

# First nurse wings earned in 1943



The first wings awarded to a flight nurse were pinned on 2nd Lt. Geraldine Dishroon-Brier by Brig. Gen. (Dr.) David N. W. Grant, Air Surgeon, Feb. 18, 1943.



2nd Lt. Geraldine Dishroon

As the first class of nurses graduated, General Grant realized there were no wings designed for flight nurses. He took the wings off his uniform and pinned them on the distinguished graduate, Lieutenant Dishroon-Brier. He said that nurses should wear the same wings as the flight surgeon, with the addition of a superimposed "N."



Early flight suits were often big and bulky.

Getting the right size boots in a man's Army wasn't always easy.



806th MED AIR EVAC SQDN, LOUISVILLE, 1992

Front row, Gerry Brier, Phyllis Choura, Jean Tierney, Dorothy Worden, Pat Mello,  
 second row, Bill Brier, Shirley King, Marion Shulze, Ethel Simpson, Ruth Butler,  
 Dorothy Barnes, Charles Pieper,  
 back row, Gene King, Ken Shulze, Dick Simpson, Edith Rothenberg,  
 Ed Tierney, Ken Worden.

Photo taken by Kathryn Varmec, Dorothy Barnes' daughter.



Membury Tower  
 from the left: Lt Harold Meiore, Lt Mary Taggart, Lt  
 Katherine Millane, Lt Denzil Nagle, Lt Ethel Carlson,  
 in front, Dr David Doyle in back, one of right is not  
 identified.



Nurses and Medics of the 815th MAES  
 Living room of Nurses quarters at Membury.

THE 67th (now 567th) AAF BAND

During WWII the 67th AAF Band was stationed at Bowman Field. They performed at the Kentucky Derby in 1942, at dances in downtown Louisville and at the Officer's Club. A few of these fellows contacted me about joining the 79th at Louisville. I felt the more the better so I sent them details on the Holiday Inn. They were able to get about a dozen together counting wives, so they decided to have their own dinner when the 79th and the 806th had their dinner. They attended the dedication, evidently this was their first reunion, and showed a lot of exuberances when they were together. Remember when we got together the first time in 1981?

June 11, 1944

. . . One hundred and twenty nine B-26s and A-20s bomb rail and road bridges, intersections, rail lines, oil tanks, artillery, and town areas. Bad weather prevents afternoon operations. Ten fighter groups fly escort, and strafe and bomb bridges, railroads, gun emplacements, rail and road-traffic, and marshaling yards in support of troops in France. . . .



Second Lt. Geraldine Dishroom (top), on the cover of a 1944 "Picture Post" magazine. U.S. Army Nurse Corps flight nurses (right), pose in front of C-47 med-evac aircraft.



## The Nurses

T-1, built by Price's engineering troops, was a dusty airstrip on the Omaha beachhead. The T stood for the transports that swarmed daily into the field hauling supplies and troops.

As the troops poured onto the beach, a gray-green C-47 still sporting its black and white invasion stripes fought through a strong down-draft to land at the tiny strip. Opening the cargo door, a young woman in an oversized flight suit jumped to the hardened sand and began working on the bodies that littered the ground where the aircraft stopped. With that short jump, 1st

Lt. Grace Dunnam, chief flight nurse of the 806th Medical Air Evacuation Squadron, became the first American military woman to hit the Normandy beach.

It was June 11, 1944.

Five days before, Dunnam and the rest of her flight nurses were awakened at their base in Grove, England, by the rumblings of a sky filled with aircraft. The 806th had been in England since July 1943.

"I think everyone knew it was coming, and we were ready for it," said Jean Foley-Tierney, the unit's youngest nurse. "Like any 22-year-old, I felt I could handle it and knew it

*Grace is incredible  
She and her  
husband  
(a companion  
village photo)  
were my  
sponsors  
coming to the  
village in  
March '87  
Both now deceased.*

all," laughed Foley-Tierney, 70, who now lives in Roxbury, Conn.

"I was very excited and completely nervous," said another nurse, Geraldine Dishroon-Brier, recalling her flight on D+6. Dishroon-Brier was the first woman ever awarded flight nurse wings.

