

Finding Aid for the

Otken Collection

OHA 260.05

**Otis Historical Archives
National Museum of Health and Medicine
Armed Forces Institute of Pathology**

Date of Records: 1917-1919

.1 cubic foot, 1 box

Description

The bulk of the Otken Collection consists of letters written by Dr. Luther Otken to family members and his future wife while he served in the American Expeditionary Forces as a Captain in World War 1. Other items in the collection are postcards, newspaper clippings, a typed service record, a copy of his discharge certificate from the Army, and a copy of his obituary.

Most of his service time was at Base Hospital #22 in Bordeaux, France. He attended training on treatment of fractures and the implementation of the Carrel-Dakin treatment, but his correspondence also makes frequent reference to his "face cases." His correspondence also includes descriptions of maternity service at the New York Women's Hospital, tenement life in New York, and mentions of the Spanish flu. The collection is arranged first by recipient, then by date. It was donated in 2009 by Dr. Otken's grandson, John Garrott.

Dr. Otken referred several times to photographs taken of his patients but those photos no longer exist, according to the family.

Biographical Information

Luther Boyce Otken was born in Summit, Mississippi on June 21, 1891 and raised in McComb, MS, the son of Dr. Charles H. and Emily Jane Lea Otken. He earned his undergraduate degree from Mississippi College, his medical degree from the University of Texas, Galveston and was commissioned as an officer in the Army Medical Corps upon graduation. He received a final promotion to Major one month before receiving his discharge in March 1919.

Dr. Otken met his future wife, Frances M. Hodges, while both were stationed at Camp Shelby, MS where Miss Hodges was training with the Army Nurse Corps; she also served in France during the war. Following their marriage in May 1919, Dr. Otken practiced medicine in Greenwood for 48 years. He died November 21, 1969.

Box Contents

Finding aid.

Service record, Army discharge certificate, obituary.

Letters To His Future Wife

Frances Hodges

No date

Writes of his trip over on the boat; "would give five dollars for a newspaper."

July 17, 1918

Getting many cases through the hospital and using it as an Evacuation Hospital.

July 30, [1918?]

Conditions similar to Camp Shelby – "a bunch of patients & nothing to work with;" "hoped I would never have to open up a Base Hospital again but guess I'm doomed. Keeps my fur rubbed the wrong way all the time;" expecting General Pershing for an inspection; have about 500 patients and only six nurses.

October 8, 1918

Convoy got in at midnight with 130 litter cases, all surgical and hadn't been dressed for three days.

October 22, 1918

"We buried our nurse today – military funeral, we bought a nice coffin for her – you know the govt only furnishes a plain wooden box, I was one of the pallbearers;" got orders to go to Base Hospital 114 for temporary duty as orthopedic surgeon "but you know how I know very little about orthopedics."

January 19, 1919

Asked Major Gore if a nurse could resign and get home that way, but possible only if she was sick; "I can't give you much advice until I hear from you but if you think you are going to be stuck there for three or four months I want you to go to the chief of Medical Services and have him examine you:" he "can't bear the idea of going home and leaving you over here for so long;" a Lieutenant Willy, an engineer who built the hospital, died of the flu.

Letters To His Family

Mother, Mrs. E.H. Otken (Emily Jane Lea Otken)

No date

Envelope only.

July 1, 1917

In New York for two days; describes sightseeing trip through the city.

July 13, 1917

Heard about the commotion at home about troops being ordered out.

July 20, 1917

Children are dying of osteo-colitis; describes tenements in New York.

July 27, 1917

Had received notice from the State Board that he had passed; received his commission; admonishes his mother to "be careful how you discuss the war."

August 3, 1917

Hot spell in New York with many deaths every day and dead horses on the street; no word from the Surgeon General.

August 10, 1917

Family "unnecessarily excited" about letter with "exemption blanks;" made arrangements to go to the New York Women's Hospital for a year; has not yet written to his Senator – is waiting for word from Surgeon General's office; admonishes mother for "the tone of your letters – a stranger would think you were pro-German," the war was necessary.

February 3, 1918

Newspaper clipping, poem: Lusitania! Lusitania!; operating daily at Camp Shelby; didn't have one death that week; many new patients; many pneumonia patients; Mississippi River was "on a rampage" which will cause delays in transportation of men and supplies.

No date

1st letter after arriving in Milwaukee; hospital just about mobilized from the 2nd floor of the Milwaukee Auditorium; will move to the barracks from the hotel.

No date

From Milwaukee; travel by train to New York with twelve freight cars, two baggage cars, and five Pullman cars; instructions for signing letters sent to him.

