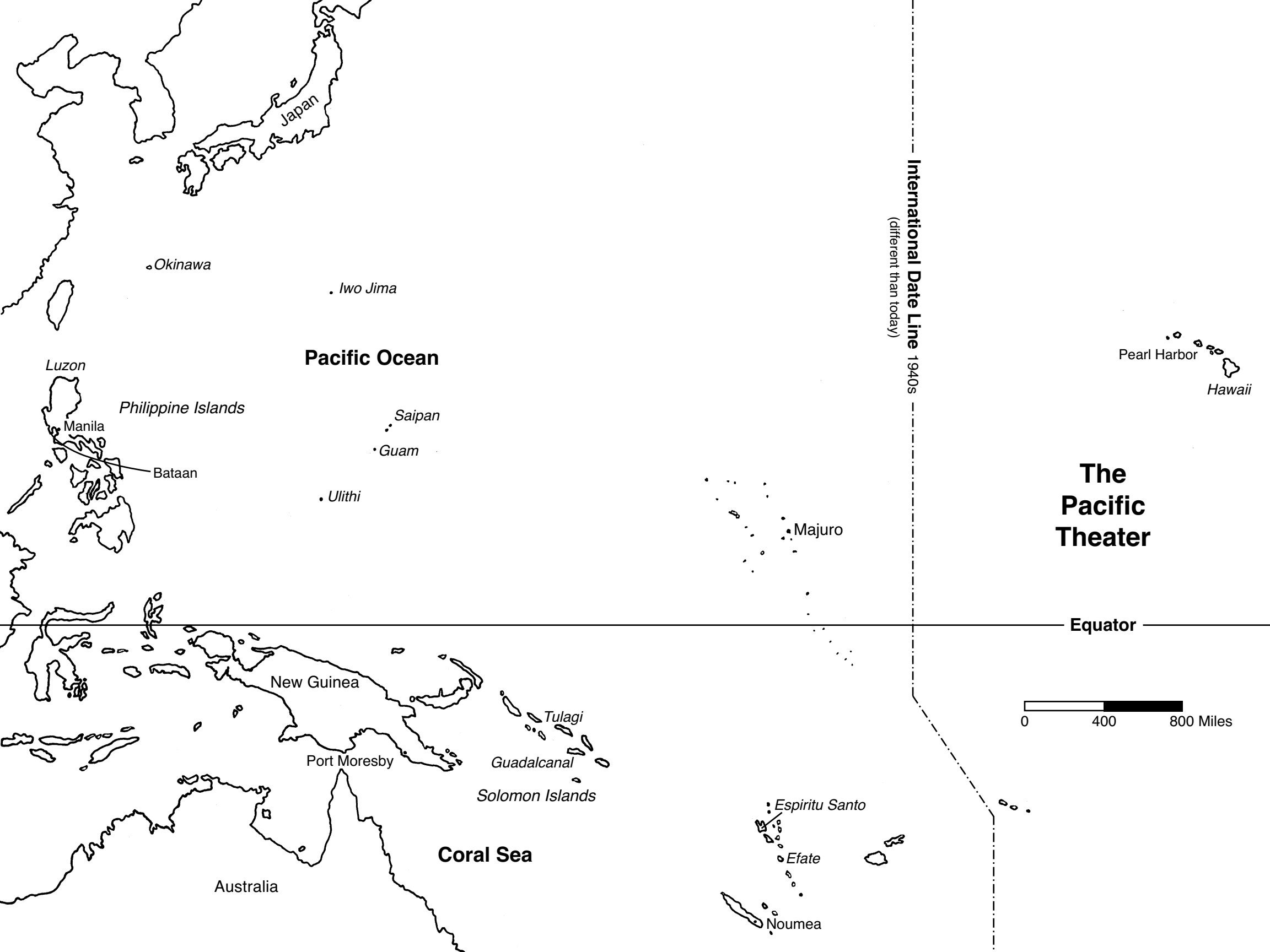
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Pacific Ocean

The Pacific Theater

Equator

0 400 800 Miles

THE BEGINNING

CHAPTER ONE

It was a Sunday morning, December 7, 1941. In Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, the hospital ship *Solace* lay quietly at anchor. She had been newly converted and her fresh white paint glittered in the early sunlight. Down her white side, from stem to stern, ran a broad green stripe. In the center of this was a huge red cross. Another red cross was painted on the white smokestack. Against the placid water of the harbor the ship looked very peaceful and very pretty.



USS *Solace* anchored in Hawaiian waters, 1941.

At five minutes to eight Lieutenant Grace Lally, Chief Nurse on the *Solace*, was in her cabin dressing for church. She could hear airplanes, but this was not surprising. Both the army and navy had airfields nearby and planes were always passing overhead. Even when Miss Lally heard the sound of guns she thought only that it was another drill—these were held frequently now—and she stepped to the porthole of her cabin to look out.

