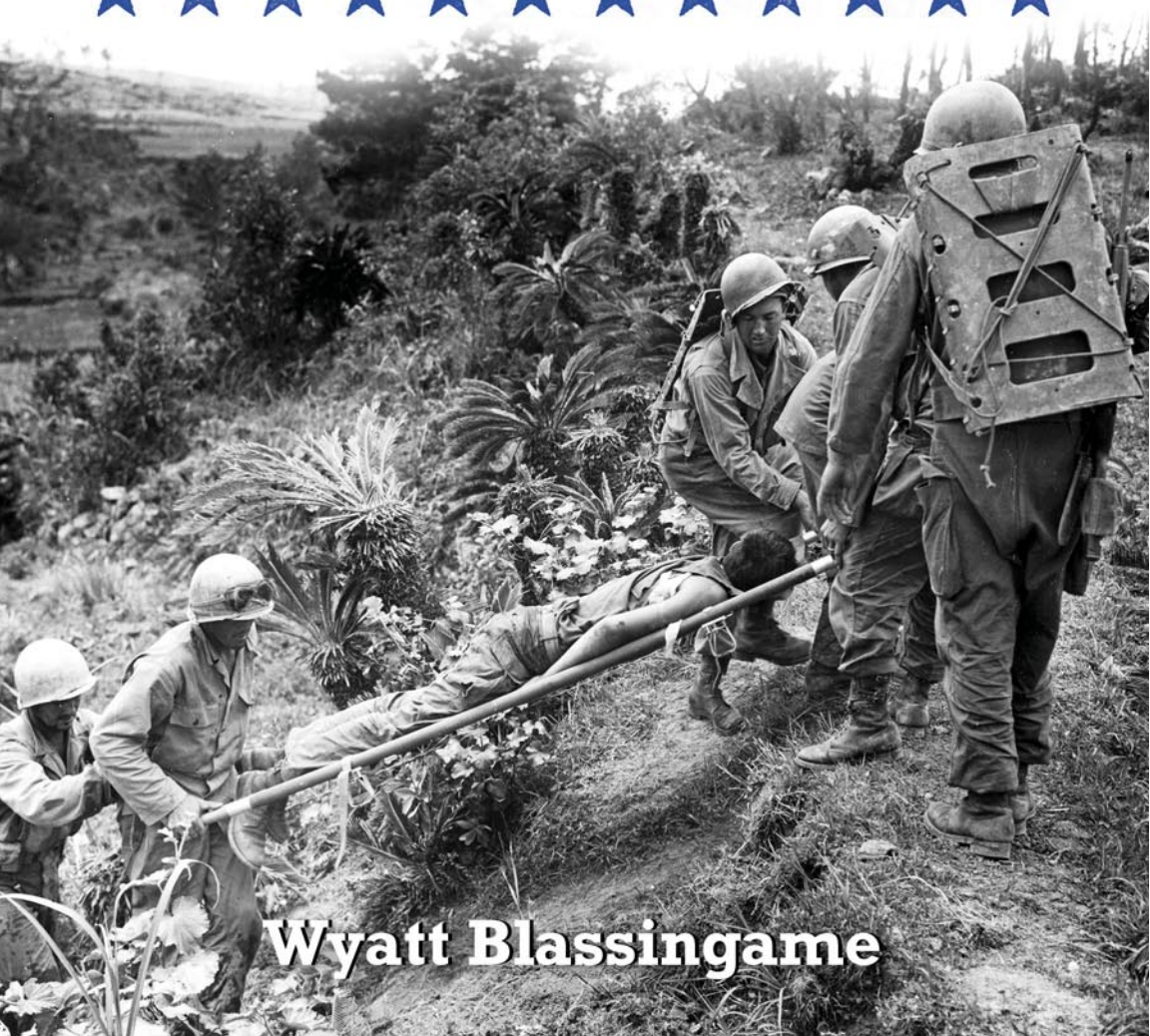


**MEDICAL  
+ CORPS +  
HEROES OF  
WORLD WAR II**  
★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★



**Wyatt Blassingame**

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# **MEDICAL + CORPS + HEROES OF WORLD WAR II**