"We had never been in a warlike situation before," she said. "We had a lot of practice with injured coming back from missions, but to actually land there [on Omaha Beach]. It's an entirely different feeling to know it's the real thing. You know shots can be fired in anger — and were."

The nurses traveled in C-47s, carrying 24 patients each, with the 31st Air Transport Group. But since the aircraft also carried troops and supplies on the inbound leg to Normandy, the planes could not be marked with the distinctive red cross.

"We were just another airplane," said Dishroon-Brier, 78, who now lives in Cheyenne, Wyo. "We were an open target."

Crossing the channel without red cross markings on the aircraft was only the first hurdle. Landing at T-1 was the second.

"There was a ravine at each end of the strip, and the pilots had to be very careful in getting in there," Foley-Tierney recalled. "It was a very busy place. There was equipment all over. There were G-Is coming up from the beach. There were wrecked LSTs everywhere. It was hot, dusty and noisy. It was very exciting."

Once on the ground, getting the troops out was the nurses' first priority. Since there were no field hospitals yet, medical care was available only in



A nurse (top) in a field hospital gives plasma to a wounded soldier. Flight nurses (left) load wounded onto an aircraft for transport to England. A C-47 aircraft (below) was one of the main used for evacuating wounded soldiers. Second Lt. Winna Jean Tierney (bottom) at airfield T-1, Omaha Beachhead, June 14, 1944.



**"I was very excited and completely nervous . . . We had never been in a warlike situation before."**

England. First aid stations were set up everywhere, but there was only so much they could do.

"We picked them up right off the beachhead," Dishroon-Brier said. "We were getting patients who had just been wounded not more than 30 minutes before."

Despite the lack of proper medical care, the nurses felt they could do something for most of their patients.

"Even if it was a minor injury, you were doing something for them because you were taking them off the beachhead."



Second Lt. Geraldine Dishroom (center) and fellow nurses prepare for a medical evacuation flight.

Dishroom-Brier said. "And believe me, they were very glad to leave."

Patients included American and allied troops and German prisoners of war.

"The German prisoners were usually disheveled, and most of them were barefoot," Foley-Tierney said.

"I remember one [German] was an SS officer," Dishroom-Brier said. "I thought he didn't speak English, but at the end of the flight he started talking. He spoke excellent English!"

Through the summer, the C-47s made two to three trips a day to recover wounded. From June until August, the 806th brought out more than 20,000 wounded.

Many years later Dishroom-Brier was stopped in her home town by one of the former "young" troops she had picked up at Normandy. She was embarrassed to say she didn't remember him because she was always busy getting patients strapped into the litters and giving medication. But he was extremely proud to tell her that "he remembered her very well." ◊

## Postscript

*D-Day was merely the beginning of operations designed to be "aimed at the heart of Germany and destroy her armed forces." Of all the stories that can be told about the invasion, its success is probably best measured by the following intercepted message:*

