



Letterman Hospital
"Work for the Sake of Mankind"

A Summary of Its Significance and Integrity

April, 1994

(front cover) Letterman Hospital in its early years, about 1901.



Building 1014, a receiving ward and clinic built in 1924, follows the Spanish Mission Revival tradition in Presidio architecture, while presenting a feeling of massive simplicity and horizontality. Note the enclosed gallery connecting it to the adjacent structures, and the Palace of Fine Arts in the background.

Introduction

The history of the Army's Letterman Hospital reflects the emergence of the United States as a world power and the full span of the nation's involvement in the affairs of the Pacific Basin. The hospital began as a result of the Spanish-American War and closed as the Cold War ended. Praised as a model modern hospital at its inception, Letterman served the medical needs of soldiers stationed on the West Coast and those who garrisoned the nation's new possessions in the Philippines and Hawaii. Important advances in the rehabilitation of battle casualties were made here during and after World War I. A generation later, Letterman became the nation's busiest hospital, and the first stop on home soil for the sick and wounded from the Pacific Theater of World War II. Through wars in Korea and Vietnam, and during times of peace, Letterman provided medical care to generations of soldiers and their families. The distinctive architecture and campus-like environment of the original hospital reflects an excellent match of form and function. Letterman eventually grew to become a major military teaching and research institution, and one of the more important Army medical facilities in the United States.

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

History

The Letterman Hospital complex is significant because it was the U.S. Army's first permanent general hospital. Its medical facilities served military personnel, their dependents, and the Bay Area for nearly one hundred years—over the course of five wars and the peacetime years in between.

The hospital was dedicated by President William McKinley upon the conclusion of the Spanish-American War, thus symbolizing the nation's entry into the realm of nationalistic expansion and its emergence as a world power.

Significant advances in military medicine occurred at Letterman, such as the early segregation of patients by illness and the development of modern orthopedic devices during World War I. Letterman was a pioneer in the use of physical therapy for the wounded to train "the shattered system... of these men to go back to civilian life as self-supporting, self-respecting members of society."¹

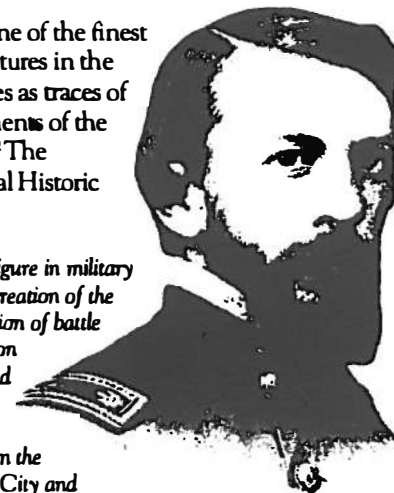
During World War II Letterman was the largest military hospital in the United States. During the Vietnam era its facilities provided an atmosphere of care and support to returning veterans that was often lacking in the outside community.

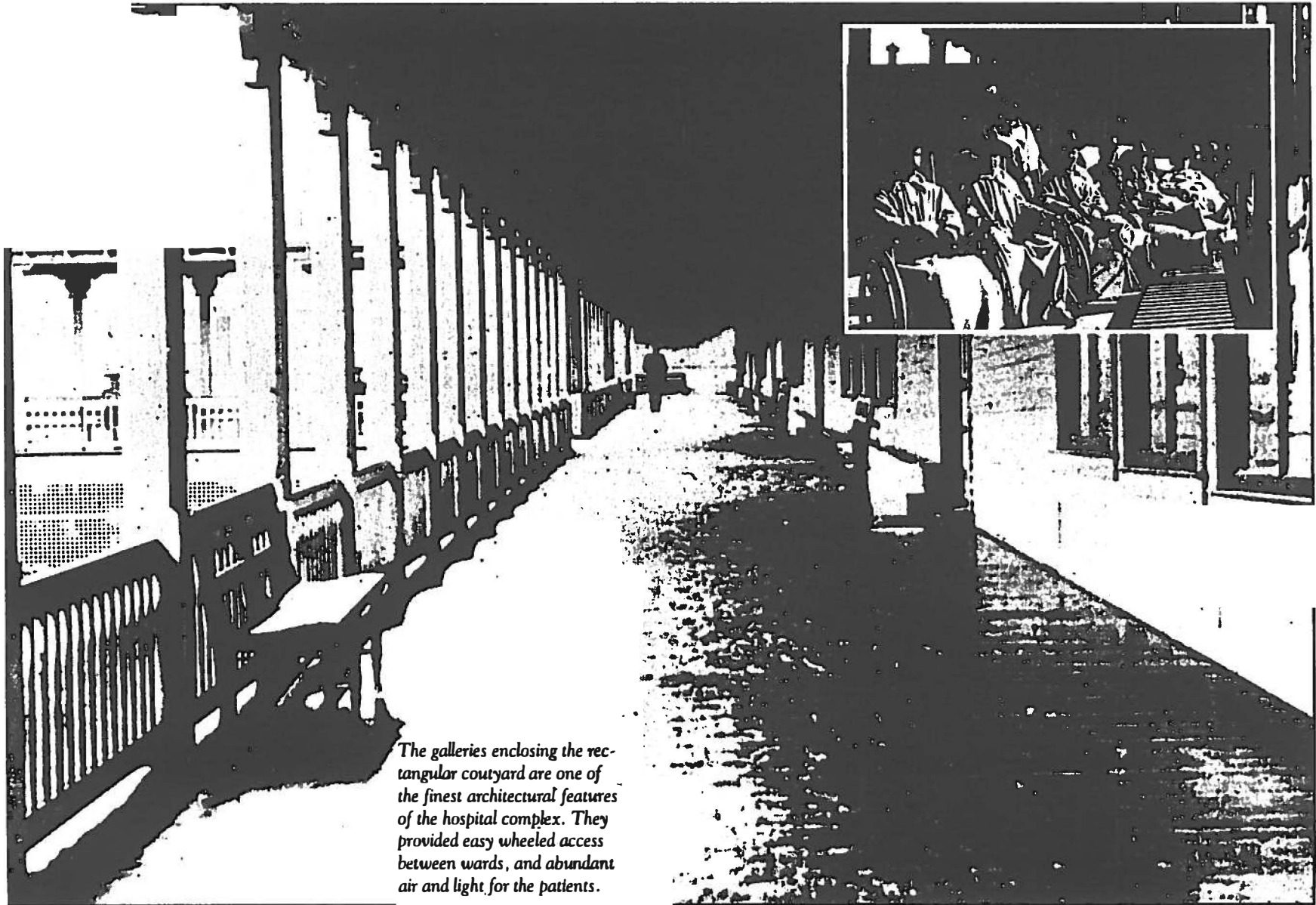
The Letterman Hospital complex is an important contributor to the National Historic Landmark Status of the Presidio of San Francisco, under National Landmark criteria VIId (the United States Becomes a World Power, 1865-1914), VIIe (World War I), VIIIf (Military Affairs not related to World War I or World War II, 1914-1941), VIII (War in the Pacific, 1941-1945), XIIIIf (Medicine), and XVIIm (Period Revivals, 1870-1940).