No date

1st letter after arriving at Camp Merritt; limited to one trunk to ship overseas; big send-off from Milwaukee and a noisy reception through Syracuse.

May 9, 1918

Acted as pall bearer for military funeral of Lt. Col Daum, an aviator killed at Dayton, Ohio; impatiently waiting for orders to ship out; lists items given to him by the Red Cross.

May 11, 1918

Three doctors there now and the rest will meet them at the port of embarkation; 100 nurses who will go with the unit are waiting at Ellis Island; 200 enlisted men; "we are all anxious to get away from here and get on over & get to work – this business of just killing time is the hardest job I ever had;" waiting to hear about his commission.

May 22, 1918

Camp Merritt; leaving for France; will leave cards at the port to be mailed when he arrives safely "over there;" "I'm proud of the fact I'm in this war."

No date

Postcard; "arrived safely. Somewhere in England."

No date

Postcard; "arrived safely."

No date

Probably 1st letter from France; not allowed to give details of the trip over; will be glad to get to work; misses the daily newspaper and would be willing to pay \$1 for one.

June 26, 1918

Base Hospital #22; newly arrived in France; uneventful trip across the water; many boats convoyed all the way; takes an all-night run by fast train to get wounded to hospital from Evacuation Hospital.

June 27, 1918

Postcard; will write long letter soon.

June 29, 1918

Work on his hospital progressing but will be a while before it opens; US aviation camp about a mile away; on surgical service and responsible for Carrel-Dakin treatment of all infected wounds – one of the biggest discoveries of the war; send newspapers and tear out the stocks and ads but not the sports.

July 7, 1918

Miss Hodges in Paris but still unassigned; going to American Red Cross Hospital #2 for training; went to Bordeaux for a benefit for one of the French Hospitals.

July 12, 1918

Hospital commanded by Colonel Blake, a famous surgeon in fracture cases; most cases are fracture cases; Miss Hodges is at Base Hospital #24, about 100 miles away.

July 20, 1918

"...a force working day & night;" boys sorry to be away from the fight; Allies pushing in on the Rhine and Soissons; "majority of our cases are not dangerously wounded but some of them are horribly wounded;" Germans shelling Paris.

July 26, 1918

One hundred ambulatory patients; parade in Paris July 14 with soldiers of all Allied Nations; "the spirit of our boys who are wounded is indescribable."

August 4, 1918

Received a whole hospital train of patients; all equipment has not yet arrived, short of nurses, some doctors away on temporary duty; has charge of two wards, 100 cases that are dressed daily; Germans still on the run.

August 10, 1918

"..running full blast now;" expects a big hospital train; YMCA has entertainment; convalescents also put on talent shows – "lots have been on the stage back in the States."

August 18, 1918

Work includes suturing, cleaning wounds of shrapnel and bullets, and "bone work;" English and French launched a big offensive in Flanders.

August 31, 1918

Takes all morning to dress his cases, has operated nearly every afternoon; has been promised a week's leave if he saves a particular patient; boys bring back thrilling tales from the front; some optimistic the war will be over before winter; have had lots of [black] soldiers from the stevedore and labor regiments; several entertainments a week at the YMCA; scarcity of some food, plenty of other kinds.

September 7, 1918

Boys are all doing well; Germans retreating almost their whole front; writes of Senator Vardaman being defeated.

September 22, 1918

German prisoners in from St. Michel fight; nurse from BH 114 died from pneumonia; operated a second time on face case; in France three months; won't win war before Christmas but it won't last another year.

September 29, 1918

200 wounded German prisoners and another convoy arriving; not allowed to give patient names or hospital capacity, but "[if you] add one year to my age and multiply by one hundred you have the number of our beds;" had photographer make pictures of the most seriously wounded and will have more made as the boys heal; German prisoners say they know they're whipped; news from front says Germans being driven back on all fronts; can't send packages from home without OK by the CO; "[blacks] are no cowards & they fight like demons."

October 12, 1918

Three thousand patients and sixteen "of us" to care for them; having "quite an epidemic of it" in the States [influenza?]; Germans on retreat; representative of Chicago Tribune visited camp; "face case turned out fine, is all healed up now & is ready for duty but I hate to send him back to the trenches I feel like he has had his share;" two nurses, "all Northern girls," sick with pneumonia.

October 31, 1918

Returned to BH 22 from BH 114 to take charge of all the face cases – oral and plastic work; two hospitals caring for more than 9000 patients; flu continues – "don't try to wear it off – go to bed at once - take a big purgative & sweat it off;" boy with the bad face ready to return to the front; censorship issues on letters home; Austria has gotten enough – Italians and English "giving them an awful licking."

