

## People remember World War II nurses

By 2nd Lt. Amber Millerchip, Air Education and Training Command Public Affairs / Published June 08, 2004

RANDOLPH AIR FORCE BASE, Texas (AFPN) -- Many Americans commemorated the 60th anniversary of D-Day on June 6, watching and remembering those World War II veterans who stormed the beaches of Normandy. Often forgotten are the flight nurses who served behind the scenes ensuring the men who fought that day lived to talk about it.

Flight nurses evacuated the wounded from battlefield hospitals to make room for the steady stream of incoming patients, said retired Air Force Capt. Lillian Kinkela Keil, a World War II flight nurse who participated in the Normandy and Battle of the Bulge evacuations. To survive, the critically wounded needed rapid evacuation to the nearest major military hospital.

"We did everything we could to keep the wounded alive, comfortable and see them out of danger," Captain Keil said.

She is thought to be the most decorated woman veteran in American history, said Dr. Bruce Ashcroft, Air Education and Training Command historian.

Five hundred Army nurses served as members of 31 medical air evacuation transport squadrons activated during the war. More than 1 million patients were evacuated, and only four were lost en route, Dr. Ashcroft said. The record for any single day during World War II was 4,707 patients evacuated.

Before World War II, no care was provided to wounded Soldiers during evacuation flights, Captain Keil said. Although the role of the flight surgeon was developed in World War I, it was not until November 1942, when the School of Air Evacuation opened at Bowman Field, Ky., that the flight surgeon's counterpart -- the flight nurse -- became a member of the medical flight team. Captain Keil was among the school's first graduating class of flight nurses.

Because of the rigors of the job, flight nurse training demanded physically fit nurses. To pass the course, the nurses were required to successfully navigate an obstacle course, sliding on their stomachs beneath a live wire and swimming under ignited gasoline.

This was important training in the event the nurses crashed somewhere, Captain Keil said, "so that no matter where we landed, we could take care of ourselves."

During World War II, although women performed many roles in the U.S. military, only nurses were allowed in combat zones, said Jeff Duford, Air Force Museum research historian.

Upon graduation, 2nd Lt. Keil and other 810th Medical Air Evacuation Squadron members sailed with the largest convoy of troops across the Atlantic Ocean at that time. There were 88

ships. Throughout the journey the ships had to continuously cut their engines because of submarine activity.

"Even before D-Day, we were picking up wounded from all over: England, Scotland, Iceland and the Azores," Captain Keil said. "We took them wherever they needed to go. We also had to deal with the German Junker 88s that flew overhead on their way to buzz bomb London."

Another flight nurse, retired Air Force Capt. Clara Murphy from the 802nd Medical Air Evacuation Squadron, was sent to North Africa before the Normandy invasion.

"We were always halfway between the front and back lines," Captain Murphy said. "Going forward had top priority. We would fly forward in the morning with supplies and then fly back with patients to Oran (Algeria)."

Right after D-Day began, fully loaded glider planes flew to the front lines with supplies, Captain Keil said. The flight nurses soon followed on Douglas C-47s, landing in the fields of France, as close to Omaha beach as possible. Because the C-47s were also filled with military supplies, the aircraft did not carry Red Cross markings, which meant no protection from enemy fire.

"We brought over gasoline, oil, guns, medical equipment, blankets and anything it took to keep the fighting man going," Captain Keil said. "All (the supplies were) for (General George S.) Patton. If we didn't land because of weather, Patton and his troops didn't go anywhere." General Patton knew where the gas was coming from and how the nurses were taking the patients off the battlefields, Captain Keil said. As a thank you, Captain Keil said General Patton once sent them a case of champagne.

Each plane carried 24 litters and was similar to an emergency hospital ward, but only one nurse and one technician cared for the wounded. Oftentimes the patients arrived wearing a piece of paper, listing their name, rank, serial number and the field doctor's notes, Captain Keil said.

"We never left empty and nothing ever surprised me," Captain Keil said. "The boys were dirty. Full of mud from the foxholes and caked with dried blood. The mud was a real problem because any dirt around the wound was susceptible to infection."

Morphine was given to the patients to help them with the trip, Captain Keil said. Although many were still suffering a lot, they did not seem to care. "Even when wounded badly, they would look up, see the nurse and feel extremely relieved because they knew they would get good care and were flying away from where they were wounded," Captain Keil said.

All passengers were amazed and just so happy to talk to an American woman, Captain Murphy said. The Soldiers would talk about their sisters, mothers, wives and girlfriends to the nurses. They also shared their fears about flying and worries about having to go back to the battlefield.

According to Captain Keil, every patient was unique and memorable. "I had to make each patient feel [as though] he was the only one on the plane I was caring for, yet I was taking care of 23 others," Captain Keil said. "This made them feel very important, and they loved that."

Captain Keil recalled one flight that really touched her heart. They had reached their destination, circled a few times, but because of severe weather, could not land.

"It was a terrible sight," Captain Keil said. "I saw 12 litters in the snow. The boys were waiting and waving at us. Those who couldn't wave managed to at least get their hands out of their blankets in an effort to get our attention. We had to leave them. It was horribly sad."

Moving prisoners of war was also a challenge, Captain Keil said. On one flight, German POWs were on one side of the plane, and American Soldiers on the other. They should never have been together, said Captain Keil, who had to calm down the Americans. "I was very stern and talked roughly to (the Americans) explaining how the Germans were POWs, wounded like themselves and deserved the treatment they would want if they were captured by the Germans," she said.

Captain Keil flew 250 air evacuations throughout Europe and 25 trans-Atlantic crossings. She also flew 175 missions during the Korean War.

"I loved and enjoyed every flight," Captain Keil said. "It was fantastic because I was a nurse doing what I wanted to do: helping with the war effort and flying." (Courtesy of AETC News Service)

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