

# Former nurse honored as Woman of the Year

By **JIM MOAD**

Daily Commercial Staff Writer

## WILDWOOD

In recognition of her selfless devotion in answering the call to duty in both war and peace, a Continental Country Club woman was honored recently by the Resident Ladies Club.

Harriet Thomas, awarded the Air Medal for her heroic service as an Army Air Corps nurse during World War II, was named Woman of the Year.

Co-recipient Ruth Zimmer lauded Thomas as more deserving of the title "Woman of the Century."

Zimmer, a local author and columnist, wrote a newspaper column a few years ago about "Women in Wars." In it she spoke of the significant role women have performed in serving their country.

"Harriet was a flying evacuation nurse," said Zimmer, who was recognized by the club for her extensive service within the gates of the adult community and beyond. Flight nurses seldom

uation of many thousands of wounded. Thomas was one of the few, Zimmer said.

Club member Lillian Schauseil calls Thomas the Florence Nightingale of the community. "Every Wednesday she's up at the clubhouse checking blood pressures as the 18-Hole Men come in from the course. She checks everyone's

pressure. She also answers calls during the night, too. She's a wonderful person. She's very involved with everyone's health," Schauseil said.

Florence Nightingale was the founder



Thomas

of the nursing profession as it is known today. British soldiers, wounded in the Crimean War, called her the "lady with the lamp" when she walked the halls of their hospital at night.

Wounded Australian soldiers returning from the North African

## NURSE

Continued from A1

Campaign, those who had fought against German Gen. Erwin Rommel's tanks, appreciated Thomas in the same tradition.

In accepting the club's award, Thomas told the story of how wounded Australian "Rats of Tobruk" had been withdrawn to New Guinea for medical treatment.

With a fighter escort overhead, Thomas's evacuation plane, a C-47, landed to pick up all the soldiers.

Thomas recalled one particular man lying in an aisle with a busted-up arm. Dirty, dehydrated, and emaciated, the man wouldn't look at her.

He hadn't seen a Yankee woman in more than eight months," Thomas said. "Finally, he told me that the reason he would not face me was because he had no breath. He was more concerned with my feelings than his own."

"That's what caring is all about," Thomas said.

As a tribute to 1st Lt. Thomas, the "Aussies" changed the words of their traditional song, "Waltzing Matilda," to "Waltzing with Thomas."

Thomas earned her Air Medal



Courtesy photo

**Harriet Thomas was a flying evacuation nurse during World War II. She received the Air Medal from the Army Air Corps for her distinguished service.**

for combat flying above and beyond the required 100 hours in the Southwest Pacific between 1943 and 1945.

Club member Marge Lange said Thomas was instrumental in starting Caregivers, a volunteer group that brings food to shut-ins, drives people to appointments, and relieves caregivers, so they may have a break.

"Harriet has been active on the Hurricane Safety Committee, by giving help to those who require attention," Lange said. "She also helped to get the Weather Radios

we have in the community. Two years ago when there was an alert, Harriet gathered people up at the clubhouse and gave oxygen when needed. She stayed there all night."

Raye Guardado, the club's president, said the recognition of Thomas is "long and well deserved."

"She is the most dynamic woman I have had the pleasure to know," Guardado said. "Ruth (Zimmer) and Harriet are role models for the younger generation."



Lieutenant Harriet Thomas,  
Air Medal recipient from General Kenney

Late in 1942 I found myself en route to the northern coast of New Guinea to pick up eighteen Australian lads who had quite recently been known as the "Desert Rats" so named by the Americans in North Africa for their exemplary courage in fighting Rummell. When I met them they were dirty, exhausted, and very quiet.

Air-borne, I approached the lad nearest the cockpit who was staring out the window. I gave him my name and told him that I needed to re-splint his arm. No response, just the continued staring out the window. I asked him if he had something against yankee nurses, to which he replied "I have not seen a white woman for nine months and I think I have bad breath". With my hands I turned his head to face me. "What you have done in this horror has made it possible for me to come and start you on your way home". Visibly relaxing, he said "Thanks, Yank". When I turned to the lad across the fuselage, he said "I heard what you said to Dougie. Thanks Yank". And so it went as I worked my way aft. Reaching Pt. Moresby we got them unloaded and waiting for transport to the field hospital.

After re-checking the aircraft, I appeared in the door to be met by a chorus of eighteen voices raised in song—"Waltzing with Thomas, waltzing with Thomas, we'll go a-waltzing Thomas with you".

A bright gold thread in the tapestry of my life.

HARRIET E. THOMAS  
804<sup>th</sup> Air Evacuation Squadron  
US Air force

May 30, 2005