

Merle Heintzman pioneered female military service

A Scugog woman remembers her Christmas at war

By Heather McCrae
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As Christmas approaches this weekend, Merle Heintzman's thoughts are of the thousands of soldiers serving in war-torn countries who won't make it home to celebrate with loved ones this year.

She knows first-hand what it's like to be stationed overseas, during the Christmas season.

For this local resident it was Christmas of 1944, and the first time she didn't make it home for Christmas.

That's because she was serving overseas in the U.S. Army Air Force as a flight nurse with the 814th U.S. Medical Air Evacuation Squadron.

Nursing was one of the only avenues open to women in the service then.

"I missed coming home. That's when you really think about your family, when you're not able to celebrate with everyone else," Mrs. Heintzman said.

Born in Ohio, Mrs. Heintzman, age 85, owns the Landfall Farm Bed and Breakfast operation on Hwy. 7A, between Port Perry and Blackstock, as well as "The Front Room Antiques and Collectibles", volunteered to serve in the U.S. Army Air Force in 1943, soon after graduating from nursing school.

Initially working in an air force base hospital, she and 23 other flight nurses were trained in air evacuation before being shipped overseas in the R.M.S. Queen Elizabeth, then a troop ship, in February, 1944.

After landing overseas, and up until the landings on D-Day, Mrs. Heintzman and her colleagues had ample time to work at a U.S. bomber base, as well as at a hospital in England, and even flew a couple of transatlantic trips with patients.

"Our prime mission was to be available for duty in and around D-Day, to go in behind the lines to pick up the wounded, as well as supply missions (emergency supplies and landing strips) in unarmed and unarmoured C-47s."

Each flight, which carried a medic and a flight nurse, had a double duty... to fly in with supplies... and then fly out with the wounded infantry."

Each plane would carry 24 litters (stretchers) at a time.

The flight nurses in the 814th Air Evacuation Squadron all lived together in Nissen huts and had similar schedules.

Their flights gradually got longer as they followed the Allied advance deeper into Europe.

All throughout her service Mrs. Heintzman said she never experienced strafing, "however, we had to keep advancing with the troops all across France, and into Belgium, to pick up the wounded."

The scariest moment Mrs. Heintzman can recall is when Major General George S. Patton's army tanks stalled when his tanks ran out of gas during the Battle of the Bulge.

At that time supply planes had to transport gas in

five-gallon cans.

"In the C-47s there were no seats for passengers, just accommodations for the pilot and co-pilot, so we had to sit on those cans of gasoline when we were flying into a combat zone," she said. "It was a bit unnerving, to say the least."

There was only one landing strip, too, and no control tower, and, always, there would be three planes coming in to land at the same time. Of course, two would have to give way for the other plane to land safely.

"A colleague did see two planes crash and refused to fly again and, consequently, was sent home."

Mrs. Heintzman recalled that first Christmas she never got home.

"We changed out of our uniforms and wore party dresses that we all had smuggled over, and had a party at our quarters" she said.

The tree had no commercial decorations. Instead, all were made from strips of silver packing materials, paper chains and pinecones.

Because there were no festive lights, a friend from the control tower contributed red and green floodlights for the Christmas tree.

Then, to add to the festivities, they served up champagne that had been picked up in Riems, France, in early September.

"The area had just been liberated by the troops and we got some champagne, saving it for Christmas."

"We missed being away from home, but we were all in the same boat, and had the camaraderie of each other, which was good," she said.

"And there were letters to read, from home, and gifts to open, too."

The party didn't last long. A week later, on New Year's Day, the members of the 814th U.S. Medical Air Evacuation Squadron brought back a load of wounded soldiers that were strafed on Christmas Day.

After arriving home in the U.S. in the fall of 1945, Mrs. Heintzman worked for three major airlines.

In 1962 she came to Canada and five years later became a Canadian citizen.

She has many letters and medals from her courageous stint in the air force.

In a letter from the U.S. Army Air Force, it reads, in part, "these individuals served with distinction on difficult and dangerous air evacuation missions."

"Charged with the responsibility of ministering to wounded personnel being evacuated by air from combat zones to rear areas, they exhibited a high degree of courage, technical proficiency and devotion to duty. Their achievements were exemplary of the finest traditions of the armed forces of the U.S."

Among her many medals are the ETO medal (European Theatre of Operation) with three battle stars that represent the campaigns in France, Belgium and Germany.



Merle Heintzman, who owns Landfall Farm Bed & Breakfast on Hwy. 7A, near Blackstock, served as a flight nurse with the 814th U.S. Medical Air Evacuation Squadron, in and around D-Day (June 6, 1944), a critical time of the war. That year, for the first time, she didn't make it home for Christmas, and now recounts what life was like as a flight nurse doing active duty during World War II. She often thinks about the thousands of men and women in the military who won't make it home this year, to share Christmas with loved ones.

A wounded German POW also gave Mrs. Heintzman his Iron Cross, a high medal of distinction, which he had received in 1939.

And, an injured German pilot gave the flight nurse his flight wings.

"We started our evacuation missions shortly after D-Day, which was a critical time of the war," she said.

Mrs. Heintzman is unsure how many women of the 814th U.S. Medical Air Evacuation Squadron are still living, however she continues to keep in touch with three colleagues every Christmas.

"I'm very proud that I served as a flight nurse during World War II. It was at the time before the Womens' Army Corps was founded," she said.