EAST TEXAS HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

HARMON GENERAL HOSPITAL

by Ken Durham

When the citizens of Longview, Texas, heard the shocking news of the surprise attack upon Pearl Harbor by Japan they did not realize how directly the war would be brought home to them. With the entrance of the United States into World War II in December 1941, the government began selecting sites across the nation for naval and air bases, Army training centers, hospitals, and many other facilities.

Longview community leaders joined the rush of cities competing for these essential military establishments. Led by Carl Estes, publisher of the Longview Daily News, a group of thirty Longview businessmen sent Grady Shipp to Washington in January 1942 to present Longview's advantages to Representative Lindy Beckworth, Senator Tom Connally, and military and political leaders. Shipp, the director of the Longview Chamber of Commerce, secured an Army hospital for Longview late in March 1942.

The Army chose part of James A. Holloway's farm, located just south of Longview, as the hospital site. Holloway reluctantly agreed to sell part of his farm to the government, but when the Army forcibly took additional acreage which Holloway had not agreed to sell, he refused the government's offer. He could not believe his government would treat him this way when it was fighting a war to destroy Nazi Germany for treating its citizens in a similar fashion. A land condemnation suit was filed in the federal district court in Tyler, but Holloway still refused to accept a price set by a court-appointed, three-member commission or one subsequently set by a trial jury. His heirs, however, accepted the payment after Holloway's death in 1946.

The Army officially announced the choice of Longview as the site of a 1,500 bed hospital in April and work began a few weeks later on the 156-acre plot. Construction was of the cantonment-type, consisting of wooden frame barracks with asbestos shingle siding. During the summer and early fall over 150 buildings were erected by thousands of local laborers.

The hospital had a major impact on Longview. It continued the economic and population boom begun a decade earlier by the discovery and development of the East Texas Oil Field. It helped to enlarge Longview's population from less than 14,000 in 1940 to approximately 30,000 in 1946, and it brought to Longview, for the first time, large numbers of people from outside the South. The Federal Housing Administration designated Longview as a Defence Housing Area because of inadequate housing for hospital personnel. This designation allowed Longview to construct apartments and houses during the war.

The Army named the hospital in memory of Colonel Daniel Warrick Harmon, who served in the Army Medical Corps from 1904 until his death in 1940. Colonel Governor V. Emerson, a native of Pennsylvania, an orthopedic surgeon, and a twenty-six-year veteran of the Army Medical Corps, was appointed commander of Harmon General Hospital in October 1942.

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The number of buildings and facilities grew constantly throughout the life of the hospital, which included 119 buildings and provided 1,525 beds when activated on November 24, 1942, but at its peak early in 1945 there were 157 hospital buildings and 2,939 beds. Ultimately, the entire complex consisted of 232 buildings and cost over $5,000,000. In addition to the hospital staff of over 700 officers and enlisted men and about seventy nurses, the facility housed 270 Women's Army Corps personnel, two or three training hospitals of 300 people each, and over 200 German prisoners of war. Three and one-half miles of covered ramps connected the hospital buildings. The post also had a 120,000-gallon water tower, a railroad spur and detraining platform, and a fire department. A post exchange had a restaurant, barbershop, beauty shop, tailor shop, and a branch of Longview's First National Bank. Protestant and Catholic chaplains and the Jewish rabbi from Marshall, Texas, conducted services in the chapel. There was a library with 8,000 books, a weekly newspaper, The Harmonizer, and a Western Union office. The hospital complex provided a self-contained community for the 4,000 to 5,000 hospital patients, personnel, and the associated training detachments. A welcome improvement during 1943 was the installation of attic fans in all the hospital wards and living quarters and air conditioners in all operating and recovery rooms.