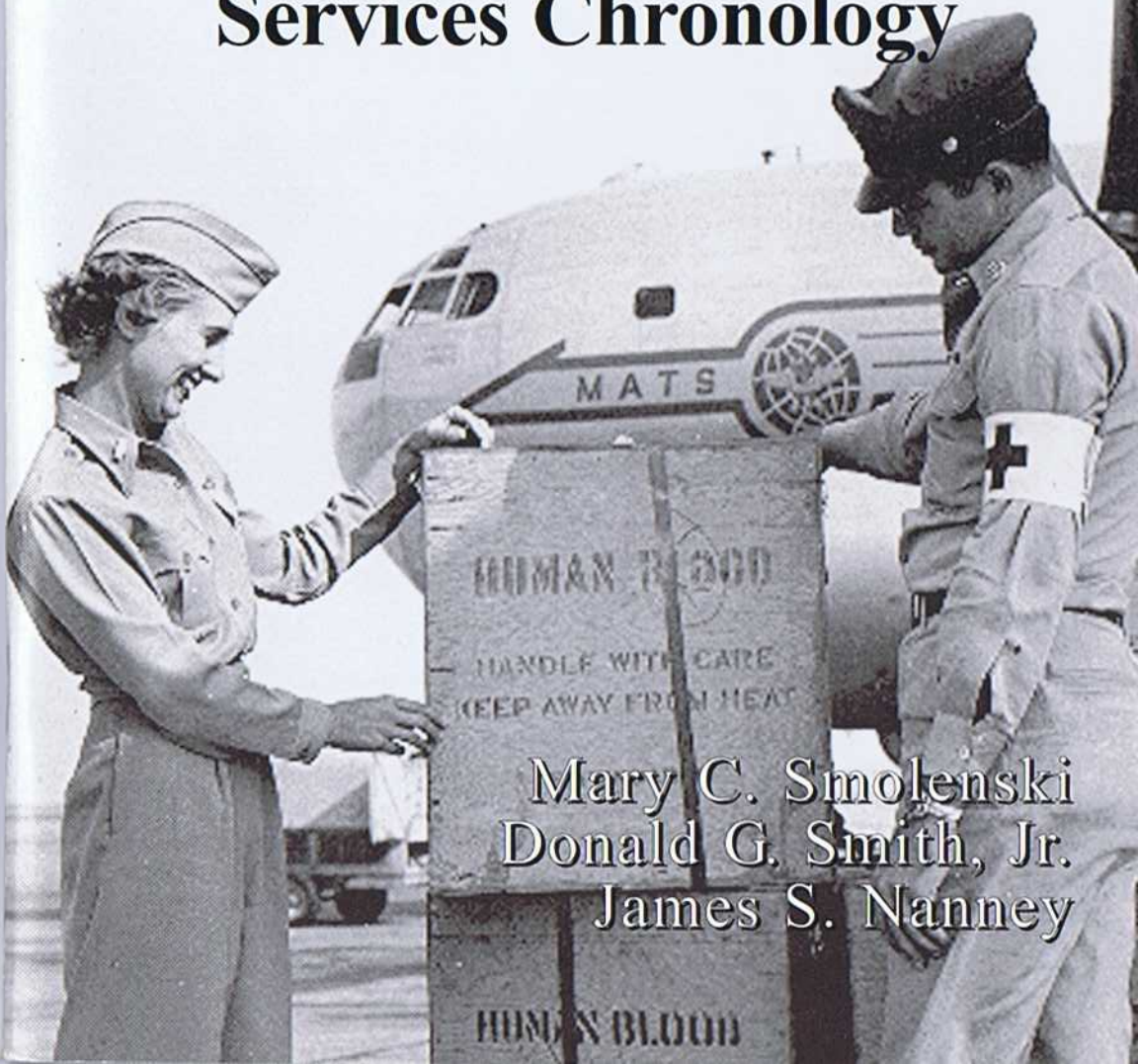
July 17, 1944

. . . Top Secret . . . from General Freiherr Heinrich von Lüttwitz, commanding general, 2d Panzer Division, Normandy . . . The Allies are waging war regardless of expense. In addition, they have complete mastery of the air. They bomb and strafe every movement, even single vehicles and individuals. They reconnoiter our area constantly and direct their artillery fire. . . The feeling of helplessness against enemy aircraft has a paralyzing effect, and during the bombing barrage the effect on inexperienced troops is literally 'soul shattering.'

1903-2003 *Flight*  
the 100th Anniversary  
Commemorative Edition

# A Fit, Fighting Force

## The Air Force Nursing Services Chronology



Mary C. Smolenski  
Donald G. Smith, Jr.  
James S. Nanney

# The Chronology of Air Force Nursing Services

## World War Two and Its Aftermath

### 1941

**December 7:** Japanese planes bombed Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. In all, approximately 59,000 nurses served in the Army Nurse Corps in World War Two. More than 200 Army nurses died, 16 from enemy fire. Many of these Army nurses supported the Army Air Forces (AAF), and one of their new specialties was flight nurse.

### 1942

**November 30:** The War Department directed the 349th Air Evacuation Group to train flight surgeons, flight nurses, and enlisted personnel for aeromedical evacuation (aerovac) duty aboard troop and cargo carriers. Squadrons consisted of medical personnel but no planes. Headquarters, the housekeeping section, consisted of a commanding officer, chief nurse, and medical administrative corps officer. Each squadron had a headquarters and four flights. A flight surgeon with six flight nurses and six flight technicians headed each flight. A flight team included one nurse and one enlisted technician. Squadrons were assigned to either troop carrier or air transport groups.