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by Wyatt Blassingame



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Front cover: Army medics work hard to get this litter case over the difficult terrain on Okinawa to an aid station. April 20, 1945

Back cover: In an underground surgery room, behind the front lines on Bougainville, an American Army doctor operates on a U.S. soldier wounded by a Japanese sniper. Papua New Guinea, December 13, 1943

Page 2: In a gully, Navy doctors and corpsmen administer plasma to wounded Marines at an aid station on Iwo Jima. February 20, 1945

Page 5: Medic on duty with soldiers awaiting firing orders in a dugout in Ubach, Germany. January 7, 1945

Page 170-171: Wounded men from the *Nevada* are transferred to an amphibious craft for further transfer to a Navy hospital ship. Okinawa, July 17, 1945

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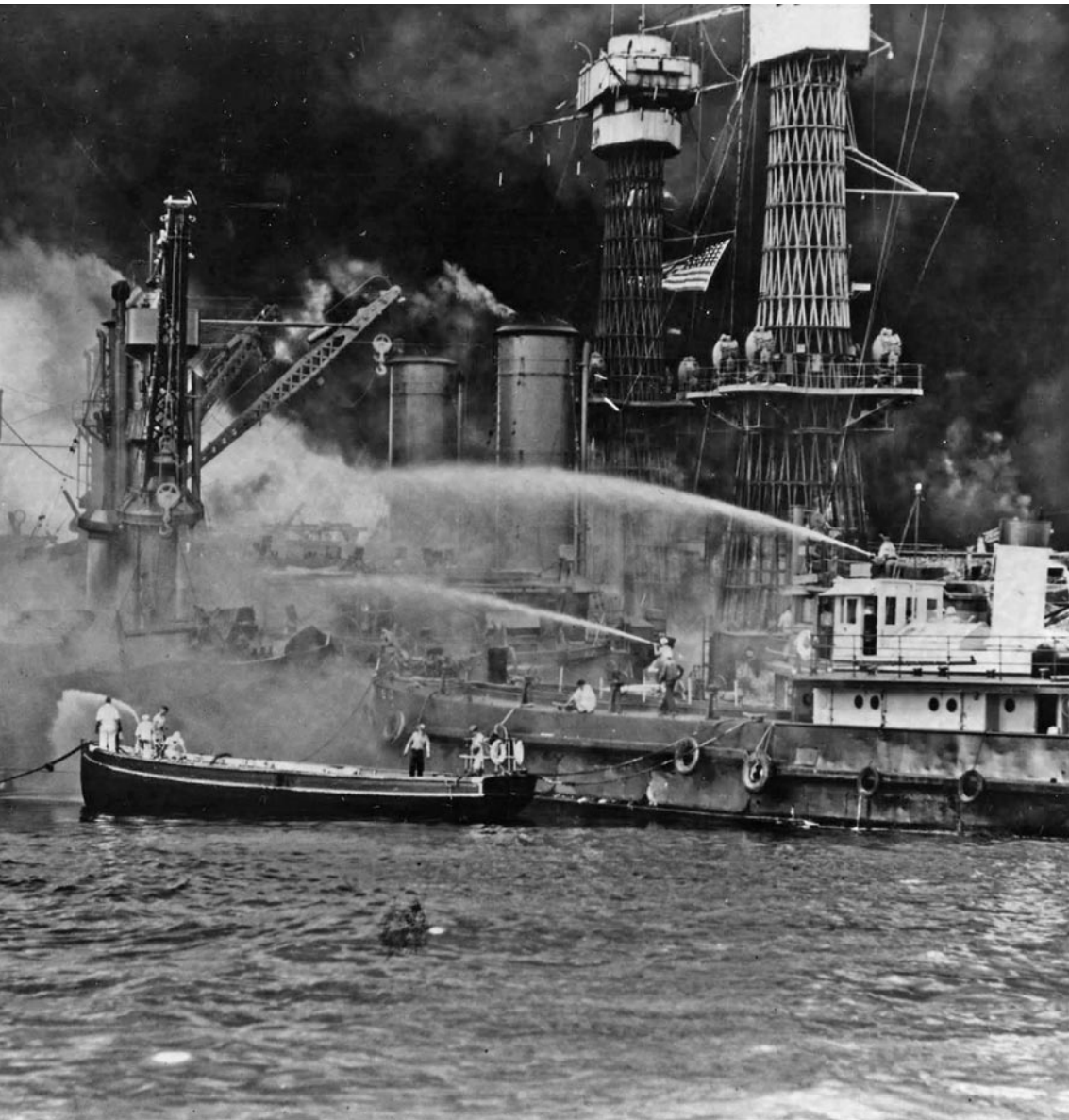
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## CONTENTS