Harmon General Hospital was one of fifty-nine Army general hospitals in the nation and one of ten in the southwestern states of New Mexico, Texas, Oklahoma, Louisiana, and Arkansas which comprised the Eighth Service Command, headquartered in Dallas. The other Army hospitals in Texas were William Beaumont in El Paso, Ashburn in McKinney, Brooke in San Antonio, and McCloskey in Temple. At its peak Harmon had over forty medical and dental officers who presided over ten medical sections. Due to its specialties in central nervous system syphilis and psychiatry and its designation as a center for tropical and dermatologic diseases, the great majority of patients were ambulatory upon arrival, and it was unusual to have patients on the seriously ill list. In fact, 73.3 percent of the patients admitted during 1944 and 1945 were admitted for disease. Only 14.7 percent were battle casualties, and twelve percent were admitted for injuries. Consequently, only thirty-eight military patients died at Harmon out of more than 23,000 treated, and six of these deaths resulted from automobile accidents involving patients who were allowed to leave the hospital grounds.

Harmon's average daily patient load rose throughout the war. It increased from 824 patients in 1943 to 1,247 patients in 1944, and 2,108 patients in 1945. Of the 23,405 active-duty personnel admitted to Harmon, almost eighty-five percent were Army enlisted men, thirteen percent were Army officers, and there was a small number of Army nurses, WACs, and Navy and Marine personnel.

During the early months of 1945, 20,000 overseas casualties arrived at the nation's military hospitals each month. According to U.S. Surgeon General Norman T. Kirk, the peak patient load for the stateside Army general hospitals was reached on August 12, 1945, when 320,000 were hospitalized. The highest patient load at Harmon was 2,804 on April 4, 1945.
Colonel Emerson encouraged the use and development of new medicines and medical innovations. Mass production of penicillin did not begin in the United States until 1941 and Harmon received its first supply on December 30, 1943. Penicillin was so successful that by the end of 1944 only seven gonorrhea patients remained in Harmon. The Harmon pharmacy also devised enteric-coated penicillin capsules for oral use six months before the development was published in medical journals.

Syphilis and malaria were two of the major diseases weakening American troops in all theatres of the war, and an interesting technique at Harmon was the use of malaria to cure patients of central nervous system syphilis. In June 1944, Harmon was designated for specialized treatment of this disease. Patients with syphilis were allowed to volunteer for the malaria fever therapy or to use the traditional thermal therapy. The volunteers were inoculated with malaria by anopheles mosquitoes. When the patient's temperature reached 105 or 106 degrees, the fever killed the syphilis. The patients were then treated for the malaria. However, the patients could not be cured of malaria. The best treatment was atabrine, a preparation of quinacrine, which merely suppressed malaria attacks but did not cleanse the blood system of the plasmodia.

Working closely with the Syphilis Center was the Laboratory for Imported Malarial Studies. This research laboratory, established in April 1944, was one of four in the country operated by the U.S. Public Health Service. The laboratory included an insectary where colonies of several native species of mosquitoes were maintained. They fed on voluntary subjects who had returned from tropical war zones with malaria. The infected mosquitoes were then used to inoculate the syphilis patients for malaria therapy, and research was conducted on the ability of various species of native mosquitoes to transmit malaria.

In January 1945, Harmon was permitted to establish an artificial eye center in the eye, ear, nose, and throat section. A process of making artificial eyes from plastic rather than glass had been developed by two dentists using the same material they used in making dentures, and consequently, a dental officer at Harmon received training in this process at Brooke General Hospital in San Antonio. Eye coloring could be matched much more closely using plastic than glass, and plastic eyes proved popular among the 158 Harmon patients who received them in 1945.

Colonel Emerson established two advanced and distinguishing medical practices at Harmon. These were the conservative policy of performing surgery only if the need was clearly and unmistakably indicated by the patient's medical records, and the policy of early ambulation. All sections encouraged this latter practice because it reduced post-operative nursing care and promoted early return to duty.

Most of the doctors at Harmon were highly qualified, and the heads of the various sections were American Board Members in their fields. The pathological laboratory, under the direction of Colonel Stuart W. Lippincott, was recognized as the most efficient laboratory in the Eighth Service Command. Emerson promoted cooperation among the various medical sections by the exchange of information at daily pathological conferences.
where the doctors discussed unusual cases in diagnosis and treatment. In addition to these daily conferences, Emerson scheduled leading medical authorities to speak at Harmon.

