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# WWII flight nurses gather

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**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.