1. Pearl Harbor, Wake, and the Philippines	7
2. Training for the Medical Corps	26
3. Guadalcanal	34
4. The Loss of a Portable Hospital	58
5. Solomons, Gilberts, and other Pacific Islands	67
6. The Beachhead at Anzio	82
7. D-Day	96
8. Germany's Western Front	108
9. Army and Navy Medics at Sea	124
10. Iwo Jima and Okinawa	144
Author's Note	167
About the Author	168
Pacific Theater map	16





A fireboat pours water onto the burning battleship *West Virginia* in Pearl Harbor, on December 7, 1941.

## PEARL HARBOR, WAKE, AND THE PHILIPPINES

### CHAPTER ONE

**I**t was Sunday morning and there were few patients in the sick bay of the old battleship *Nevada*. Ned Curtis, Pharmacist's Mate 2nd Class, had the duty. He was supposed to report at 0800 (8 a.m.), but following the Navy's custom, he came in fifteen minutes early. He went over the lists with the hospital corpsmen going off duty, checked the date—it was December 7, 1941—and said formally, “You are relieved.” Then, because there wasn't any work to be done at the moment, he wandered over to look out the porthole.

Pearl Harbor lay placid under the blue Hawaiian sky. A hundred yards away a garbage lighter was moving toward the *Nevada*, pushing a bow wave of scummy, oil-stained water. Beyond that a motor launch was taking off-duty sailors ashore. And from somewhere—it sounded as if it might be back toward Ford Island—came a dull series of jarring thumps. Ned Curtis wondered what kind of work was going on over there on Sunday morning.

Suddenly there was another thump, louder, closer, an explosion of some kind. And all at once the *Nevada's* sick bay jarred to the clash and clang of the call to battle stations.

Several of the off-duty corpsmen had been sleeping in sick bay. This was carrying things too far, some of the men felt, to have an air-raid drill on Sunday morning! But nevertheless they grabbed their clothes on the run. And then over the public-address system came an excited voice crying, "This is no drill! We are being bombed by Jap aircraft!"

Ned Curtis' battle station was in sick bay, so he just stood where he was, feeling dazed. Overhead the *Nevada's* guns were firing now. He could feel the vibrations. He saw the last of the patients who had been in sick bay run in a small, frantic circle looking for clothes that weren't there, then dash for his battle station still wearing pajamas. The sick bay was empty now, except for the other corpsmen and the doctor whose stations were here. One of the corpsmen was saying, "I still think it's a drill. I still think..."

The ship leaped. Curtis was thrown into the air and came down rolling. When he was standing again he heard one of the other corpsmen saying, "...torpedo hit us somewhere forward."

After that the first casualties began to arrive. As they did the ship shuddered and lunged again, struck topside by bombs. Moments later the call came down from the forward antiaircraft fire director, high up on the foremast. "Ensign Taussig has been hit. He needs help."

It occurred to Curtis that this was not the way it was supposed to be done in a drill. The injured man should be given first aid, then taken to sick bay or a battle dressing station. But this was no drill. "I'll go," he said without waiting for orders, and was running, his first-aid pouch in his hand.

