

Remembering D-Day Through the Eyes of Evelyn Kowalchuk

By [Jason Johnson](#) | Wednesday, June 6th, 2012 | [History](#)

Sixty-eight years ago today, thousands of Allied troops stormed the beaches of Normandy attempting to secure an Allied foothold in Hitler's "Fortress Europe." I'll leave the military history to others more familiar with such matters, but I would like to introduce you to a friend and neighbor who witnessed the battle's aftermath from a unique vantage point.

Evelyn Kowalchuk, a first-generation American who grew up in New Jersey, graduated from nursing school as the United States was about to enter World War II. With the men and women of her generation enlisting to do their part to defend the nation, Evelyn attempted to enlist in the U.S. Army as a nurse. Evelyn's mother, who had immigrated from Ukraine some years before, still had difficulty reading English, but she knew enough to recognize the Army seal on the letters her daughter kept receiving and would always throw them away before Evelyn got home. Finally, realizing that her mother must be intercepting her letters, Evelyn gave the recruiter her sister's address, received her paperwork and finally took her oath of enlistment in October 1942.

After training, Evelyn volunteered for a relatively new program, the flight nurses program, situated in the Army Air Corps' 818th Medical Evacuation Squadron. The flight nurses were based in southern England where, unbeknownst to them at the time, they would play a critical role in the largest amphibious invasion ever attempted.

The Allies had already secured the beaches around Normandy when Evelyn made her first flight into France that June of 1944, yet the battle was far from over. Northern France remained a war zone when the 818th started evacuating the treatable wounded from Normandy to hospitals across the Channel. Because the C-46s and C-47s used to evacuate the wounded were also used to bring in supplies and materiel to the Allied forces, the planes could not bear the Red Cross, thus they frequently came under enemy fire. On at least one occasion, Evelyn and the other flight nurses on her crew had to spend the night in Normandy after it grew too dark to fly safely back to

England. That night, she recalls sleeping—to as much of a degree as possible—in a foxhole with Nazi shells whizzing overhead.

Evelyn Kowalchuk and the flight nurses didn't only transport wounded Allied troops, once she recalled having to shield the identity of a badly wounded German POW from the American GIs on the plane in order to protect him.

After the war, Evelyn returned to New Jersey where she married a fellow veteran, Andrew Kowalchuk, and had two sons, one of whom, followed his parents' example and joined the Marine Corps. She pursued her master's degree in nursing and would spend the next 30-plus years working as a nurse both at a hospital and later for the Newark city schools. The Kowalchuks retired to Smith Mountain Lake, Virginia in the late-1980s where they built their dream home and became active in the community. At one time, Mrs. Kowalchuk was an active member of six civic groups, ranging from the VFW, to the Firebelles (the women's fundraising auxiliary for the local volunteer fire department) and the SML Republican Women's Club. She also spent a significant amount of her time talking to school and church groups about the sacrifices the Allies made on D-Day and the role of women during World War II and volunteering at the National D-Day Memorial in Bedford.

Like so many members of the Greatest Generation, Mrs. Kowalchuk is getting older. Her health isn't what it once was and she no longer drives. She's had to curtail her involvement in the community, but "Chappy" (as we all affectionately call her, using a nickname she earned during the war) remains spunky with sparkling blue eyes that appear to still view the world with the same gusto that lead her to volunteer for that dangerous mission 68 years ago.

If you want to hear Mrs. Kowalchuck describe her wartime experience in her own voice—and you should—you can hear her [here](#) and [here](#).

Evelyn Kowalchuk

Obituary



Evelyn (Chaychuk) Kowalchuk, 93, of Moneta, left this world to join her son Ivan and husband, Andrew in the Forever After on April 7, 2013. Born on March 29, 1920 in Jersey City, she was the youngest of three sisters to parents born in the Ukraine. Starting at 15 Evelyn worked at the RCA Radio Factory in Harrison, NJ as a solder but her main interest since age of five was

to be a "Mother and Nurse". After Graduating in 1941 from the Newark Memorial Hospital in Belleville (now Clara Maass Nursing School), Evelyn, against her mother's wishes, joined the United States [Army](#) Air Corps. She trained for the Flight Nurses Training and Air Evacuation at Bowman Air Field in Kentucky. Only eight weeks later, in April of 1944 along with 24 other flight nurses, Evelyn was sent to England as part of the United States Army Air Corps 818th Medical Evacuation Transport Squadron providing comfort and much needed medical assistance. Evelyn flew to Normandy on D-Day +3 to provide assistance returning with wounded soldiers from Omaha Beach often under fire from enemy forces. After the war and being honorably discharged from the Army in 1946, Evelyn continued her nursing career, first as a school nurse in the Newark Board of Education and Health, then becoming the first female school nurse at Newark Academy, Livingston, finishing her nursing career in the Irvington Board of Education. In between she received a Master's Degree plus 32 credits in School Health and Guidance from Kean College. Was an Alumnus of Seton Hall and Jersey City State. After her move to Livingston, Evelyn married builder Andrew Kowalchuk on January 10, 1948, having two sons, Peter Andrew and Ivan James. Her son Ivan followed in his parents footsteps and joined the military with the United States Marines. Finally retiring with 14 years of service in 1988 Evelyn moved to Huddleston, at the age of 68. In Virginia, Evelyn stayed very active. Each week she worked with a student learning program at Huddleston Elementary School as a book buddy, sewed children's sweaters and pre-natal caps for a relief organization, and also volunteered at Carilion Bedford Memorial Hospital. Evelyn was also known for her volunteer work at the National D-Day Memorial Foundation. Then on June 6, 2001 Evelyn had the privilege of escorting President George W. Bush to the National D-Day Memorial dedication ceremony. Evelyn then went on to receive the Chevalier of the French Legion of Honor, on April 3, 2002 in recognition of all the nurses who gallantly served the wounded soldiers in France. She also received the Air Medal, ETO Ribbon, and American Theatre Ribbon and was also recognized for her campaigns in Northern France, Rhineland, Ardennes, Central Europe and especially Normandy. A member of the 1st Ukrainian Presbyterian Church in Irvington since 1932 and later becoming a member of Patmos Methodist Church in Huddleston. A life member of the [VFW](#) and the American Legion post # 54 of Bedford. A life member of the Flight Nurses Association, Order of the Eastern Star of New Jersey MIZPAH chapter # 33, Charter member of the Women in Military Service in Washington, first female veteran to be elected on the Board of Directors of the [World War II](#)

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315th Troop Carrier Group Association, Federated Women's Club, appeared in June 2002 article National Geographic, honored as the Citizen of the Year in 2002 in her Smith Mountain Lake Ruritan Club, and making numerous speaking engagements about her military and nursing experiences. She was also recognized for so many more accomplishment and achievements but most of all was known for her sense of humor, courageous ambitions, her remarkable smile and loving nature as a pioneer Air Flight Nurse who took care of so many. She will be missed by many especially her beloved son Peter. Those wishing to make memorial contributions in Evelyn's name please consider, The National D-Day Memorial Foundation, P.O. Box 77, Bedford, VA 24523. A Celebration of Evelyn's life will be conducted at 10 am on Saturday, April 20, 2013 at Trinity Ecumenical Parrish in Moneta with Rev. Dr. Gary K. Scheidt officiating. The family will arrange for a burial in Arlington National Cemetery at a later date. To send condolences online please visit www.tharpfuneralhome.com. Arrangements by Tharp Funeral Home & Crematory, Bedford, (540)-586-3443.