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Battle Station Sick Bay. Navy Medicine in World War II

by
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Jan K Herman
Naval Institute Press; 1997

This recent offering from the Naval Institute Press is a highly readable collection of personal accounts from USN personnel serving in a variety of postings in many different theatres of war during WW2.

As the preface explains, this is the work of Jan Herman, historian to the Navy Medical Department since 1980. In 1985 he began to conduct interviews with a diverse group of WW2 veterans. This was the beginning the US Navy Medical Department's oral history project and this book is a selection from those interviews.

The reader is taken from Pearl Harbour, to the Pacific war and service ashore with the USMC, in submarines, with the surface fleet and on the 'Mercy ships'. Some accounts are by personnel from the then USS COMFORT (AH6) a name familiar to some in the RAN Health Services Branch from service on Operation Damask. The Pacific picture is completed by including accounts from the 'Rice Paddy Navy' serving on mainland China.

The European experience is less emphasised (being by the author's admission, a predominantly Army responsibility) but D- Day is included, as the Navy and Army worked together to evacuate the casualties off the beach and back to England.

One of the book's strengths lies in its selection of people in roles not often highlighted in the usual WW2 recollections. Here in the latter chapters we hear from one of the doctors working on Human Serum Albumin, and the race to have this life saving intravascular volume expander prepared. Reminiscences also come from Franklin D Roosevelt's personal physician and others working in the White House.

Appendages to the book include a glossary which covers the medical terms making the book more comprehensible to the general reader. A minor criticism is that it could have included the military acronyms as well. There are two sections of photos well chosen to highlight the environments and scale of challenge these people faced.

Finally, in a moving and well written finish American ex POWs describe their moments of liberation and HA2c Irving Feld describes the scene and ongoing human suffering at Oak Knoll Naval hospital which was lightened but did not end with peace.