

William Cannon

William Cannon had attended medical school at the Medical College of South Carolina in Charleston South Carolina. He graduated in 1939 and then received specialist training in pathology at the University of Tennessee.

Dr. Cannon was in Cincinnati when he heard Pearl Harbor was bombed. Shortly afterward he went back to the Medical College of South Carolina to assume a teaching position. The school had lost three out of five faculty members to service while one more had been promoted to dean of the school. This left only one doctor teaching until Dr. Cannon appeared.

The college was so short-staffed that work load was tremendous on everyone and the pressure to get qualified doctors out to the services to help in the war effort made it even more tremendous.

Dr. Cannon described a typical day as starting with him rising about 6:00 am followed by a one and half mile walk to campus, except when he could catch a ride on the irregular bus service. He would try to get into campus by 8:00 to begin teaching. There was normally one hour of lectures followed by 2-3 hours of lab work. Dr. Cannon taught most of the labs. In addition Dr. Cannon was responsible for carrying out contract and referred lab work from outside the college. This included 300 autopsies conducted yearly, of which Dr. Cannon did 60-70%. These were autopsies on non-military cases. After teaching and performing lab work until approximately 10:00-11:00 pm, he would then go over to the hospital to help supervise the residents on duty. He would not normally get home before 1:00 or 2:00 am in the morning. Dr. Cannon followed this schedule throughout the war, getting only a weekend off occasionally. The medical college was running classes for four semesters a year so there were classes to teach year round.

The staff were under great pressure to get their students through school quickly so that they could assume medical roles in the military. Despite this Dr. Cannon was very confident that despite the abbreviated training they gave the students with few exceptions they were all qualified for the roles.

In fact the job was so stressful that Dr. Cannon considered joining the service himself as he had applied for the draft before the war but was declined. He was told by the dean that his job was considered essential and that if he resigned he would have to join the military as a buck private. Most of the students that he had been recently teaching were officers and he did not relish the idea of serving under them in the military. He decided that the medical college was the best place for him.

Dr. Cannon describes Charleston as being very much a military town before the war. During the war its military character was only reinforced. In addition to a pre-war naval base, a 1000 bed naval hospital was constructed to accept wounded being brought from overseas on navy hospital ships. There was also a Coast Guard base and another naval hospital and school. Dr. Cannon found that as the war progressed the facilities were constantly upgraded and expanded.

There were so many military men in town that Dr. Cannon had a hard time finding housing when he moved back to Charleston. He initially took a room, near the medical college, in the house of

the former dean of the school but conditions became so crowded that he was forced to move farther out and away from the school. Later he was able to find an apartment three blocks from school.

Dr. Cannon also had the frustrating experience of dealing with rationing during the war. As a civilian he did not have the privilege of shopping at the post exchanges on the military bases. These well-stocked stores were reserved for military people and their families. Since all of the students they were teaching were in uniform they could enjoy shopping for luxury items like cigarettes when Cannon could not.

Despite not being on the front line the war did bring certain dangers to Charleston. One winter night a kerosene heater in a guard shack at the Coast Guard base caught fire. The blaze quickly spread and threatened a storage depot of mines. These mines were to be laid off the coast to combat submarines and would have caused major destruction had they exploded. Fortunately the local fire department arrived and quickly put out the blaze.