

**“Fear Not Fear”: The Role of the Nurse  
in Caring for Patients during World War I”**

**Jennifer M. Casavant, RN, MSN, ACNP-BC**  
**PhD student University of Virginia School of Nursing**  
1121 Wertland St. Apt # 3  
Charlottesville, VA 22903  
(434) 293-4550 home phone  
(434) 982-1809 fax number  
[jmc5dy@virginia.edu](mailto:jmc5dy@virginia.edu)

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**Purpose of study:** This is a work in progress of a social history that explores the activities of the American Red Cross nurses who served with the University of Virginia Base Hospital 41 during World War I. This study uses both primary and secondary data to document their experiences.

**Rationale and significance:** World War I, like many before it and many after it, advanced the technology of medicine and the knowledge and practice of nursing. Some of the challenges faced by the nurses of Base Hospital 41 during this time included inadequate medical supplies and food, lack of utilities like heat, light, and hot water, enemy attack, overcrowding and low nurse-patient ratios, infection, and illness, including the influenza epidemic of 1918. Amidst these adverse conditions the nurses of Base Hospital 41 in St. Denis, France in the late summer of 1918, continued to try to remain in their traditional role—particularly of promoting comfort; while they branched out into new roles of performing triage and utilizing state of the art technology like Dakin’s solution to treat wounds from artillery shrapnel, machine gun fire, and chemical warfare.

**Description of methodology and sources:** A social history approach is used in examining primary manuscripts, and documents such as diary entries and letters. Primary sources included the University of Virginia Medical Center archive Base Hospital 41 collection, the Camilla Louise Wills collection within the Center for Nursing Historical Inquiry at the University of Virginia School of Nursing, documents from the American Red Cross Archives and the Library of Virginia in Richmond, and pertinent primary nursing literature. Secondary sources included nursing, medical, and military historical writings that provided context. Archival research was conducted in 3 archival centers.

**Preliminary Findings/Conclusions:** True to their motto, “fear not fear”, the nurses of Base Hospital 41 who served in France during World War I had an important role in reducing morbidity and mortality as they overcame the obstacles they faced with courage, endurance, and creativity while in caring for the wounded and ill soldiers. These nurses made a difference in the lives of the patients they cared for and left a legacy for nursing history. Their contributions have significance in military history, nursing history, and women’s history.