

WWI Fort Caswell Nurse Profile: Nellie E. Davis 1884-1962

BY NORMA ECKARD
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*Nellie Eaton Davis
Denver, Colo.
Army Nurse Corps
1st Lieutenant, Chief Nurse
Served: Aug. 18, 1916 – after
1931*

*Fort Caswell, U.S. Army Post
Hospital (Chief Nurse): March
16, 1918 – March 20, 1919*

Nellie Eaton Davis was born and raised in the Denver area of Colorado. There is a family tree in Family Search.

The 1900 Census lists her father (in real estate), her mother, and two daughters. The record shows that three children were born, with two living. (Nellie's little brother died several years earlier when he was two years old.) Nellie, age 16, was the oldest. Both were attending school.

The 1910 Census is almost identical, except Nellie was listed as a nurse.

Much of the information about Nellie's training and military service shown below was found on the last page of Nellie's World War I Veteran's Compensation Fund Application Records from the state of Washington from 1924. On the list of service, it shows she graduated from St. Joseph's Hospital in Denver on Jan. 21, 1907, classifying her as a graduate nurse.

The Denver City Directory of 1907 [Source: Ancestry] lists over six columns of nurses.

Nellie joined the Army Nurse Corps from Portage, Wash., in 1916. It is unclear why she was in Portage. The U.S. had not yet entered the Great War and the influenza pandemic had not yet created a desperate plea for nurses, so it is not clear what motivated her to join. She is the only nurse who served at Fort Caswell during WWI who had enlisted before the U.S. joined the war. She was one of a very select group. At the time she enlisted, a mere 200-400 nurses were serving in the Army Nurse Corps. It's likely why she was chosen as chief nurse at Fort Caswell.

Her WWI Service Card from Colorado had only the following:

Name: Nellie E. Davis
Rank: Chief Nurse
Branch: U. S. Army
Military Place: Denver, Denver [County], Colorado
Roster of Men and Women Who Served in The World War From Colorado 1917-1918
Denver County

Therefore, her military service had to be pieced together from multiple sources, although mostly from the record mentioned above. Some gaps still remain and no final discharge date was found. (Additional sources: Military Registry excerpt shown further below, and the WWI VA Index.)

Chief Nurse Nellie E. Davis was mentioned in "As You Were," a booklet about the hospital at Camp Jackson, S.C., printed in 1919 by the Library of Congress.

On March 29, 1919, after WWI, the Oteen Weekly Newsletter from Asheville, NC, welcomed Nurse Davis and Nurse Jost to their new assignments from Fort Caswell.

08/20/1916 Letterman General Hospital, San Francisco.

10/03/1917 Fort McPherson, Ga.

10/13/1917 Camp Jackson, SC (as Chief Nurse).

03/16/1918 Fort Caswell, NC (as Chief Nurse).

03/20/1919 General Hospital #19, Oteen, N.C.

04/11/1919 Ellington Field, Houston, Texas.

05/11/1919 Walter Reed Hospital, DC (for treatment).

12/17/1919 Mitchel Field, N.Y.

03/05/1922 Fitzsimmons Army Hospital, Denver (as 2nd Lt.).

07/22/1924 Fort Riley, Kan. (as 2nd Lt.).

07/28/1928 Discharge.

1931 San Diego (Chief Nurse; 1st Lt.).

Unknown Discharge.

The 1929 San Diego City Directory [Source: Ancestry] lists Nellie and her parents living at 3914 Falcon St. The home is in the Historic Mission Hills District and was built in 1928. An Internet search will show the gorgeous craftsman home both inside and out.

Her mother passed away in 1929. The 1930 Census shows Nellie and her father living in the same home. From the 1931 Army Register, 1st Lt. Nellie Davis was serving as Chief Nurse in San Diego. [Source: Oregon State Library; Ancestry.com. U.S., Select Military Registers, 1862-1985 [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA].

Her father passed away four years later in 1934. Nellie lived in the same home until 1942, according to the 1940 Census and San Diego City Directories. In the census, she is listed as age 56, employed as a RN at a rest



Photos contributed

Headstone of Nellie E. Davis (Source: Findagrave)

home.

From 1943 until 1948, Nellie cannot be found in online historical records. She is found in 1948 in the San Diego City Directory with a different address, 1838 30th St. Could she have served in WWII? From her previous military service, it seems possible that she would accept a role somewhere during WWII.

From 1948 until 1956, she remained in the San Diego City Directory.

On April 15, 1962, Nellie Eaton Davis passed away in Los Angeles. (Also recorded here.) She had a tragic ending to her life, succumbing to second and third degree burns over most of her body after suffering for four days, caused while trying to light a cigarette. The story below describes her final days.

L.B. Woman, 78, Dies of Burns in Bed

Nellie Davis, of 3850 Chestnut Ave., died in Harriman-Jones Hospital about 4:45 p.m.

She had suffered second and third degree burns over most of her body.

According to the convalescent hospital at 3401 Cedar Ave., Mrs. Davis was sitting on the edge of her bed awaiting breakfast when she flipped the wheel of her cigarette lighter and the flame turned her gown into a torch. An attendant extinguished the blaze.

Davis, Nellie E. (N700131), Chief Nurse (1st Lt. A. N. C.), 3914 Falcon St., San Diego, Calif.

Additional sources: Military Registry excerpt shown further below, and the WWI VA Index.

The Base Hospital was organized and opened for the reception of patients October 22, 1917. At this time there were stationed at the base, 39 officers, 6 nurses, and 127 enlisted men. The Hospital Staff personnel, at the time of organization, consisted of Division Surgeon Lieutenant Colonel Kent Nelson, Commanding Officer Base Hospital Major T. J. Leary, Chief of the Medical Service Major W. W. Herrick, Chief of the Surgical Service Major James S. Stone, Chief Nurse Miss Nellie E. Davis.

Source: Oregon State Library; Ancestry.com. U.S., Select Military Registers, 1862-1985 [database on-line]. Provo, Utah, USA].

(Independent (Long Beach, CA), 16 April 1962, p. 1.)

If you would like to help us honor Nellie Eaton Davis or another Brunswick County WWI veteran, email the Friends of Ft. Caswell Rifle Range at ftcaswellriflerange@gmail.com or go to caswellriflerange.com/

Donations continue to be sent supporting the historical preservation of the 1918 World War I Fort Caswell Rifle Range Memorial and the book featuring all the men and women that served their country from Brunswick County. Send donations to Friends of Fort Caswell Rifle Range, 5 Foxfire Trace, Caswell Beach, NC 28465.

A new arrival is Miss Davis, who has been chief nurse at Fort Caswell, N. C. This camp is now broken up. Miss Jost is also a newcomer from the same hospital.

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