Architecture

The Presidio of San Francisco contains one of the finest collections of military buildings and structures in the country. These buildings "offer themselves as traces of specific historical events and as embodiments of the values that have structured military life."² The Presidio has been designated as a National Historic

Major Jonathan Letterman was an important figure in military medicine. He is credited in particular with the creation of the first effective ambulance service for the evacuation of battle casualties during the Civil War. His organization functioned so well at the battles of Antietam and Gettysburg that it was adopted throughout the Union Army and influenced the medical service in every modern army. He resigned from the Army after the war and became coroner of the City and County of San Francisco in 1867.





The galleries enclosing the rectangular courtyard are one of the finest architectural features of the hospital complex. They provided easy wheeled access between wards, and abundant air and light for the patients.

Landmark in recognition of its significant architectural, as well as historical values. The Letterman complex is one of the many areas that contributes to the vast array of architectural styles, set in a parklike environment.

Built between 1899 and 1902, the pavilion-style hospital was designed by San Francisco architect W.H. Wilcox. The use of pavilion-style buildings for hospitals had its roots in the Crimean War and was further developed as a result of the Civil War. The Letterman complex, originally constructed of wood, consisted of administration buildings, hospital wards, operating rooms and physical therapy facilities, all connected together in a symmetrical rectangular plan by enclosed galleries. The campus-like buildings surrounded a large, grassy courtyard and on the east side of the complex, facing the original parade ground, was an impressive row of officers' housing.

The new hospital at the Presidio was, according to architectural historian Britton Schinkle, "both a clear diagram of the organization of the hospital and a machine for the supply of fresh air and light to the patients. Like the Spanish Presidio, this hospital marked a historical moment when the science and organization of the medical institution were perfectly matched by the architecture that served it."⁴

The hospital complex continued to expand over time, in order to meet the growing needs of the facility. Further construction resulted in many different layers of architectural styles and a diversity of building types, including hospital wards, clinics, medical offices, kitchens, steam plants, green houses and warehouses. In the 1930s, many of the wood-frame Greek Revival hospital wards were replaced with concrete Mission Revival style buildings. The utilitarian structures included both the blocky, concrete Mediterranean Revival support buildings and the wood-frame World War I warehouses along Gorgas Avenue. By the 1970s, both the modern Letterman Army Medical Center and the Letterman Army Institute of Research had been constructed, along with three nurses dormitories, and many of the original historic structures in the quadrangle had been demolished.

In spite of the many changes over the years, the remaining buildings of the original Letterman complex area are an important contribution to the significance of the Presidio as a whole. Subsequent construction and landscaping up to the period of World War II added to the range of architectural styles and materials associated with the hospital complex. Although many of the historically significant buildings were removed in the post-war era to make way for new construction, the existing structures and grounds still reflect the variety of styles that makes the Presidio such a rich layering of architectural history.



Major Alfred C. Girard, Medical Corps. The first commanding officer of Letterman Hospital.

A Brief Physical History

The site that was to become Letterman Hospital was originally a flat, open, grassy space on the eastern edge of the post, sloping gently down to the extensive salt marshes and sand dunes that once edged the Bay.

