

The article below is reprinted from the *New York Times Magazine* of Sunday, December 5, 1943.

### 'GOOD LISTENING, QUICK RECOVERY'

by Meyer Berger

The wards of Walter Reed General Hospital are astir with clipped metallic sounds. Nurses and orderlies are busy at the beds with portable wash basins. Clear morning sunlight bends golden bars across the cots. The wounded lie back in their pillows, wounded from Salerno, New Guinea, Africa, Sicily, and only their eyes move as they take in the action about them.

At first you don't notice, but their attention is somewhere out of this room. Some just stare at the ceiling, out of this world. You'd be apt to think, maybe, that they're reliving in memory the hour when Nazi land mines or Japanese shrapnel got them, that the horror of battle has put that vacant stare in their eyes. It isn't that at all.

Down in the basement in a room hardly 15 by 20, where the walls are perforated with white soundproof board, a handful of enlisted men run an extraordinary sound system. From this room, through some 2000 headsets, they pour music into the ears of the wounded kids just back from fighting fronts. The wounded weave dream stuff out of it. That's why they stare so.

The wounded hear songs they want to hear. They tell the nurses their requests, the nurses go to the ward telephone and "Eggie's" basement gang puts the numbers on the record player. This morning it's "Wait for Me, Mary," "Paper Doll," "I'm Thinking Tonight of My Blue Eyes," "Put Your Arms Around Me," "Suwanee River," "Mexicali Rose," "Indian Love Call," and for some wounded jive kid, "Pistol-Packin' Mama."

Private Wayne Dirksen, who hails from Freeport, Ill. where he was choirmaster and organist, murmurs little asides in to the mike between numbers: little reassuring phrases in soldier language, cheerful bits of harmless gossip, cracks about the weather, the nurses, the Wacs, anything that comes to mind, and upstairs the wounded grin.

This personal service the wounded seem to love. It has been a long time since they could ask for a song and have it served up merely for the asking. They've had to draw it from memory in cramped, muddy foxholes, and it's difficult to carry a tune in your head when machine guns and dive bombers drive it out with their terrific obbligato. It's swell just to lie back, effortless, and hear sweet music.

They have "Eggie" to thank for it, and Corp. John A. Wells, Corp. Andy Hricak, Pfc. Carl Griggs and Corp. Bob Moore. "Eggie" is Sgt. Gabriel Robert Egeland, a blond, quiet lad who ran a radio repair shop in Sturgeon Bay, Wis. Wells, fresh-faced, talks with a Southern drawl. He was with the telephone company in Washington, repairman and on the test desk, where he received his basic communications training in their plant schools. Moore, dark and hollow-

checked, was in radio repair in Adel, Iowa. He was wounded at Manila and on Attu. Shrapnel both times. Griggs studied radio engineering at the University of North Carolina before induction into the Army.

Walter Reed had the sound system installed almost twenty years ago, partly through a gift from the late S.L. Rothafel, the "Roxy" who ran the Capitol in New York. It was rather primitive, judged by current radio standards. It piped only one radio broadcast at a time and had no flexibility. Its first beneficiaries were the wounded of World War One, who took great comfort from it in their day.

Over two years ago, though, Eggie and his group took the system over, and without a cent of government money, which is extraordinary in itself, they took the system apart. They rewired it so that it serves a choice of radio or direct recorded programs to the wounded in their beds, mess halls, and recreation rooms, and makes recordings right on the premises. They've built up the record library too, and they have their own workshop.

Right now, Eggie figures it would cost around \$20,000, perhaps even more, including labor, to replace the unit. He and his crew have conjured the whole system out of nothing but salvage -- salvaged old house radio sets, salvaged wire, salvaged knobs and dials, salvaged telephone jacks, terminal strips, made-over plugs and junk-heap lighting units. A certain amount of salvage also figures even in their recording blanks.

The basement gang started the re-vamping job back in March, 1941. Corporal Wells got permission from officials in Washington's Telephone Company to strip wire and small parts from old discarded panels and switchboards. Eggie knew a guy in the pin-ball and slot machine racket, who was willing - even eager - to let Eggie and his men take all the knobs, wire and condensers they could rip out of old pool-hall and drug-store pinball units.

With these materials, and by countless hours in the labyrinths under Walter Reed where the twenty miles of wire sprawl through conduits, Eggie and his soldier mechanics worked the miraculous change. They remodelled the amplifiers and installed an automatic trouble-shooter that betrays the slightest break or short by winking red lights on the high panel board in the basement. They have a recorder and are proud when important people come to their basement to use it. Services for all the principal faiths are held in the post chapel and broadcast through the hospital radio.

Pfc. Dirksen, a born announcer with just the proper amount of corn in his mike feed, handles the purchase of new records. Right now he's having a bit of trouble, because

when he buys records wholesale he must turn in cracked or broken records equal in weight to the amount he buys. If you have any around, incidentally, you might send them to him or Eggie, care of the Radio Room, Walter Reed Main Hospital. Money for new records comes out of the Chaplain's Fund.

The record library has about 1,000 disks in it at the moment. It has grown slowly, but selection has been careful, and is based entirely on the wishes of the wounded. It is predominantly popular, but there's enough standard and classical stuff to meet all demands.

Corp. Leslie C. Bradley, who hails from St. Louis, is in the radio room daily from 2:30 to 11 p.m. After 5 p.m. he alone operates the system and must not only keep the programs interesting but also make spot repairs.

The radio headsets used by the wounded are the ones that Roxy gave, and in addition the basement gang has wired into some of the wards and into the larger assembly rooms some fifteen or sixteen loudspeakers, some of them saved from the scrap heap. Neuro-psychiatric cases sometimes bang their headsets around, but Eggie's gang patiently restores the sets. The worst cases don't use headsets. They get their music over loudspeakers.

The basement crew has fixed switches at every cot, so that the wounded may choose their radio programs. Half the wounded in a given ward may, for example, want to get the football or baseball game, and the other half may want jive, or the news. Each man has his choice, and since the sound pipes in through headphones, men of dissimilar tastes at adjoining cots do not disturb one another.

Someone in Eggie's troupe starts the day's programs at 7:30 a.m. Two of the best general programs are picked out

of the air, and the wounded can have either. By unanimous vote they turned thumbs down on sudsy stuff, the "schmaltzy" soap-opera interval, generally from 9:30 to 11:30 a.m. A great many find the chaplain's fifteen-minute Scripture readings soothing.

The basement serves forty wards all told from 7:30 a.m. to 11:30 p.m. The neuro-psychiatric cases are cut out of the circuits at 9 p.m. Pfc Dirksen keeps comparing the wounded's requests with the "Hit Parade" and finds they just about keep pace. The overseas kids are a little while catching onto the new tunes, when they're fresh off the hospital ships, but pretty soon they're asking for the same numbers as civilian hep cats.

Wherever possible the names of bed-ridden kids who ask for specific programs are worked in. Usually these boys are lonely, and hearing their own names over the system seems to have therapeutic value.

Eventually, if he can wangle the supplies and the necessary room, Eggie would like to build an improved studio. He dreams about the time when he may be able to offer the wounded kids a service whereby they may record their voices, in speech and in song, if they wish, to send to their kin and to the girls back home. He thinks they'd like something like that, and dreams of the day when people like Vincent Lopez and other soldier favorites may come to Walter Reed's basement to sing and play for the wounded, and make recordings.

Pfc Dirksen's signing-off message, incidentally, is characteristic of the warm personal service that's dished out by Eggie's basement gang. It always closes with, "Good listening, guys, and quick recovery."