**December 22:** The 77th Congress authorized relative rank for Army Nurse Corps officers from second lieutenant through colonel by passing Public Law 828. Previously, the highest rank a nurse could hold was major. Public Law 828 also provided for pay and allowances approximately equal to those granted commissioned officers who had no dependents.

### 1943

**January:** The first strategic aerovac flight had a medical crew of two: one technician and Lt. Elsie S. Ott (Mandot), an AAF nurse. The mission transported five patients from Karachi, India, to Bolling Field, Washington, D.C., a trip of 11,000 miles which lasted six and one-half days. For this mission, Lieutenant Ott received the first Air Medal ever awarded to a nurse.



Lt. Elsie Ott received the Air Medal for the first strategic aeromedical evacuation flight, January 1943.

**February 18:** The first class of flight nurses graduated from the AAF School of Air Evacuation, 349th Air Evacuation Group at Bowman Field, Kentucky. The first flight nurse ever awarded flight nurse wings was Lt. Geraldine Dishroon-Brier. The first flight nurse on the island of Guadalcanal was Lt. Mae E. Olson.

**July 27:** AAF flight nurse Lt. Ruth M. Gardiner was the first nurse to be killed in a theater of operations during the war. She was on an aerovac plane that crashed in Alaska while on a mission. She was 28 years old, originally from Pennsylvania, and assigned to the 11th Air Force of the Alaskan Defense Command of the AAF. An Army Hospital in Chicago, Illinois—Gardiner General—was named in her honor.

## 1944

**February 8:** The Overseas Replacement Depot for flight nurses was activated at Randolph Field. Nurses reporting overseas were assigned there to ensure that their records, clothing, equipment, health, and training were up to date.

**February 12:** Female nurse prisoners of war (POWs), including flight nurses, were liberated on Luzon after three years of captivity. They were evacuated to Leyte en route to the United States.

**June:** For the duration of War World Two all military nurses were given a temporary commission.

Capt. Leontine Stroup, a flight nurse, authored "Aero-Medical Nursing and Therapeutics," one of the first articles published on this topic, in *The American Journal of Nursing*.

**June 6:** After the invasion of Normandy, Army medics began to cope with many casualties with severed spinal cords, severe head wounds, and pulmonary wounds. With no hospitals ashore, the sick and wounded needed to be evacuated to England, but heavy surf hindered sea evacuation. By June 8 aviation engineers in Normandy completed an emergency landing strip in the mud behind Omaha Beach.

**June 9:** Flight nurses of the 816th Medical Air Evacuation Squadron (MAES) flew "blood runs" to Normandy, airdropping fresh blood.



These Army Air Forces nurses, imprisoned on Bataan and Corregidor, Philippine Islands, were freed after three years of imprisonment. Manila, Luzon, Philippine Islands, February 1945.

**June 11:** Official aerovac began on D+5 when 2d Lt. Grace E. Dunham, chief nurse of the 806th MAES, flew into Normandy in a C-47 that was still painted with invasion stripes. Upon landing, she jumped from the airplane wearing her oversized flight suit, provided care to the wounded, and flew with them to England. By the end of the month, flight nurses had helped evacuate about 7,500 patients from France to England.



Flight nurse prepares for takeoff, North Africa, December 1942.





*Lt. Reba Whittle after her return to the United States from captivity by the Germans during World War Two.*

**September 27:** Lt. Reba Z. Whittle was the first flight nurse to be imprisoned by the Germans. Her plane was shot down by antiaircraft artillery fire behind German lines near Aachen. Every person on board was injured, but Whittle ignoring her wounds, helped move the medical technician out of the burning plane. Germans soon arrived, provided first aid, and escorted Whittle to Stalag 9C, a prison camp near Frankfurt. When she was not nursing British, American, and Australian prisoners, Whittle, the first female Allied prisoner of the Germans, remained secluded in her prison cell and never saw another woman. She was exchanged in January 1945 for German prisoners held by the Allies.