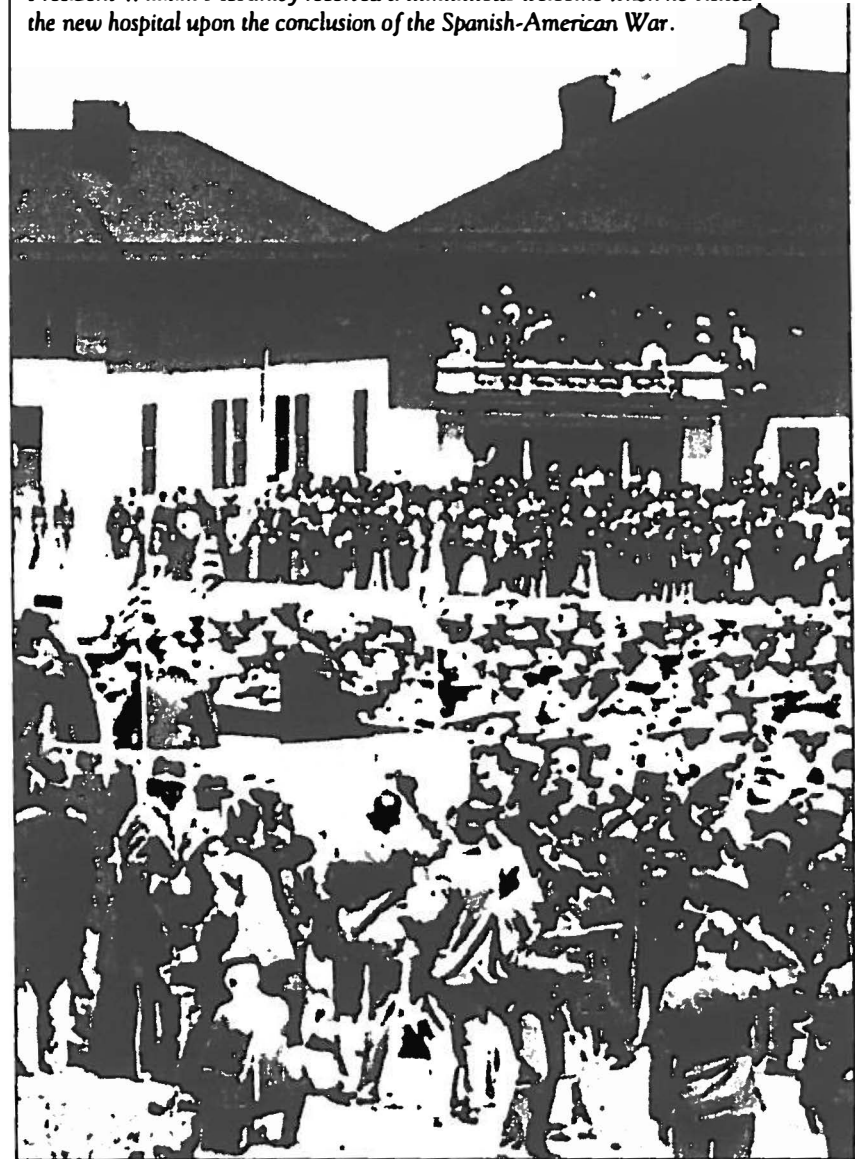
Upon the outbreak of the Spanish-American War in April 1898, the area became the site of a temporary encampment for troops assembling for service in the Philippines. Known as Camp Merriam, the rows of tents served as the temporary home of volunteer regiments, including the 20th Kansas Infantry, commanded by Frederick Funston. Just outside the Presidio's south boundary was Camp Merritt, whose field hospital became overwhelmed with cases of typhoid, measles, pneumonia and venereal diseases. When all the troop encampments were ordered onto the post, a temporary general field hospital was set up in the brick barracks on Montgomery Street.

Shortly after the declaration of war, 22,000 troops were en route from California to the Philippines. Following the brief war, the islanders rebelled against the United States, and the need for long term occupation of the islands became evident. So did the necessity for a permanent hospital Army hospital on the West Coast. General Orders No. 182 dated December 1, 1898 established the "U.S. Army General Hospital, Presidio of San Francisco."⁵ It was the first of a new series of general hospitals built in peacetime and intended to be permanent, not just for the duration of a war. The designation "general hospital" indicated that it offered a wide range of medical services and served a wider area than one military post or one unit in the field. By the turn of the century it was the Army's largest medical facility.⁶

The location for the hospital was chosen because of the nearby camps of transient troops, its accessibility to the docks for unloading patients from ships and, of course, the proximity of the city of San Francisco. Before the salt marshes of the lower Presidio were filled in for the Panama Pacific International Exposition of 1915, the compiler of the hospital's first history, Captain H. H. Rutherford, regarded the site as "the one great mistake in the hospital's formation" because of the humidity, "quantities of dust which are swept over the hospital by the winds...insects, flies, fleas, etc."⁷

Plans for the new facility were drawn by the San Francisco architectural firm of W. H. Wilcox and construction was completed in June 1899. It was one of the very few times at the Presidio that the Army turned to the private sector for architectural design. The original hospital complex covered approximately six acres, and was praised as a model modern hospital, one of the largest in the United States.¹⁸

President William McKinley received a tumultuous welcome when he visited the new hospital upon the conclusion of the Spanish-American War.



The first commanding officer of the hospital was Major Alfred C. Girard. Girard was a very busy man. In addition to his administrative duties he was the operating surgeon for the first three years and, with few exceptions, personally performed all the operations—178 in one year alone.⁹ Girard had travelled in Europe, was familiar with Lister's germ theory, and instituted segregation of patients by illness (a concept that seems elementary to us now, but which was well ahead of its time).¹⁰

There was no casual coming and going in the hospital's early days. Letterman was a military hospital and it showed. The guard on duty refused to pass anyone without written permission from the Officer of the Day. Sentries at front and rear patrolled their posts day and night. The gates were locked at retreat. The hospital had its own parade ground for drills, and its own flagpole—symbolic of an independent military installation. (The Presidio provided logistical support for the hospital, but Letterman was not a part of the Presidio's chain of command.)