December 7, 1918

Not very busy, not many patients and they are being sent home as fast as possible; almost 1800 sent home one day that week; his hospital to be used as Evacuation Hospital for two sectors for 40000 wounded and then he will be sent home; still has about 40 face cases; "the younger men of the unit are all busy arranging these convalescents going home, into companies, equipping them [,] paging them & seeing to all the clerical work necessary to get them home – hope I escape all this; work has slowed to the extent that "we hardly know what to do with ourselves;" sent his "Yale man" home – will have a stiff knee all his life but is lucky to be alive; newly arrived men "tell us some awful stories about the 'Flu' in the camps;" he was sick for two days and then was all right.

Grandmother, Mrs. C.H. Otken

Date illegible

Postcard, Kaiser Bill.

Sister, Perla Clay Otken

May 28, 1918

Put in for commutation of quarters, claiming his mother as dependent; lists the amount of money he will receive and how it will be allocated; nothing to do in New York except paperwork and inspection of the men so they don't develop any diseases; sees Miss Hodges frequently.

July 24, 1918

His draft number was drawn but as an officer can't be drafted; looks for his commission to arrive; wrote to Surgeon General that he would like to serve a year [stateside] before going into active service; gets \$2 a week for car fare and after three months, \$50; is now at a maternity hospital and gets more work per man than interns do at the big hospitals; they handle 150-200 cases a month in addition to clinic work; describes the living conditions of the tenements.

July 29, 1918

His allotment has started; "send me some newspapers;" expects General Pershing for a visit to the hospital; Major Theo Roosevelt was at the hospital, "also Rickenbacker the aviator;" heard the transport Covington was sunk; "the German offensive has turned into a disastrous defeat."

September 14, 1918

Don't send anything to him – doesn't need anything and wants to carry home as little as possible; discusses the Carrel-Dakin treatment and how quickly it cleans up infection; he has been recommended to do all face and jaw cases as well as oral and plastic surgery for the unit; discusses a face case he worked on – "his face is not going to be disfigured very much" and hopes to get a picture of him.

October 19, 1918

Very busy at the hospital with an average of 3000 patients; Spanish flu is all over Europe as well as in the States; in charge of three officers' wards and "they are much harder to handle than the men [enlisted] & want so much more attention;" sent a lot of Class D patients back to the States, those hopelessly crippled and those unable to return to service in two months; news from the front is good; expects to be home within the year.

November 16, 1918

"Coincidence wasn't it that Germany should fall on the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month;" boys are being sent home as fast as possible and they have stopped arriving at the hospital so fast – the decrease is noticeable; glad they all escaped the flu.

November 30, 1918

"...we are sending the boys home as fast as we can – have our hospital down to about 2500 men;" his hospital converted to an Evacuation Hospital so he will be there a while longer; all Base Hospitals are to return to the States in the order they arrived; went downtown to a banquet given by the American officers to the French officers, "a small affair;" four base hospitals arrived in the last week with their quota of men but not nurses; Margaret Wilson, the president's daughter, sang at the Red Cross Hut for the patients – had them all singing; flu just about done where he is.

December 10, 1918

Just learned of his mother's death, "all we can do is to reverence the memory of the best mother children ever had;" his hospital being used as Evacuation Hospital.

December 31, 1918

Got leave and is glad he got away – traveled, including to Monte Carlo where "they don't allow any person of any army to enter the gambling halls;" when he returned he had a letter saying his mother died; work is very light.

[?], 1919

Envelope only.

[?], 1919

Envelope only.

No date

Telegram: "Luther arrived safely."

January 4, 1919

Grieving over mother's death; received news that Evacuation Hospital #20 to relieve his hospital but still doesn't know when they will be sent home.

January 10, 1919

Hasn't had enough work to keep busy; has about twenty-five face cases waiting to go home; expects to go home in a few months; has all the serious cases in his ward.

February 2, 1919

Not doing any professional work at all; many patients leaving – several boats left the prior week and are expected to send out 5000 more patients in the next; two teachers of his were badly gassed; Frances Hodges visited Verdun; not anxious to return to New York with the weather below zero.

February 8, 1919

Still living at Beau Desert and not busy with work; flu seem to be over; kerosene stove exploded in one of the wards during the night and it burned down quickly – ward was full with amputees but everyone escaped; only twenty nurses from the hospital will go home, the rest will stay there on duty; Frances Hodges relieved of duty from Evacuation Hospital #1 and will return home soon; the CO gave her and other nurses a trip to the battlefields of Verdun – he would also like to see it but has not; if the flu is active in the US it's likely that some hospital units in France would be deployed to hospitals there – many doctors and nurses have nothing to do and they could be of good use.

