

## ***Letter from Ann Taft***

July 15, 1937

Dear T. ---

Just received your letter dated June 18, and was glad you sent the newspaper clippings. As yet the new groups have not arrived and we have not received the packages, but we hear that they are on the way, and have many things for us.

At present, I am in the midst of setting up my fourth operating room, and T., each one presents new problems, and difficulties; but I guess the first 100 will be the hardest and then I'll be able to set up with my eyes closed. Do not think I'm discouraged because I'm not. It has been a grand experience, and is worth five years of my life.

My first operating room was set up in Romeral, and what a problem! No running water; water had to be carried in the house after we had pulled it up from a well, and then was placed in tanks for scrubbing. Water had to be carried in for the autoclaves, etc. Our autoclaves are heated by prima stoves which run on kerosene, and you can't imagine how much work there is attached to sterilizing and keeping things clean. We spend hours trying to figure out a way in which to sterilize our goods so that things come out dry. We have not given up trying although we have been at it five months. The sterilizer was very cheap and the water was very hard, and so when the instruments were boiled, they were coated with lime and muck and what not. Soda bicarb and other chemicals would not soften this water. It would take me an hour or so to wipe the muck off the instruments every day. Finally I decided that if I boiled the instruments in something else, they might be cleaner, and that I would have more time for other work. So I hied me off to the kitchen and appropriated three dish pans for boiling and three frying pans for covers. What fun! The Prima stoves did their damndest but it used to take three hours to get water to boil; then the instruments would rust and stick, and all the greasing in the world was more or less ineffective.

Wounded kept arriving day and night. It was so cold that while assisting at operations, I used to hop first on one foot, and then on the other to keep warm. The instruments were so cold they stuck to my hands and poor H. used to run her feet off carrying sterile hot water, circulating for me, and three or four small operations at the same time. We had no material for lap sponges, so we used muslin and gauze. We had no jars for catgut, so again we raided the kitchen, and every pot with a cover took up residence in the operating room. Some were red enamel and had two ears, and some had one ear, and no pots were alike. Imagine! We even have glove covers made up by peasant women. Every empty can that had a cover and every cookie box was appropriated so that I could keep up a good supply of sterile gauze for the operating room and the rest of the hospital.

We cut up some rubber sheeting, dug up the back yard, and made sand bags. We made masks from unbleached muslin; and when I scrubbed I always had on a pair of woolen socks, three sweaters and a jacket, besides the regulation uniform of the Medical Bureau. I'd fold up all my sleeves and commence to scrub in ice water, and then struggle into a gown. It was so cold, that you could see clouds of vapor rising from our patients' chests and legs, and hot water bags were placed under their shoulders, buttocks, and feet; and in spite of everything we did, we could not keep our patients warm during operations. If we plugged in the electric heaters, the lights grew dim, and we could hardly see to operate; so we had to sacrifice heat for light. It is surprising that in spite of all the difficulties, our mortality rate was very low, and were are astounded at the unexpected recovery of some of our most serious cases. But the will to live is great, and all are fighting for a better world.

After about a month of working day and night, we were told that we would have to move because the fronts we were serving were quiet, and we were needed elsewhere. Freddie Martin came to wake me one afternoon, and said, "Ann, pack the Operating Room; we are moving." She has said this so many times, it seems that some day when I'm old and grey, and death comes and taps

me on the shoulder, I'll jump up thinking it's Freddie saying, "Ann, pack the Operating Room." The day we moved was March 17th and what a day it was. Cold, raining, bitter! We landed in the new town, knee deep in mud, and commenced to try to set up. And all the time wounded were brought in, cold, in shock, bleeding, dying. T., it was - I can't tell you what it was. Words cannot describe the horror of it! Things were so difficult. Not enough beds, instruments, linens or other equipment. Freddie has been marvelous. If she hadn't been with us, we never would have survived.

After we had been in this town a few days I went to bed with rheumatic fever, and had to remain in bed all the time we were at this hospital. Poor Rae Harris! Besides being night supervisor, and the only American nurse on nights, she had to work in the operating room day and night. Of course none of the nurses got more than four hours sleep at any time, and many a day, no one saw a chair or bed for 72 or more hours. We were so overcompensated, that when we finally went to bed we could not relax. Every time I tried to get out of bed, and go to work, Freddie would come along and sit on me. But everyone was working so hard, and I could not rest knowing that my being ill made it so much more difficult for everyone else.

After a month in this town, things sort of quieted down and we moved to the two casas that at one time belonged to the royal family. They must have expected us, because they left us the most beautiful parks and estates. The place is large and spacious, and we've been able to establish a really beautiful and efficient hospital. As a matter of fact, we've been told the Americans have the best hospitals in Spain, and that they realize that it is due to the efficiency of the nurses and doctors. I may sound very conceited, but I am proud and happy to be here helping the brave Spanish people wipe fascism off the face of the earth....

I will let you know when the packages arrive, and thanks loads for everything.  
Tell my friends to write.  
Love to everyone.  
Lovingly, Taftie