President William McKinley dedicated the hospital in May 1901; the next month a major fire destroyed a number of the original hospital buildings.

By the time the President paid his visit, difficulties of overcrowding and high staff turnover during the hospital's first years had begun to be ironed out. The majority of the medical staff was now permanently assigned, and the doctors, Medical Corps enlisted personnel and civilian contract nurses had gained "a grasp of their work which could come only with experience and application."¹¹

That experience was soon to be sorely tested when the great earthquake of April 1906 injured thousands and left thousands more homeless. Four refugee camps were set up on the Presidio, one adjacent to the hospital. Its commander, Brigadier General George H. Torney, "was put in control of the sanitation of the city, and the hospital was thrown open to the sick and injured. Food, bedding and clothing were issued to those in need, and until quarters were available in various city hospitals, all civilian patients were admitted without charge. The hospital received high praise for its admirable emergency work."¹²

In November 1911 the U.S. Army General Hospital was renamed Letterman General Hospital to honor Major Jonathan Letterman, the medical director of the Army of the Potomac, which gained fame during the Civil War.

After World War I began in 1917, Letterman was greatly expanded with the construction of the "East Hospital," east of Officers' Row. (These wards, barracks and dorms were razed in the 1960s to make way for the present Letterman tower.) The hospital expanded from its original 400 beds to 1,200 beds, and was officially designated an orthopedic center, where amputation cases from overseas were treated. The orthopedics shop was fully equipped for the manufacture of "all kinds of appliances for the correction and support of deformed and weak limbs... splints, steel, leather and wooden appliances and artificial limbs."¹³ It was so effective in the rehabilitation of amputees that the "Letterman Leg," developed at the hospital, was used for more than twenty years.¹⁴

Its service in World War I earned Letterman a reputation "among the top-notchers," and, according to the hospital's newspaper, *The Foghorn*, "it is this reputation that has attracted some of the finest surgeons and medical men of the country for service on its staff. Positions on Letterman's staff are at a premium because of this fact, and the administration is thus able to select the men best suited for its needs—all surgeons know Letterman as a hospital that stands as a monarch of them all."¹⁵

An Army School of Nursing had come to Letterman in 1918. In the inter-war years, the hospital instituted an intern training program, admitted Veterans Bureau patients, and cared for Civilian Conservation Corps enrollees during the Great Depression. Extensive plans for the beautification of the grounds were carried out at this time.

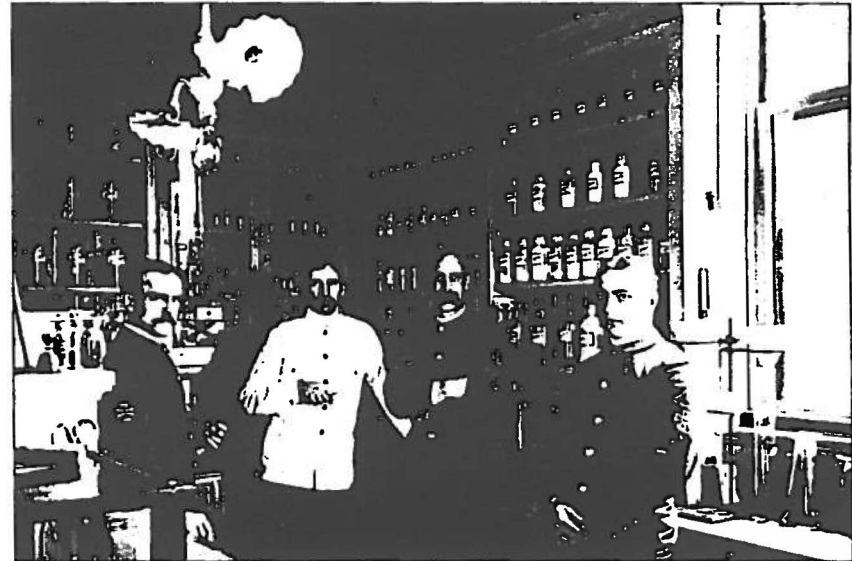
Previous war-time expansions paled before the emergency needs that fell upon the hospital in World War II, as Letterman became the main stateside debarkation hospital for the entire Pacific Theater. Bed capacity was increased to 3,500. The hospital admitted 72,000 patients during the peak year of 1945. On one day alone, October 20, 1945, 1,862 patients arrived, including nearly one thousand former prisoners of the Japanese.

As a debarkation hospital, Letterman quickly moved patients who arrived by sea and by air to hospitals near their homes whenever possible. Facilitating the transportation of patients was the Hospital Train Unit established in July 1944. Each train was made up of ward cars, utility cars, berths for hospital staff and a kitchen car. Temporary wooden buildings that were built on the east end of Crissy Field were used by the hospital train staff; other buildings in the area housed Italian, German and Japanese prisoners-of-war.

