

Major General David N.W. Grant: An Early Leader in Air Force Medicine

COL (Ret) John Pierce, MD

The U.S. Air Force Medical Center at Travis Air Force Base near Fairfield, California, is named in honor of Major General David Norvell Walker Grant, considered by many to be the father of the U.S. Air Force Medical Service. The first legacy organization of the U.S. Air Force was created within the U.S. Army in 1907 (Aeronautical Division, Signal Corps). Through a succession of evolutionary, organizational, and mission changes over 40 years, it became an independent service when the National Security Act of 1947 created the Department of the Air Force. Grant spent most of his career in the predecessor organizations, the U.S. Army Air Corps (1926-1941) and U.S. Army Air Forces (1941-1947).

A native Virginian, Grant graduated from the University of Virginia School of Medicine in 1915 and joined the Army Medical Corps in 1916. His service in World War I included assignments in Panama and within the continental U.S. From 1919 to 1922, he served in Germany in the Army of Occupation. Grant's aviation medicine career began in 1931 when he attended the School of Aviation Medicine. After he completed the 6-month course, he was stationed at Randolph Field, Texas, for 5 years. In 1937, after more than a decade as a major, he was promoted to lieutenant colonel. He completed the Air Force Tactical School that same year.

In 1939, Grant became chief of the Medical Division, Office of the Chief of the Air Corps in Washington, DC. On creation of the U.S. Army Air Forces in 1941, he was appointed air surgeon and served in this capacity throughout World War II. He was promoted to colonel in 1941, brigadier general in 1942, and major general in 1943.

Early in preparations for war, Grant recognized that the medical needs of an air force differed significantly from those of large land armies. He and others were successful in their



fight to establish a separate medical service for the air forces. During World War II, the U.S. Army Air Forces consisted of 2.4 million personnel and more than 80,000 aircraft. Today the U.S. Air Force has about 320,000 personnel who support and operate about 5,500 aircraft.

Grant was one of the first to understand the need for aeromedical evacuation and was responsible for its organization and operation in World War II. He also was instrumental in the establishment of the Convalescent Rehabilitation Program to help restore the wounded, ill, and injured to full capacity for further service or for their return to the civilian world.

The development and training of flight nurses were inherent in the aeromedical evacuation program. In 1943, the first class of flight nurses graduated from the U.S. Army Air

Force School of Air Evacuations at Bowman Field, Kentucky. Second Lieutenant Geraldine Dishroon of Tulsa, Oklahoma, was the honor graduate in her class of 39 students. As she was to receive the first wings presented to a flight nurse, Grant removed his flight surgeon wings and pinned them on Lieutenant Dishroon as a sign of respect for her and the other new flight nurses. In 1944, Lieutenant Dishroon landed with the first air evacuation team on Omaha Beach after the D-Day invasion.

Under Grant's leadership and guidance, aviation psychologists developed comprehensive mass testing procedures for selecting and classifying potential aircrew members, based on aptitude, personality, and interest. After 3 decades on active duty, Grant retired in 1946 and became medical director for the American Red

Cross and national director of the Red Cross Blood Program.

In 1966, 2 years after Grant died, the 4167th Station Hospital at Travis Air Force Base was re-named the David Grant U.S. Air Force Medical Center in his honor.

About this column

This column provides biographical sketches of the namesakes of military and VA health care facilities. To learn more about the individual your facility was named for or to offer a topic suggestion, contact us at fedprac@frontlinemedcom.com or on Facebook.

Author

COL Pierce is a retired U.S. Army pediatrician who served as Chief of pediatrics, Director of Medical Education, and Chief of the medical staff at Walter Reed Army Medical Center. COL Pierce also was the consultant in pediatrics to the U.S. Army Surgeon General for 7 years. He co-authored a book on Dr. Walter Reed and his research on yellow fever and edited a book on the Walter Reed Army Medical Center.