March 6, 1919

Arrived at Camp Merritt; came home on a United Fruit Company boat from Bordeaux; many men seasick because of bad weather and because the boat wasn't large – "fortunately I weathered it & didn't miss or lose a meal;" total passengers were 98 officers and nurses from BH 22 and BH 3; "'Miss Liberty' certainly did look good;" harbor strike on and nearly all boats tied up; Frances Hodges expecting orders to sail home soon and will wire him at his home – his only way of knowing where she is because of the thousands landing in New York daily.

March 11 [1919]

Arrived at Camp Grant, Illinois; everyone to be discharged at once but because of the red tape it will take four to five days; expects to be home within a week.

Sister, Lois B. Otken

August 24, 1918

Directions on how to use money he sends home; sent to a special course on fracture treatment; "saw the big parade by the troops of the Allied nations on July 14, Bastille Day;" hospital train full of wounded arrived and all the serious cases are in his ward; takes him about four hours a day to dress his cases; rebuilding a face for a badly wounded boy with repeated surgeries – "couldn't help but think of Papa & Capt. Sloan;"

has seen several boys from home but not allowed to mention their names, also a boy now at the hospital that he operated on at Shelby.

October 5, [1918?]

Very busy with nearly 3000 patients and only 18 ward surgeons to care for them; Spanish flu's chief complication, pneumonia, causes them to lose a lot of patients; lost count of the number of hospital trains that arrived that week; gets the surgical cases with the worst wounds – now has 67 patients, some with as many as eight big wounds; every patient has to be dressed daily; got some pictures of his work; his face case has a "fairly presentable face;" war news is encouraging with Bulgaria's fall; new rule dictates the way a letter home must be addressed.

November 10, 1918

"...busy as usual. I have over ninety cases with part of their face shot off, jaws fractured, etc;" flu seems to be abating; forbidden to send postcards of Bordeaux but will bring them home when he comes; thinks Germany is ready to accept terms; "I would like to see Germany devastated but that would cost us a million men and it is not worth that;" flu mortality in some camps has been high; France has been "wild with excitement" over the end of the war, "you rarely see an able bodied Frenchman that is not in the Army & a woman without crepe on is a rarity."

December 14, 1918

Planning on sending his face cases back to the States the following week; will be sending about 2500 patients from his hospital on the ship; not doing any surgeries except emergency work; a classmate arrived after the Armistice to be part of a company getting the men to the boats from the hospital; put on gold service chevron – a gold V braid; wounded get same kind of braid but worn on different sleeve, one for each time they are mentioned on the casualty list; had several men with four braids – "that means they have been wounded – sent to the rear recovered & go back into the fight four different times."

January 18, 1919

The hospital will be formally turned over to Evacuation Hospital #20 the following week and he will be relieved of all duties; has been going to Bordeaux twice weekly to observe a prominent French surgeon at work; has read in the paper "of how the 'flu' is raging again" [at home] but very little of it in France; Base Hospital 24 shut down and Frances Hodges has orders to go to Evacuation Hospital #1 for duty – "She came over to France as a casual & was assigned to BH 24 on a temporary duty order;" nurses from his hospital will stay with EH 20; his "Yale boy" wrote to him from Walter Reed Hospital and is doing well.

March 12, 1919

"...much harder getting out of this Army than it was getting in. Think I have just about signed my life away – I have done nothing but sign papers all day...;"

Sister, Frances P. Otken

November 23, 1918

Most boys that are sick and slightly wounded are getting well; those that will be laid up for any length of time are being sent home except for those not able to travel; "all sorts of wild rumors afloat this week as to what is to become of us;" thinks all of the hospital

buildings will be used as a rest camp for the boys going home because it is a port of embarkation; wonders if he'll be discharged when he gets home or sent to another hospital; will be attending a big banquet in Bordeaux given by American officers for the French officers – the mayor of Bordeaux and other French celebrities – all are going and it will be "quite a great affair;" flu is much better – they still see cases but it seems to be a milder type.

Newspaper clippings

"The Sport Light" by Grantland Rice, "heralded as the second James Whitcomb Riley of the United States;" "Seven More Ships Sailing for Home with U.S. Troops" (his ship and hospital mentioned) – longer version; "Seven More Ships Sailing for Home with U.S. Troops" (his ship and hospital mentioned) – shorter version; Casualty list; November 13, 1918 partial front page from [unknown] Herald. See also letter to Mother, February 3, 1918.

Prepared by Kathleen Stocker
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