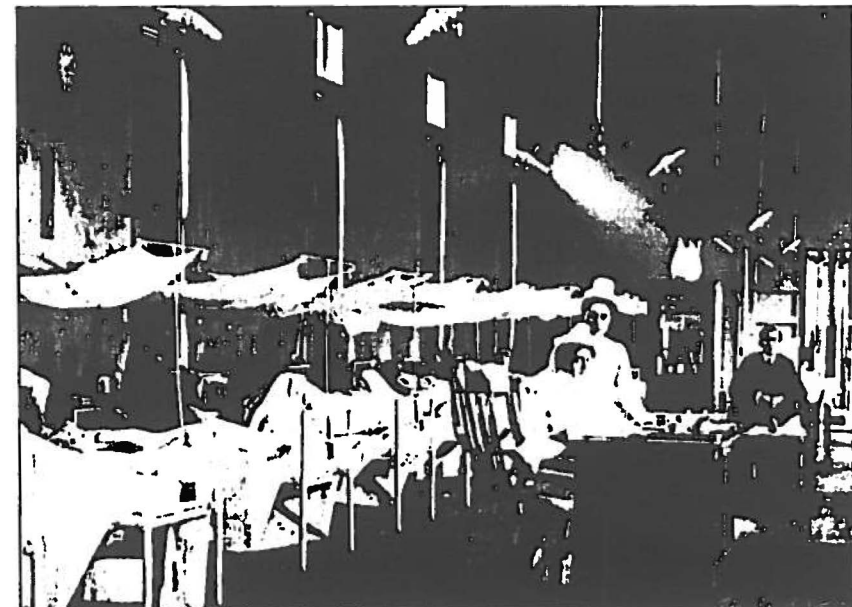
In the immediate post-war years, Letterman became the headquarters for hospital train movements on both East and West Coasts. "In recognition of the superior work accomplished during the three years of the war that Letterman was a debarkation hospital, the organization received the War Department award for meritorious service given for performance of exceptionally difficult tasks."¹⁶

During World War II, the roles of women in the Army greatly expanded. In 1942 dieticians and physical therapists joined nurses as official Medical Department personnel, and in 1947, the Army Nurse Corps, created in 1901, and the Women's Medical Specialist Corps received Regular Army status.

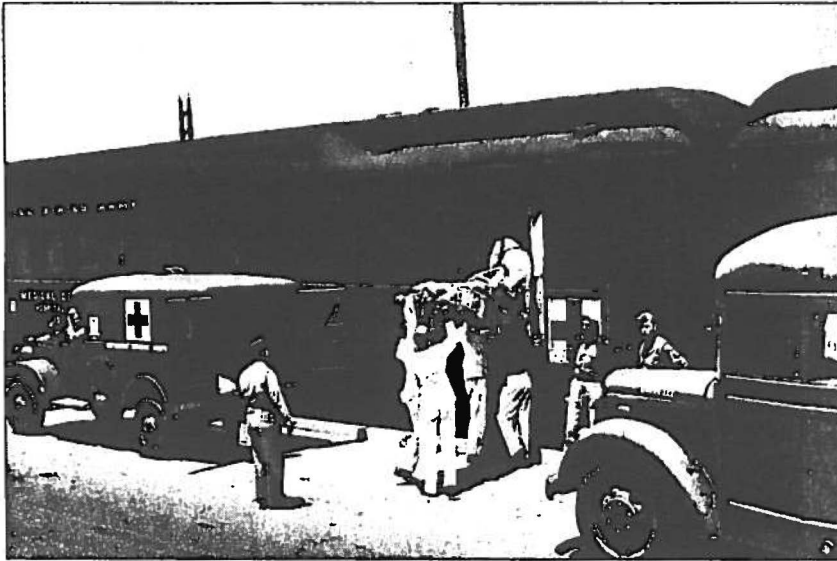
During the Korean War, and again during the Vietnam era, Letterman Hospital provided essential medical care for sick and wounded soldiers. Just as important was the feeling of welcome that the hospital staff gave to all the troops returning home from service overseas.



1



4



2

3



Clockwise from upper left:

1. *The hospital dispensary and medical corps staff in 1901.*
2. *The hospital train unit, at the "lower hospital" at eastern Crissy Field, contributed to Letterman's status as the busiest stateside debarkation hospital during World War II. This photo was taken on June 16, 1945. Note the tower of the Golden Gate Bridge in the background.*
3. *Rehabilitation of the wounded was an important part of the Letterman mission throughout its history. Here, an injured Vietnam veteran receives physical therapy to help him recover the full use of his hands.*
4. *The interior of one of the medical wards in 1901.*