He had to cross the open deck. All around him guns were firing, a shuddering world of noise. A hundred yards away the *Arizona* was a mass of smoke and flame from which one explosion followed another. As Curtis ran something leaped from the deck ahead of him; there were thin, screeching sounds beneath the boom of the guns. Machine-gun bullets, he thought; we're being strafed. Then he was climbing steel ladders up the foremast.

Here Ensign Joe Taussig lay on his back with two sailors kneeling over him. One leg of Taussig's trousers had been ripped away, exposing a gaping wound at the thigh. The ensign was trying to hold the lips of the wound together with his fingers, but the blood was running freely over his hand onto the deck.

I've got to move fast, Ned Curtis thought, but I've got to do it right. He forced his hands to be steady. He sprinkled sulfa on Taussig's wound and put on a battle dressing. He was about to give the ensign a shot of morphine when Taussig said, "Wait."

Another bomb hit the *Nevada*. Flame-filled smoke shot skyward. The flame did not touch the men in the small cubicle high above the deck, but the smoke and the heat did. The deck on which they stood was becoming unbearably hot.

“Wait,” Taussig said again. He rolled his head, looking around him. “You can’t get me down from here. And you can’t stay here. Go below, all of you.”

“We’ll get you down,” Curtis said, and jabbed the needle into the ensign.

“Leave me and go below. That’s an order.”

Nobody seemed to hear him. One of the sailors said, “The ship’s under way!”

Looking up Curtis saw that the *Nevada* was moving. But she was going to pass very close to the blazing *Arizona*. Already smoke was rolling into the fire director in an almost solid mass. “Here,” Curtis said. He dipped cotton into water and passed the pieces to the other sailors. “Hold it over your nose and mouth. It’ll filter some of the smoke.”

He was about to put wet cotton over Taussig’s mouth when the ensign said, “You can’t save me; but if you stay here you’ll all die.”

With terrible slowness the *Nevada* moved through the *Arizona*’s smoke. It was the only battleship that managed to leave its anchorage in an effort to fight clear. And like brown hawks Japanese planes swooped on it, guns blazing, bombs hurtling down. Near misses sent great geysers of water leaping into the air close alongside. Then there was a direct hit, perhaps two of them. New fires blazed up to increase the already unbearable heat in the fire director.



At almost the same time that Hospital Corpsman Ned Curtis was kneeling beside Ensign Taussig, Dr. John Moorhead was leaving his hotel on Waikiki Beach a



ABOVE: The *Nevada* on fire after the Japanese attack. “The ship that wouldn’t sink” went on to take part in the battles of Attu, Normandy, Southern France, Iwo Jima, and Okinawa.

BELOW: Smoke billowing from the shattered *Arizona*.



## TRAINING FOR THE MEDICAL CORPS

### CHAPTER TWO

In 1940 the U.S. Army's Medical Corps had fewer than 1500 doctors, most of them based in the United States. Slightly more than two years later the Army had more than thirty times that many doctors, and they were spread over a good part of the world. The number of Navy doctors increased in the same way.

This abrupt growth was hard on both the doctors and the military. There was, of necessity, considerable confusion. Doctors were hurriedly assigned to Army or Navy hospitals in the United States. They might remain there, or they might be sent to combat duty with no military training at all. There were Navy doctors who went aboard their ships without knowing which way to look for the flag nor whom to salute. And there were Army doctors who weren't quite sure if a colonel outranked a major or if it was the other way around.

Most doctors, however, did at least have a few lectures on military life before they went into the field. Thousands of Army doctors were trained at the Medical Field School at Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania. And doctors assigned to special duty usually received intensive training. A doctor with the paratroopers, for example, had to be able to jump along with the soldiers. A flight surgeon had to understand



During training, Army medics practice the speedy evacuation of “wounded” comrades. Here the medics are moving the man from a collecting station to the clearing station further behind the lines. Carlisle Barracks, Medical Field Service School, February 1943. See page 97 for a similar scenario on the battlefield.