From here she could see a good part of the United States battle fleet: cruisers, destroyers, and the great, gray battleships tied up close together alongside Ford Island. On the deck of the *Nevada* several sailors were fishing. Overhead an airplane was diving toward them but the sailors, intent on their fishing, did not even look up.

Later it would seem to Lieutenant Lally that what followed was something she had dreamed or seen in a movie. Along the leading edge of the plane's wing little blinking lights began to flash. Instinctively Grace Lally knew they were guns. At the same time one of the sailors fishing on the *Nevada* shuddered and fell backward. Another went stumbling across the deck before he fell. Then the plane was gone and Grace Lally stared after it, uncertain of what she had seen. Had that really been a red circle painted on the wing—the emblem of Japan?

Grace Lally turned and ran from her cabin to the wardroom. The windows were wide here, the view better. Before one of the windows the ship's paymaster stood as if frozen. Miss Lally joined him. Neither spoke. There was no time for it. They watched an airplane come out of the



U.S. Naval Air Station on Ford Island during the Japanese attack at Pearl Harbor. The masts on the right belong to the *Nevada*.

sky in a long, steeply slanting dive. They saw the bomb detach itself from the plane's belly and flash downward to strike the battleship *Arizona*. A great mass of flame and smoke blotted out the sky.

There could no longer be any doubt in Grace Lally's mind. I must get the emergency wards set up, she thought. Her voice was quite calm and steady as she began giving orders to the young nurses who came running into the wardroom. Soon the officers' lounge, where members of the crew had been gathering for the church service a few minutes before, was filled with sixty-seven double-decker bunks. Other beds were set up in the crew's recreation room, even on the open decks. Blood plasma bottles, drugs, bandages were piled

they wear their helmets. "We have a lot more casualties from bumping into things in the blackout," she said, "than we do from German bombs."

Not all the American nurses sent to England were assigned to hospitals at first. Many of them, like Ruth Haskell and Theresa Archard who were with the 48th Surgical, were sent to live in long rows of prefabricated buildings. Here the girls would be turned out of bed early in the morning to take exercise. Then there was breakfast, then classes, drill, lunch, and still more drill. This went on day after day, and the afternoon marches got longer and longer. Sometimes the nurses had to carry heavy packs while they marched. Frequently they staggered back to their Nissen huts with feet badly blistered and sometimes bleeding.

Since there was no actual nursing to be done, many of the girls thought they were wasting their time. "I joined the nurse corps, not the infantry," one of them told Ruth Haskell. "I don't see why I have to walk ten miles in an afternoon, and loaded like a burro."

Lieutenant Haskell smiled, a little ruefully. "The colonel says this will come in handy later on. But I hope not."

Life, however, was not all marching. Nearby army posts, both British and American, often gave dances. A blanket invitation would be sent to all the nurses at a hospital or camp. The nurses would get all dressed up—and then climb into the back of a big truck to be driven through the blacked-out countryside to the army post. After the dance they would climb back into the truck to return to their own camp.



Nurses carrying heavy packs on an eight-mile training hike.

Now and then each girl would be given a few days' leave to go sightseeing. She might visit Coventry or London, and stare in awe at the horrible wreckage caused by German bombs. She might visit places she had read and heard about all her life: Shakespeare's birthplace at Stratford-on-Avon, or Westminster Abbey, where so many of England's famous men and women are buried, or Stonehenge with its tremendous, mysterious stones. And Marjorie Peto, as Chief Nurse of 2nd General, even received an invitation to Buckingham Palace, along with other American officers. There she met the king and queen and young Princess Margaret Rose.

flooding in the rain. They knew how to tighten their tent pegs to keep their shelters from sailing away in the wind storms, and how to loosen their tent ropes again when the tentage dried out in the sun and shrank." She added, "They had raised the process of bathing in a helmet to a high science."

Chief Nurse Hallie Almond at the 38th Evacuation Hospital told Miss Bourke-White that the nurses sometimes became so exhausted they broke into tears. "Fatigue neurosis," she called it. And added, "But they only cry when their work is lightest. The minute we get a flow of badly wounded patients they are back on their feet, smiling and telling little jokes to make the boys feel better."

Army nurses washing up in their helmets. May 1945



Here are the stories of the courageous young women who served as nurses at Pearl Harbor, Corregidor, Anzio, Battle of the Bulge, Iwo Jima, and other fighting fronts of WWII. Now illustrated entirely with photos from the war!

As an intelligence officer with the Naval Air Corp, Wyatt Blassingame served on the islands of Tinian and Okinawa, earning a Bronze Star. He witnessed Army and Navy nurses at work while visiting wounded comrades in hospitals on Hawaii, Saipan, and Okinawa.



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