



BOWMAN FIELD DEDICATION SPEECH BY
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Greetings and acknowledgements:

It is indeed an honor and privilege to be with you today as you dedicate a marker to commemorate the World War II Bowman Field Air Base and the 50th Anniversary of the School of Air Evacuation.

When I graduated from Flight School 18 years ago, little did I realize that the specialty that I was entering had such a rich and meaningful heritage. However, three flying assignments, extensive research and reading, and communication with past, current, and future aircrews, flight nurses and medical technicians have enriched my knowledge of our proud heritage. And now, to further complete the events of the 1940's, I can add this visit to Bowman Field to that knowledge.

Construction and ground work were begun in 1940, and eventually encompassed 124 buildings and one large hangar. Initial training was conducted for bomber crews; but in 1942, the First Troop Carrier Command was assigned to Bowman Field, and remained there until 1944. Additional training was conducted for combat glider pilots and members of the Army Air Force Band. In late 1942, a group of 2 officers and 138 enlisted men reported to Bowman Field and little did they know that they were about to create what would become two career fields in the military, a program that would endure for 50 years, and a specialty in nursing that would encompass both the military and civilian sectors.

The School of Air Evacuation opened in October 1942 and was dedicated toward teaching skills necessary in caring for the sick and wounded in the airborne environment. The first two groups to report to the school for training became the "guinea pigs" in the development of the formal program. These two groups laid the foundation for all classes which would follow at Bowman Field until 1944, when it was moved to San Antonio, Texas and at two other locations where it would continue to educate nurses and technicians in the care of patients in the airborne environment. The members of the 801st and the 802nd Medical Air Evacuation Squadrons did not have a formal graduation as their expertise was needed in the European and the Pacific Theatres of War. The first formal graduation was held in February 1943.

Between 1942 and the end of 1944, 1,514 nurses and 907 enlisted men were educated and trained, 18 medical air evacuation squadrons were formed, and a minimum of five different aircraft were utilized in the transport of over 1,172,000 sick and wounded soldiers. Though the school was officially recognized by the Army in June 1943, the ground commanders would not concede on its significance until the end of the Korean War in 1953.

Flight nurses and aeromedical evacuation technicians have been providing inflight care to the sick and wounded in a variety of aircraft ever since. Whether during periods of conflict or peace, they have been there to ensure that patients received the best care possible while enroute from the battlefield area or hospital to a definitive care facility.

The School of Air Evacuation has been located at Bowman Field, Kentucky (1942-1944), Randolph Field, Texas (1944-1949), Gunter Air Force Base, Alabama (1949-1959), and Brooks Air Force Base, (1959-Present). To date over 11,500 nurses and 7,500 medical technicians have been trained in the specialty of flight nursing.

They have served in active duty and reserve components worldwide. During the most recent conflict, Desert Storm, they demonstrated the Total Force concept with integrated medical crews providing patient care on three different aircraft in the Theatre of Operations, Europe and the United States.

Flight nurses and aeromedical evacuation technicians have also given the ultimate sacrifice in the performance of their duties. Seventeen nurses and thirteen enlisted men were killed during WWII. Three flight nurses were killed during the Korean conflict. No nurses or aeromedical evacuation technicians were killed as a result of combat activities during the Vietnam Conflict. However, one flight nurse and two aeromedical evacuation technicians were killed in a C-5 aircraft disaster during operations Babylift in 1974. No flight nurses or aeromedical technicians were killed during operations Just Cause and Desert Storm. In addition, one flight nurse was a prisoner of war during WWII, and thirteen flight nurses and thirteen medical technicians utilized their survival skills during a four month period after crash landing in hostile territory during WWII.

It was here at Bowman that the first international students came to learn about flight nursing and aeromedical evacuation. Canada and Brazil were the first two nations to participate in our program. In the last 50 years, over seventeen nations have sent students to the School of Air Evacuation. Canada, the Phillipines, Greece, and Australia have developed similar schools, yet continue to send their students to ours.

It was here that the US Navy sent their nurses to train, and to this day they still participate in the program.

Historically, the Army Air Corps was responsible for the School of Air Evacuation. My service, the United States Air Force, became responsible for the program in the late 1940's; and since that time, no Army nurses have graduated as flight nurses. However, I am pleased to inform you that beginning in October 1992, US Army nurses will once again attend the school, and they are ready to join the tradition which was begun here at Bowman Field.

It is fitting that we are here today at Bowman Field. Like many places, its real significance in history has been surpassed by the progress of time, and yet before me I see the dedicated men and women who came here to train so that they could help transport men, equipment and arms to win a war for the world, to play music which would provide a moment of respite for our men and women at war, and to provide the gentle caring laying on of hands often accompanied by warm words and a tender smile for those wounded and sick men and women being airlifted for further treatment.

Take a moment and if you listen with your hearts you can still hear the roar of the aircraft engines, the opening of C-rations cans, the beat of marching feet, and the laughter and camaraderie of those who spent a part of their lives here at Bowman Field.

The legacy and spirit of America which you left behind lives on. We see it in your presence here, in the men and women of the United States Armed Forces, and in the School of Air Evacuation, as it is today, as we carry on your proud traditions of service, camaraderie, and caring.

Party Girl Gertrude (Berlings) Smith, 800th.