Most of the medical officers at Harmon were involved in conducting research, speaking to medical societies, and publishing professional papers. During 1944 and 1945 the medical staff made nineteen presentations to county, state, and national medical societies and had thirty-three papers published or accepted for publication. The papers covered various aspects of medicine, but many of them dealt with malaria research at Harmon.

Training of medical personnel was also a vital part of the work of Harmon General Hospital. During 1944, forty-nine recent medical school graduates received six weeks’ training at Harmon, which also trained the staffs of seven Army general hospitals for overseas duty during 1943 and 1944. Each of these training units consisted of 200 to 300 medical officers, nurses, and enlisted men who were quartered in the barracks at Harmon. When Harmon was short handed the trainees worked as an integral part of the Harmon medical team.

During 1945, two Women’s Army Corps hospital companies, each numbering between 100 and 200 members, were trained at Harmon as reconditioning therapists, medical and dental technicians, and as nurses. In addition, one WAC service unit was stationed permanently at Harmon to assist in various capacities after receiving training there. Nine members of this service unit served as military police. The arrival of these WAC units broke the monotony and created a great deal of extra-curricular excitement for the patients. According to Eunice Todd, a medical technician, “Those soldiers just did everything you could imagine—broke every rule. It was bedlam around there for a while.”

The hospital staff and East Texas citizens provided more formal ways of breaking the monotony. The special services and reconditioning section cooperated with the Red Cross to bring quality entertainment and recreation to Harmon. A large gymnasium, completed in January 1944, and a theatre, completed later that year, contributed greatly to the recreational program. Entertainment was also provided by Harmon’s resident band and orchestra, by USO groups, and by the appearance of celebrities, including movie stars. The more advanced reconditioning patients were provided bicycles for extended rides around the country side, and they worked in the hospital and engaged in athletic tournaments. These patients also were reconditioned by refreshing their marching skills. One such group, when marching down a post street, found itself on a head-on collision course with a group of German prisoners marching to their work assignment, and all the patients scattered because their marching skills were too rusty to obey the command “Right About March.” The patients did not know who got the biggest laugh, themselves or the German prisoners who continued marching.

Harmon male staff members organized inter-base athletic teams. Their baseball team, the Harmonknights, compiled a record of 35-2 in 1945. The same year the basketball team won the Eighth Service Command tournament championship. Civilian and military staff women formed intra-base volleyball,
World War II generated tremendous patriotism across the nation, and Harmon did its part to promote patriotism in Longview and East Texas. During 1944 and 1945, radio station KWKH in Shreveport broadcast a daily show, "Heroes Come to Harmon," which spotlighted the military action of the patients, from hospital wards. Beginning the first Friday in May 1943 and continuing throughout the war, Emerson held military awards ceremonies at the flag pole in front of the headquarters building. Harmon's patients and personnel participated in the Fourth through the Seventh War Bond Drives by sponsoring war-bond dances, queen contests, and speaking at rallies. Over 1,200 people attended the Seventh War Bond Dance held at the Harmon gymnasium in June 1945.

Colonel Emerson was impressed with how deeply the people of Longview and East Texas took the institution to their hearts. Hundreds of citizens attended the dedication ceremony and open house in December 1942, and through their churches, schools, and civic clubs purchased shrubs and flowers to beautify the grounds, collected money to pay for each patient's "First Call Home," took patients on tours of East Texas, and donated such items as furniture for the ward sunrooms and music instruments for a patient orchestra. At Christmas they provided each patient with two gifts, plus decorations, nuts, and candy. Emerson said that Christmas 1943 was as fine and complete a Christmas celebration as he had witnessed in an Army hospital during his twenty-seven years in the Medical Corps.

