**WWII Vets Remember Medical Missions**

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They are in their eighties now, and for this reunion of World War II veterans, only a handful have been able to travel to Washington. Their numbers have dwindled to seven -- three nurses and four enlisted men -- all part of the Army's 44th Evacuation Hospital.

The hospital, a mobile unit with about 330 officers and enlisted personnel, closely followed the combat troops during the war. They set up tents for wards and operating rooms and moved on short notice, packing and unpacking the hospital with each move.

The 44th landed on Omaha Beach 13 days after the June 6, 1944, Normandy invasion. Six months later, they were trapped behind German lines during the famous Battle of the Bulge, the Germans' last-ditch offensive in the Ardennes region of Belgium. In the 11 months after its Normandy landing, the unit treated more than 22,000 patients, according to an account by the unit chaplain. The nurses were using a new wonder drug called penicillin. Personnel often performed surgery near battle lines in France, Belgium and Germany as gunfire sounded nearby.

"We were the same as a MASH unit but without the helicopters," explained Bob Owen, a corporal and X-ray technician, referring to the shorthand for the mobile army surgical hospitals associated with the Korean War.

The 44th treated the most seriously wounded; those with injuries that were not life-threatening were transported to hospitals in England. Or, as Owen put it, using shorthand for the injuries: "We did the head, chest and belly, and we sent the legs and arms back."

Owen, of Hobe Sound, Fla., and six others from the unit gathered this weekend for a small, private reunion, touring the White House and visiting the National World War II Memorial. In the 60 years since the war's end, there have been 15 or 16 reunions, depending on whom you ask. During the earlier reunions, the nurses would get together by themselves, said Annabelle Hayward, 86, of Wellsburg, W.Va. As death and illness took their toll, the nurses began inviting the enlisted men.

This year, the reunion came about because the oldest in the group, Rose Hausman, 89, was having a family reunion in the District with five of her seven children. When the others found out, they decided to join her. Hausman, of Indianapolis, uses a wheelchair and is not able to travel much, "so we thought we would all get together so that Rose could be with us," Hayward said.

As they gathered at the WWII Memorial yesterday for group photo after group photo, they seemed content to stay in one place, even though most had never visited the memorial. They joked and corrected one another's recollections of events.

A question about the total number of personnel in the unit prompted a lengthy discussion.

"We had 40 nurses and 40 doctors," Owen said.

"No," shot back Dominick Garcia of Virginia Beach, who was the sergeant in charge of the enlisted men. "We only had about 36 male officers and only about 30 were doctors."

There were serious moments, too. Mike Kotchick, 87, who worked in the neurosurgery ward and now lives in Endicott, N.Y., stopped to read a plaque honoring veterans and their sacrifices. For a few moments, he was silent. Then his eyes welled up with tears behind his sunglasses.

"All of this is just beautiful," he murmured.

Despite their collective hazy memories, the veterans remembered some things very clearly.

The German buzz bombs, or V-1 bombs, were awful. They made a distinct sound as they flew overhead at low altitude. When the timing mechanisms expired, the bombs fell to earth and exploded.

"As long as you could hear them, it was okay," Hayward recalled. "When they stopped, they dropped."

Then there was the time they came under shelling during the Battle of the Bulge. In December 1944, during the Germans' all-out offensive on the western front, many medical units were forced to evacuate on short notice, including the 44th.

"It was 5 in the morning and we were shelled," recalled Al Kowalski, 84, a sergeant from Rochester, N.Y., who worked in the dental unit. The 44th was ordered to leave immediately. They huddled in a horse stable before they eventually found shelter in a convent. They stayed there for several weeks while they waited to be reunited with their hospital equipment.

The 44th was also among the first U.S. units to witness the skeletal survivors at a newly liberated forced labor camp at the rocket factory in Nordhausen, Germany, where thousands of prisoners were forced to work and live underground under unspeakable conditions.

"These laborers had been worked to death," Garcia recalled. "It was horrible."

But no one wanted to dwell on unhappy memories. Most of the reunions are spent catching up on family and friends. They are not sure when the next one will be.

"The last three reunions we had, I thought were the last," Kowalski said.