## 1945

As the war in Europe ended, more flight nurses were needed for domestic aerovac and duty in the Pacific.

**April 14:** Flight nurse Wilma (Dolly) Vinsant was killed when her evacuation plane, ferrying wounded Americans to hospitals behind the front line, was shot down over Germany. She was one of three women in the Army Nurse Corps killed by direct enemy action. Buried in the United States Military Cemetery at Margraten, Netherlands, she was the only woman so honored.

## 1946

Before the AAF separated from the U.S. Army in September 1947 to become the United States Air Force (USAF), it had already acquired its own medical staff, a distinct sector of the Army medical community directed to provide nondefinitive medical care for AAF bases worldwide. Definitive care for AAF personnel, however, was still provided by the Army general hospitals.

## 1947

**April 16:** The Army-Navy Nurse Act of 1947 (Public Law 36-80C) provided permanent commissioned officer status for members of the Army Nurse Corps in the grades of second lieutenant through lieutenant colonel, and provided for

the Chief of the Army Nurse Corps to serve in the temporary grade of colonel. The act also established the Army Nurse Corps Section of the Officers Reserve Corps.

## 1948

**February:** Air Surgeon Malcolm Grow noted that his monthly memorandum, "Comments for United States Air Force Surgeons," was not being distributed to nurses in the field stations. He requested special care be taken to insure that copies were made available to nurses. He repeated his request six months later in August.

**March:** The procurement of new nurses with no previous military experience was beginning to make definite progress. The number of nurses on active duty who were receiving their officer reserve commissions was increasing daily as well.

**September:** General duty and administrative nurses in Air Force station hospitals who had been trained as flight nurses were given the opportunity of practicing their specialty in aerovac duties with the Military Air Transport Service. They replaced flight nurses who had been on duty with that organization.

## 1949

**May 12:** Secretary of Defense Louis Johnson directed the U.S. Air Force to assume responsibility for its own medical support, with the single reservation that the Army would continue to operate the general hospitals. Secretary Johnson created a Medical Service Division within the National Military Establishment (later called the Department of Defense) through which medical activities of the Army, Navy, and Air Force would be coordinated through the Joint Army and Air Force Adjustment Regulation No. 1-11-62 dated May 16, 1949.

**June 8:** Department of the Air Force General Order No. 35 established the Air Force Medical Service, its six officer corps, and the Office of the Air Force Surgeon General. Air Force Regulation 21-10 described the general principles and organization of the Air Force Medical Service.

**July 1:** An independent Air Force Medical Service was established with the Air Force Nurse Corps as an integral part. The Air Force Nurse Corps was formed by the transfer of 1,199 Army nurses, most of them already on active duty (307 regular and 892 reserve officers), working in support of the AAF. Of this total, 389 became "joint staff" in Army general hospitals. The Army hospital system continued to provide definitive care for the Air Force, and 30 per-

SATURDAY, OCTOBER 6, 2001

# WWII flight nurses gather

By KATHERINE ULLMER

Dayton Daily News

**WRIGHT-PATERSON AIR FORCE BASE** — They flew without fear. Then and now — during World War II and after the Sept. 11 World Trade Center disaster.

The 23 World War II flight nurses who flew into Dayton for their annual reunion and to dedicate a plaque Friday in the Memorial Park at the U.S. Air Force Museum to honor all World War II flight nurses, came from far and near — Maine, Florida, California, Massachusetts, and Cincinnati, among others.

Between 1942 and the end of 1944, 1,514 nurses and 907 enlisted men were trained and 18 medical air evacuation squadrons were formed, according to VerNell Bjerke, 80, of Manhattan, N.Y., president of the group, the World War II Flight Nurses Association, Inc., which numbers about 430.

Bjerke, like Agnes Flaherty, 80, of Portland, Maine, treasurer of the group, flew in the Pacific with the Army Air Corps, which later became the U.S. Air Force.

Bjerke, like Flaherty, helped care for the wounded that were air evacuated from the battlefields of Guam, Okinawa, and Iwo Jima. Though they weren't fired on, "we would see firing in the background of Okinawa," Flaherty said.

