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The Forgotten Naval General Hospital: USNH Corona, Part III

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Circulating Now welcomes Kevin Bash, Mayor of [Norco, California](#), to share a story from the medical and military history of his city. Drawing on photographs in the collection of the National Library of Medicine, this post covers part three of the story: PM&R, the Mayo Boys, Specialized Treatment Units, the Rolling Devils, and the final curtain. Read Parts I and II.

Months before the attack on Pearl Harbor, Navy Surgeon General Admiral Ross McIntire purchased the former Norconian Resort with the intent to immediately utilize the modern hydrotherapy facilities, lake, landscaped grounds, and golf course for wartime patient convalescence, physical therapy, and rehabilitation purposes.



Boats for Patients, 1942

On May 2, 1942, the Navy published this photo above with the following caption: "The sailor's favorite pastime, rowing, becomes a method of therapy at the new US Navy Hospital in Corona, where the Navy has taken over the former Norconian Club for recuperating sailors and Marines."

Courtesy City of Norco Heritage Commission

This pre-war plan was remarkable because physical medicine & rehabilitation (PM&R) was controversial in many medical circles. However, two cataclysmic events thrust PM&R into the mainstream, and McIntire was right in the middle of both. The first event was the 1940 arrival to America of [Sister Elizabeth Kenny](#) and, after much rejection, the acceptance of her controversial treatment of post-polio patients by the Mayo Clinic. The second cataclysmic event was World War II, a war that produced a new kind of patient: those in need of physical therapy.

Thanks to the introduction of lifesaving penicillin, sulfa, transportable plasma, and ever-improving wartime surgical techniques, many patients who would have previously died on the battlefield now survived their initial injuries. However, this meant that many of them also required long-term

rehabilitation. These patients increasingly flooded military hospitals, forcing many physicians to develop physical therapy methods through trial and error. Eventually, the most successful doctors developed treatment regimens that were codified and in time spread throughout the Navy hospital system.

Rather than merely reacting to the incoming need for physical therapy, McIntire in many ways anticipated and prepared for it. Designed not only as a standalone general hospital but also as a major rehabilitation center, Corona was established in part to help “bring home” injured sailors and Marines. To fulfill his vision, McIntire turned to “high-powered specialists” from the famed Mayo Clinic, an institution renowned for the development of “the concept of integrated, multispecialty group practice of medicine” and for the philosophy that “rehabilitation is to be a key word in medicine.”



Polio Treatment Unit

Days after Pearl Harbor, the former Norconian's hydrotherapy facility was put to use treating "patient number one," a post-polio patient. On December 16, 1941, Corona was designated a polio treatment facility that utilized both the treatment regimens used by President Roosevelt at Warm Springs and the controversial methods of Sister Kenney.

Courtesy City of Norco Heritage Commission

McIntire not only intended to showcase the Mayo Clinic's integrated model of care and system of rehabilitation at Corona but also throughout the entire continental Navy hospital system. Prior to and during the early days of WWII, McIntire expressed concerns that existing career and newly enlisted Navy physicians were not prepared to treat the wide range of wartime casualties to come. To determine and ensure readiness, in early 1942 McIntire sent members of his Corona Mayo team to other Navy Hospitals across the nation to assess physician skill levels and develop a wartime training programs.



Mayo Clinic USNH Corona Medical Unit #1, January 1942

Pictured above is a who's who of American Medicine in 1942. Standing on the steps of the former resort clubhouse is the first of two units of "Mayo Boys" assigned to establish both the physical plant and medical treatment protocols at Corona. Front Row: Dr. Albert Snell (Gastroenterologist), Harold Jensen (Commanding Officer), Leslie Marshall (Executive Officer), and Dr. Winchell Craig (Neurosurgery) Second Row: Dr. Harry Weber (Roentgenology), Dr. Edward Cook (Urology), Dr. Harry Macey (Orthopedics), Dr. Archie Baggenstoss (Pathology) Third Row: Dr. Henry Williams (Ear, Nose and Throat), Dr. Howard Gray (General Surgery), Dr. Donald Balfour (Medical Education/Surgical Instrument Designer). Unit I would serve at the hospital from December until July of 1942 when Mayo Unit II relieved them. By mid-1943, Corona would be home to "one of the largest groups of medical specialists ever assembled outside of the Mayo Clinic."

Courtesy City of Norco Heritage Commission

McIntire's success in combining traditional medicine with PM&R garnered Corona national attention. Newspapers, medical journals and newsreels across the nation spread stories about Corona as an example of the best medicine the Navy had to offer. In November of 1942, the *Los Angeles Examiner* lauded Corona's "famous surgeons" for saving lives and ensuring that those



Winchell M. Craig, 1954

Dr. Winchell Craig is an excellent example of the caliber of specialist brought aboard at USNH Corona. Several Navy sources state that Craig "established the first neurosurgical center for Navy and Marine Corps wounded" at the brand-new hospital. At the time of his enlistment in December of 1941, Craig was "considered to be the leading neurosurgeon in the United States." Following his duty at Corona, Craig would go on to serve at the U.S. Naval Hospital's National Naval Medical Center as Chief of the Neurosurgical Division and eventually Chief of Surgery. Craig would also become the first reserve doctor in the Navy to be promoted to the rank of Rear Admiral.