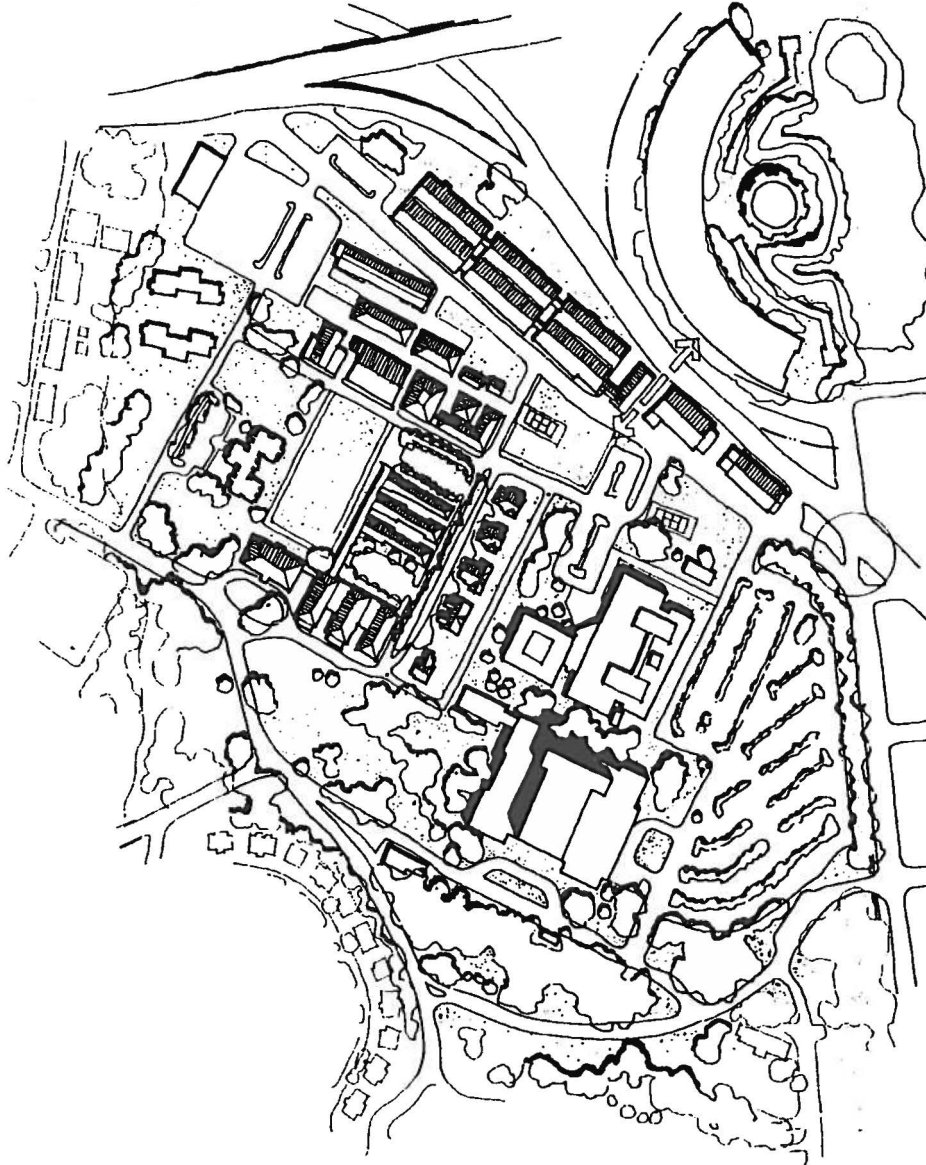
Concurrent with the increasing American involvement in Vietnam, the Army approved construction of a new ten-story hospital building at the location of the "East Hospital" quadrangle. This large facility was dedicated on February 14, 1969. Beginning in 1973, a number of buildings from the hospital's earliest years began to be demolished, including a portion of the original quadrangle. In their place there arose barracks and administrative facilities for enlisted women.¹⁷ That same year the facility was redesignated Letterman Army Medical Center "in recognition of the missions it had acquired in its 75-year history and of its importance as a regional medical center."¹⁸

Also in 1973 Letterman Army Institute of Research, established seven years earlier in five small buildings of the hospital complex, constructed a new series of interconnected buildings just north of the new hospital tower. These buildings were used to continue the Institute's state of the art research in the fields of artificial blood, tropical medicine, and pathology.¹⁹

The motto of the hospital, adopted early in World War II, expressed well the nature of its service throughout its history, "Labor Gratia Humanitatis" (Work for the Sake of Mankind). In 1990, Letterman's mission included medical support for the Army, graduate medical education and technical training, tertiary care for military retirees, support in civilian disasters, and coordination of regional health care. Until the time of its closure in 1992, Letterman continued to provide inpatient and outpatient care to active-duty service members, and to an increasingly important constituency of retired military personnel and their dependents. Indeed, it was the service given the "large retired population that truly sets Letterman apart."²¹

For nearly one hundred years, Letterman Hospital served the soldiers of this nation in five wars, and through the peacetime years in between. It also gave care to members of their families and to citizens of the Bay Area in emergencies large and small. The history of the institution reflects the advances in military medicine over the years. Remaining today in the layers of buildings and landscaped grounds of the Letterman complex is the physical testimony of that rich history. It is a legacy worth our awareness, worth preserving, and one that contributes significantly to the status of the entire Presidio as a National Historic Landmark.

The Draft General Management Plan Amendment



The draft General Management Plan Amendment states that “the Letterman complex will continue to be used to nurture ideas and support research and actions to improve human health and to better understand the interdependence of health and the environment.”

—The remaining historic buildings and features will be rehabilitated to support scientific research and educational programs. The former central courtyard, bordered by the historic administration building and hospital wings, will be reestablished by removing the existing parking lot and landscaping the area.