Juanita Engelbrecht, 84, of Cincinnati flew with the 807th Air Evacuation Group from North Africa up through Sicily, Italy and Germany, often picking up war prisoners along the way. Like the others, she volunteered to serve her country, because "it was what you felt you had to do," she said.

Most of the flight nurses flew on C-47s or C-54s, prop planes that didn't have heat. There were many other inconveniences.

"A nurse wasn't allowed to have any dependents, even if you supported your mother," said Edith (Brown) Rothenberg, of San Antonio, Texas, whom the others in her squadron still call "Brownie."

Rothenberg spent 25 years in the service, serving through the Korean War and the early part of the Vietnam War. She and three other members of the 806th squadron, who flew air evacuations from France to England, Jean (Foley) Tierney, of San Antonio, Joan (Denton) Jervis, of San Francisco, and Geraldine Dishroon Brier, 85, of Cheyenne, Wyo., shared memories over lunch at the museum. The four have kept in touch by phone during the years.

Flying in over enemy territory with a plane loaded with fuel created stress, and they became a sisterhood, Jervis said. "We knew each other's family. Everybody shared letters."

Their squadron was "the first to go into the Omaha beachhead on invasion day" to pick up the wounded, Brier said.

Brier, the first graduate of flight nurse school in the country, recalled flying into a British air base and being refused access to the officers' mess hall. She was told no ladies were allowed, but her pilot replied, "She's no lady. She's an officer in the U.S. Army Air Corps." The man left, only to come back and say, "you're welcome to be in the mess hall," she said.

Flight nurse training was at Bowman Field in Louisville, Ky. Since they hadn't ordered any wings for the women, when she graduated in

Feb. 1943, "Gen. David Grant took his wings off and put them on me," Brier said.

Of the 1,176,048 patients evacuated by air, only 46 died in the air, Brier said.

Bjerke was 21 when she entered the service. After her two-year tour of duty, she worked for TWA for 41 years as a flight attendant, a purser, and service manager.

"Nothing ever scares me," she said. She lives about 30 blocks from the World Trade Center, but wasn't in town Sept. 11 when terrorists flew two commercial planes into the towers.

"When I worked for TWA I was with their trauma team, but I was out of town. In a way, I'm glad, too. It's really traumatic." She walked to the site last Saturday and was amazed at the pile of rubble, she said.

Still, "I never thought to be afraid to fly," she said. "I would have gone up the next day. If you've been through the war, you don't worry about anything," Bjerke said. "If we weren't going to come back, we would have been gone a long time ago."

It was a day for remembering, and about an hour before the flight nurses dedicated their plaque, a somewhat larger group from the 380th Bombing Group, which flew in the southwest Pacific during WWII, met to re-dedicate its memorial plaque in the park.

Former Speaker of the U.S. House ('87-'89), Jim Wright, 78, of Fort Worth, Texas, a bombardier with the group, and his former crew member, Delmar (Curly) V. Sprouts, 87, of Olathe, Kansas, a gunner target specialist, were among those present.

BOARD OF DIRECTORS  
Elected in Louisville



Standing: Jean Foley Tierney, Ct.; Irene Burch, Fl.; Liberty Sakryd, Fl., Membership Chair; Gerry Dishroon Brier, Wy., Treasurer; Ethel Cerasale, Fl., Past Pres., Agnes Flaherty, Me., Secretary; VerNell Bjerke, N.Y.;  
Seated: Frances Crabtree, Wa., 1st V.P.; Jane Haynes, Fl., Pres.

The Board met at the home of the President on Sept. 23, 1992.

Decisions made were:

- . Dorothy Errair was authorized to sign checks as a 2nd signature.
- .. Life membership was reaffirmed and clarified. It is available to all members 65 yrs. of age and over for \$50.00.
- ... Voted to send the next Newsletter to all persons listed in the roster. Membership envelopes, which will include renewal and dues requirements, will also be sent.

Reimbursement of Board Members: It was voted to reimburse 50% of the cost of travel and hotel (2 days) to those Board members who wished to be reimbursed for the next Board meeting only.

The Board will meet in San Diego the first week in March 1993.



**Diversity in Age,  
Unity in Purpose**