The Red Cross also organized and trained the Gray Ladies and the Red Cross Motor Corps which consisted of local women and the wives of hospital personnel. Between seventy and ninety Gray Lady volunteers spent between 7,000 and 8,000 hours a year with the patients. They played games with them, worked in occupational therapy, wrote letters for them, and brought them books, playing cards, magazines, and other things to occupy their time. The approximately twenty women in the Motor Corps spent over 4,000 hours annually running errands, purchasing and mailing gifts for patients, and taking them fishing, golfing, swimming, and to football games.

It is difficult to know how local support for Harmon compared to that at other military hospitals, but there is one indication. As editor of The Harmonizer for two and one-half years, Joe Biondi was aware of the many civic endeavors on behalf of the patients. After returning to civilian life he met veterans who had been patients in other military hospitals who were astonished to learn about the recreational activities provided by East Texas citizens. Most told Biondi, "Heck, we didn't have anything like that at our hospital."

In May 1945, German prisoners of war in the United States peaked at more than 370,000, and that month Harmon acquired a satellite POW camp, a branch of a base compound at Camp Fannin, an Infantry Replacement Training Center located near Tyler. One hundred forty-three German POWs were transferred to Harmon to work in various capacities. America required its POWs to work since it was permitted by the Geneva Convention, because it allowed additional American servicemen to be sent overseas, and work had a
positive effect on the morale of the prisoners. The POWs at Harmon worked in the mess halls, in the orthopedic brace shop, as draftsmen, in warehouses, and as yardmen. By all accounts the prisoners were hard working and cooperative. In appreciation for being treated well, some of the prisoners gave their American supervisors hand-carved, wooden gifts, including ashtrays, jewelry boxes, and a cigarette dispenser. The prisoners, all enlisted men, lived in a separate compound located in a fenced area on the southwest corner of the property, and the number of prisoners varied from 133 to 205 during the operation of the prison camp from May 3 until it was closed on January 20, 1946.

U.S. Surgeon General Norman T. Kirk commended Colonel Emerson for his excellent work as commander at Harmon in a public ceremony in Longview on October 3, 1945, and announced his appointment as commander of Crile General Hospital in Columbus, Ohio. Colonel Paul M. Crawford replaced Emerson on October 6. On October 10 Harmon was blocked from further admissions. By the end of that month only 759 patients remained; the last patient was evacuated and all wards closed on December 6. The previous day the headquarters of the Eighth Service Command had declared Harmon General Hospital surplus property. Colonel Crawford turned over the duties of closing the post to Major M.K. Moulder.

The Longview Chamber of Commerce and business leaders had hoped the federal government would transfer Harmon to the Veterans Administration as a veterans hospital, but when that hope faded they turned their attention to other uses for the abandoned buildings. Christian industrialist R.G. LeTourneau discovered the abandoned hospital while in East Texas investigating sites for a new factory. He and his wife wanted to establish an industrial school and the complex of buildings seemed ideal, so the LeTourneau Foundation took possession of the 232 buildings and 156 acres on January 20, 1946. Emerson was a platform guest at the dedication of LeTourneau Technical Institute on February 25, 1946.

Today the former site of Harmon General Hospital is the main campus of LeTourneau University, a Christian engineering and liberal arts institution which offers bachelor’s degrees in thirty-eight fields and a master of business administration. A few of the old hospital buildings are still in use, one of which is the chapel. Several years ago the University restored the chapel and a benefactor endowed it in honor of the military patients and personnel of Harmon General Hospital. It was a popular place for weddings of hospital patients and personnel who met at Harmon during the war, and it remains a favorite place for LeTourneau student functions, including weddings.

NOTES

1 "Longview Daily News April 5, 1942; hereinafter referred to as LDN.


3 U.S.A. vs. 34 Acres of Land More or Less in the County of Gregg, State of Texas, James A Holloway, and other documents from the proceedings in the federal district court in Tyler, Texas, December 22, 1943 - June 2, 1946 (National Archives Depository, Fort Worth, Texas).
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