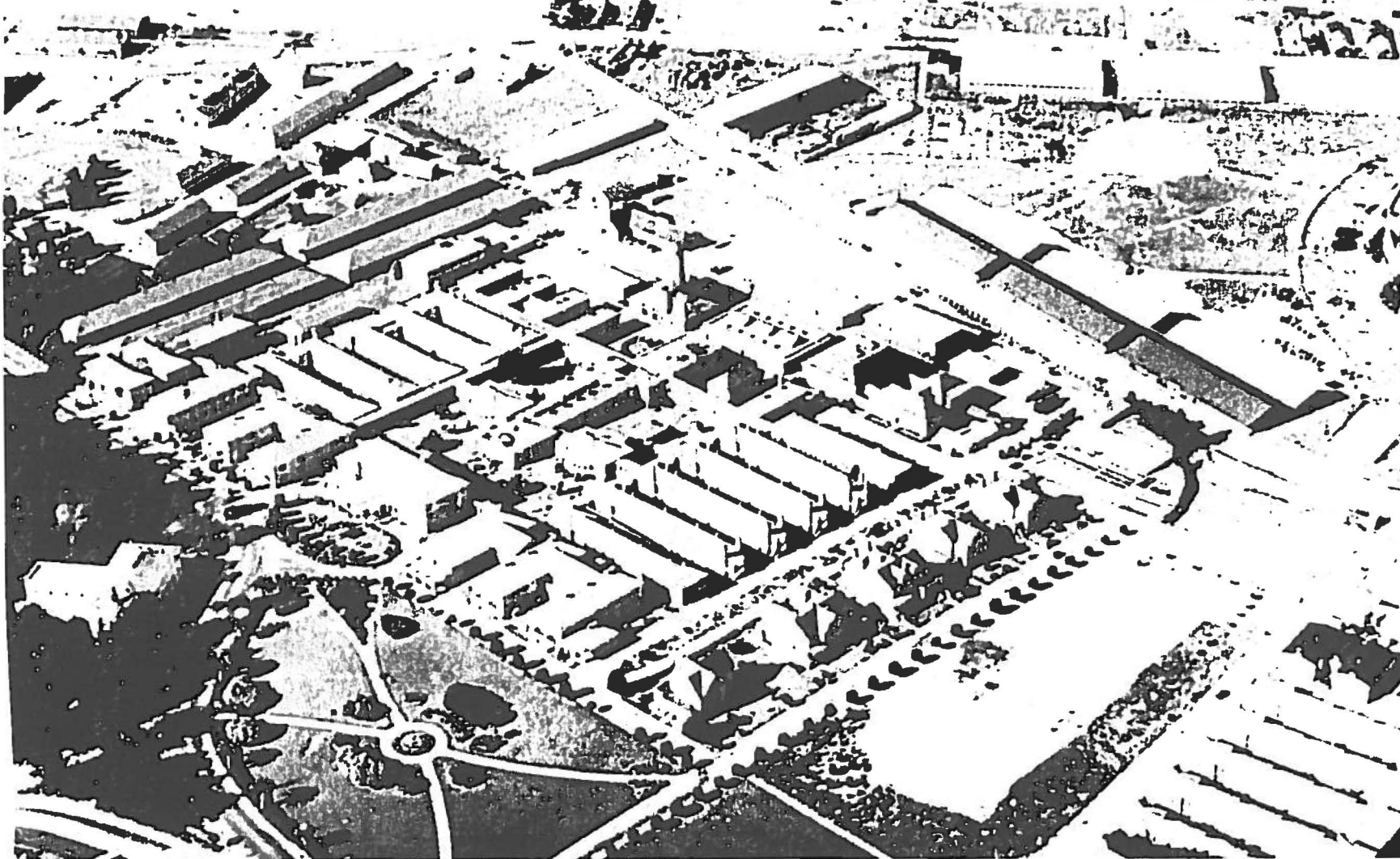
—Significant landscape features will be preserved, including the lawn area in front of the administration building and the O’Reilly Avenue and Gorgas Avenue streetscapes.

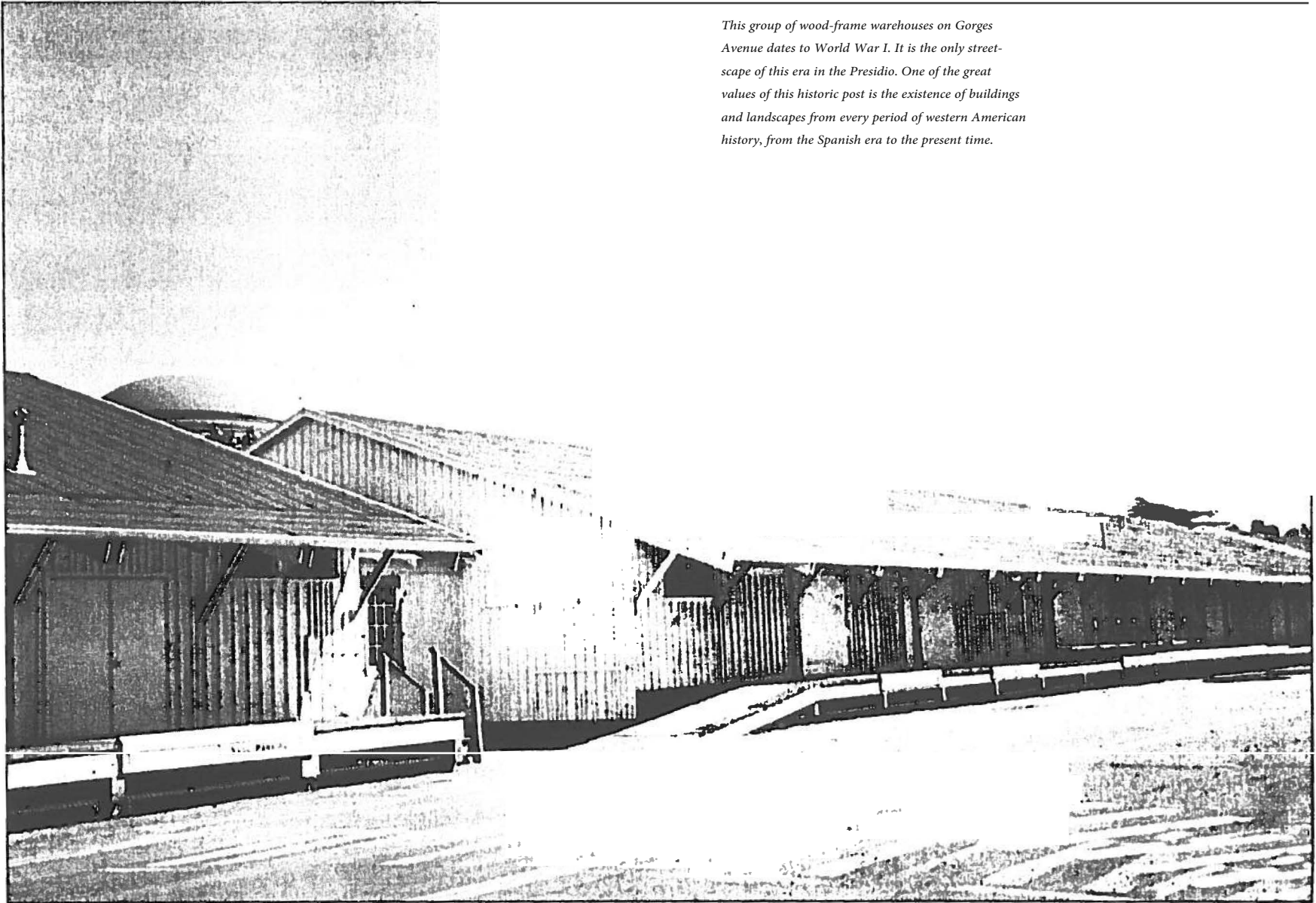
—The Letterman Army Medical Center, a non-historic building constructed in 1969, will be removed to enhance open space unless a feasible and suitable tenant can be found. The Letterman Army Institute of Research will be retained and used for research purposes.