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"wounded heroes who in other wars would have been listed as killed in action are convalescent cases today." In 1944, the local *Corona Daily Independent* reported that the hospital's physical therapy department staff "takes up where the surgeons leave off."

In 1945, Corona's architectural beauty and medical reputation even attracted Hollywood. The result was a short feature that was filmed onsite, entitled [Voyage to Recovery](#), which was designed to show audiences how the Navy cared for America's wounded sailors and Marines.

Despite the success of Corona, during the early days of WWII a major problem developed in Navy General Hospitals. Because of the onslaught of ever-changing types of patients, efforts to separate and better treat various types of diseases, injuries, and personnel was becoming impossible. Wards prepared for a specific type and number of patients would be flooded with a completely different type of patient not anticipated. This led simultaneously to both overcrowded and wasteful empty wards, as well as "errors in diagnosis both administratively and medically."

To deal with this growing problem, in early 1943 the Navy Bureau of Medicine and Surgery (BUMED) began to establish a limited number of specialized treatment centers at selected continental Navy General Hospitals. These specialized units were equipped with the dedicated equipment, labs, and staff necessary to treat acute casualties suffering from a single illness, disease,

or injury. Each center would receive specific types of patients from the entire west coast, east coast, or, in rare cases, the entire nation, thus enabling the Navy's General Hospital system to operate more efficiently. Because of the unprecedented numbers of similar patients, doctors could also conduct more detailed studies that led to major medical breakthroughs.

Corona, while still operating as a fully functional standalone Navy General Hospital, would subsequently house four Specialized Treatment Units whose patients required extensive PM&R: the Polio, Tuberculosis, Rheumatic Fever, and Paraplegia (Cord Bladder) Units.



Polio Epidemic: Corona Navy nurse treats young boy afflicted with polio, 1948.

Though Corona served as a polio treatment center from its date of establishment, it was not until early in 1944 that the hospital was officially designated as a Specialized Poliomyelitis Treatment Unit. It was considered one of the finest polio treatment centers in the nation. Remarkably, at height of the late 1940's polio epidemic, the Navy opened Corona's doors to dozens of civilian adults and children afflicted with this dreaded disease. Ironically, one

of those patients was be “Buzzy” Boettiger, the grandson of FDR.

Courtesy City of Norco Heritage Commission



The Fabulous Rolling Devils

In 1945, the Navy's entire Cord Bladder Specialized Treatment Unit was moved from the temporarily-constructed USNH Santa Margarita to the better-equipped USNH Corona. Per multiple peer reviewed journals, outstanding medical advances in the field of treating spinal cord injuries came out of this unit. Corona's PM&R Department, in mid 1945, pioneered the use of sports to help get paraplegic's out of bed and prevent deadly bedsores. This led to the creation of wheelchair basketball as a sport and the formation of the Rolling Devils, a barnstorming team that took on all comers across California.

Courtesy City of Norco Heritage Commission



U.S. Naval Hospital, Corona, CA: General view of Unit III

When it came time to design Corona's Specialized Rheumatic Fever Treatment Unit, wartime cost cutting mandated a transition from the established Spanish Mediterranean architectural style to a form of high-end "temporary construction." Nevertheless, Corona's Unit III was specifically built and would treat over 10,000 wartime patients, enabling several large and unprecedented studies that were chronicled in multiple medical journals. Incredibly, this complex is still standing, architecturally intact, and in use today as prison housing.

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Following WWII, as patient loads decreased and physicians, nurses, and Corpsmen left the service, entire wings at Corona were shuttered and mothballed. On November 1, 1949, despite assurances to the contrary and public outcry, the hospital was disestablished and stripped of all medical equipment.

However, the war in Korea forced the Navy to reopen the north sections (Units I & II I) of the hospital at great expense in 1951. Corona became a Navy controlled, all-forces hospital serving Riverside, San Bernardino, and huge swathes of Orange, Los Angeles, and San Diego Counties. At the same time though, the much-heralded Tuberculosis Sanitarium (Unit II) was found to be obsolete. In 1951, the complex was sanitized and transformed into one of the Navy's most important missile Research, Development, Testing, and Evaluation (RDT&E) laboratories, a function performed in part to this day. On October 15, 1957, the final bell rang for Corona. After a period of indecision, the California State Department of Corrections took over Unit's I & III in 1963 and established the still-operating California Rehabilitation Center.

Incredibly, behind the secure prison and Navy base fences, the vast majority of Norconian and WWII buildings are still architecturally intact from the day they were built. For anyone willing to listen, they tell the forgotten story of Admiral McIntire's successful WWII effort to establish a pioneering Navy hospital that was manned by heroes who saved lives and helped to bring soldiers home.



Historian and elected official Kevin Bash received his BA from UC Riverside and Masters Degree from UC San Diego. Mr. Bash has penned five books and several articles about Norco, the Norconian Resort, the US Naval Hospital Corona, and local military history, as well as multiple fictional novels and screenplays. He is regarded as the community's ex officio City Historian, possessing an encyclopedic knowledge of local history. An ardent preservationist, he has an enduring commitment to the future restoration of the Lake Norconian Club Hotel, the former US Naval Hospital Corona, and other local landmarks.

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