—Limited new development will be allowed if it is compatible in material, scale, color and siting with the historic buildings and their setting.

—A small section of the riparian stream valley on the boundary of the Letterman complex and main post areas will be restored to complete the natural drainage from Tennessee Hollow to Crissy Field.

This 1926 aerial view highlights the symmetry of design and human scale of the historic hospital that is proposed for rehabilitation in the General Management Plan Amendment. The Letterman complex is clearly related to, yet retains a sense of independence from, the rest of the Presidio: Note Officers' Row at the lower right, the regularly spaced wards enclosing the courtyard at the center, and the elegant landscaping at the front of the hospital grounds. (National Archives)





This group of wood-frame warehouses on Gorges Avenue dates to World War I. It is the only streetscape of this era in the Presidio. One of the great values of this historic post is the existence of buildings and landscapes from every period of western American history, from the Spanish era to the present time.

Endnotes

- 1 National Historic Landmark Registration Form for the Presidio of San Francisco, p. 8-48.
- 2 Schinkle, Britton; "Military Architecture: The Presidio of San Francisco" in *Places*, Volume 2, Number 1, p. 48.
- 3 Letterman General Hospital Foghorn, Volume VIII, Number 16&17, Dec. 1, 1948, p.2.
- 4 Schinkle, "Military Architecture," p. 52.
- 5 Foghorn, p.2.
- 6 National Historic Landmark, p. 8-41.
- 7 Rutherford, H.H., Capt.; "History of the U.S. Army General Hospital, Presidio of San Francisco, California," 1905, p.7.
- 8 Pinckney, Paul; "Our Largest Army Hospital," *Overland Monthly: An Illustrated Magazine of the West*, Volume XXXVI, Second Series, July-December 1900, p.489.
- 9 Rutherford, "History of the U.S. Army General Hospital," p.78.
- 10 Fort Point and Army Museum Association Symposium, Feb. 3, 1990.
- 11 Rutherford, "History of the U.S. Army General Hospital," p.106.
- 12 Foghorn, p.16.
- 13 *The History of Letterman General Hospital; The Listening Post* (publishers), Presidio of San Francisco, CA, 1919, pgs. 24 and 52.
- 14 Fort Point Symposium.
- 15 Foghorn, p.17.
- 16 Foghorn, p.18.
- 17 Thompson, Erwin N. and Woodbridge, Sally B.; *Special History Study: Presidio of San Francisco, An Outline of Its Evolution as a U.S. Army Post, 1847-1990*, National Park Service, Denver, 1992, p. 142.
- 18 "Welcome to Letterman Army Medical Center"; Letterman Public Affairs Office, n.d.
- 19 Thompson and Woodbridge; *Special History Study*, p. 143.
- 20 *ibid.*, p.144.
- 21 "Welcome to Letterman...."

Prepared for the National Park Service
Department of the Interior
by Stephen A. Haller
Park Historian
Golden Gate National Recreation Area

As the nation's principal conservation agency, the Department of the Interior has responsibility for most of our nationally owned public lands and natural resources. This includes fostering sound use of our land and water resources; protecting our fish, wildlife, and biological diversity; preserving the environmental and cultural values of our national parks and historical places; and providing for the enjoyment of life through outdoor recreation. The department assesses our energy and mineral resources and works to ensure that their development is in the best interests of all our people by encouraging stewardship and citizen participation in their care. The department also has a major responsibility for American Indian reservation communities and for people who live in island territories under U.S. administration.

Unless otherwise indicated, all photographs are from the museum collections of Golden Gate National Recreation Area.

Publication services provided by William Barrett Graphic Design