



HISTORY REVISITED: World War II flight nurses from left, Liberty Sakryd, Ethel Cerasale and Memrie Wilkes look over a World War II uniform jacket with an Air Borne Troop Carrier patch. All are members of the World War II Flight Nurses Association Inc., a group that will be holding a convention at the Melbourne Airport Hilton at Rialto Place this week.

JAY MORSE, The Times

Flight nurses share tales from WW II

By WEONA CLEVELAND
Times Writer

There were approximately 1,331 of them who served in World War II — little known, hardly recognized, with barely any glory or fame.

For the most part, they wore skirts because pants for women were still a novelty. Their flight pay was anywhere from \$50 to \$75 a month. None held officer rank.

"We had a 'relative rank,'" says Memrie Wilkes of Melbourne. "We were referred to as second lieutenants."

During the next four days (May 17-20), about 200 veterans who belong to the World War II Flight Nurses Association Inc. will meet in an annual convention at the Melbourne Airport Hilton. The organization has 333 paid up members. Ethel Cerasale of Satellite Beach is the national president.

Cerasale was Ethel Carlson in those earlier days: a registered nurse in Chicago when the United States entered World War II. She enlisted through the American Red Cross to go into the Air Ambulance Corps. She was sent to Bowman Field in Kentucky to the School of Air Evacuation.

"We marched, went on bivouac, read maps, took an infiltration course and learned how to take care of patients in the air," she says.

After six weeks, the graduates were sent to Scotland on the ocean liner Ile de France. "I was in a stateroom that had once been occupied by Marlene Dietrich," recalls Cerasale. "Only there were 24 of us packed into that stateroom. We

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From Scotland the nurses were sent by troop train to England. Fully expecting to live in tents, they were amazed when their bus from the railroad station pulled into the driveway of Boxford House, a beautiful mansion four miles from Welford Air Base.

While their base accommodations may have been relatively plush, Cerasale and her fellow nurses found that their on-duty hours were rugged. After taking care of the wounded who were brought to a B-17 bomber base in England, they were later assigned to fly aboard C-47 cargo planes from England to France. Eastbound the planes carried hand grenades and cans of gasoline for General George Patton's tanks. On the westbound trip they brought out 24 litter patients.

"On my first trip we brought back wounded German prisoners," remembers Cerasale. "I was almost angry. But I later learned they were high-ranking Germans who were being brought to England for interrogation."

Each trip lasted one to two hours, with the aircraft flying "at almost tree-top level to avoid detection," says Cerasale. She made 12 missions, remained in the service for five years, and earned the American Theater ribbon, European Theater Operations ribbon with three battle stars, and the Victory Medal. Cerasale later served in Panama.

Liberty Lee Sakryd — named for the Liberty bonds of World War I — also was from Chicago. She was a registered nurse doing private duty when she signed up for service in December 1941. Letterman General Hospital in San Francisco was her first assignment in March 1942. She didn't make it to Bowman Field in Kentucky until June of 1943. She was there for six months, getting the usual training plus an extensive course in tropical diseases.

By December 1943, she was at Hickam Field, Hawaii, with the 812th Evacuation Squadron.

Flying in unmarked C-54 cargo planes, Sakryd saw service all over the South Pacific, including Saipan, the Philippines, Okinawa, Guadalcanal, Kwajalein, New Guinea and

Tarawa.

She often went into newly secured airfields and once had a close call on the ground at Okinawa. "We got word Japanese planes were coming in to bomb the place. We finished loading (the plane) and got out of there in a hurry."

During her two years in the South Pacific, Sakryd, with other nurses, served at a base on Guadalcanal at Gen. Douglas MacArthur's request, helped transport 3,000 wounded from Kwajalein in a gradual evacuation, and once learned that a rumor had floated about that she had been killed in New Guinea. "Fortunately, I had just got out of that New Guinea base before an air raid," she says.

Her most exciting mission was out of Tarawa on a C-54, the Melbourne resident says.

"Four hours out the two left engines quit, and the two right engines began sputtering. Our pilot told us to prepare for ditching," recalls Sakryd, who never learned to swim. "But we got back to Tarawa safely, where we later learned the fuel had been sabotaged."

Wilkes had been a registered nurse in Vicksburg, Miss., when the United States entered World War II. She enlisted in Texarkana, Texas, where she had been working in a defense plant hospital. It was with great difficulty that she received a release from the defense plant to enter the service.

Sent first to Lackland AFB in San Antonio, Texas, Wilkes was then sent to Bowman Field for Air Evacuation School. "I was in the last class to graduate from Bowman," she remembers. "I

recall that once we had to pass in review before Eleanor Roosevelt."

Wilkes remembers that during training at Bowman a mock bombardment was enacted. "They bombarded with flour and if we were hit by the flour we got a demerit and a ride back in the ambulance."

After Bowman, Wilkes was assigned to Memphis, Tenn., where she helped evacuate patients who had been brought from overseas. "We took them to other hospitals around the country."

She saw service in Hawaii, Manila, Guam and San Francisco and flew C-54s around the Pacific on long, tiring flights. Her most memorable experience was "taking the boys who had been on the Bataan Death March out of Manila to Hawaii."

Wilkes says that most C-54s carried just one nurse and two technicians. Among their duties: irrigating colostomies, giving plasma, changing dressings on wounds.

Wilkes got out of the Army when World War II ended, but returned to the service in 1950, joining the U.S. Air Force. She retired in 1968. During peacetime she saw service in Europe.

This weekend, Cerasale, Sakryd and Wilkes will have a chance to reminisce with other air evacuation nurses and to participate in a luncheon meeting with Air Force Gen. Wilma Vaught.

Vaught will discuss the memorial monument that is planned for the entrance to Arlington National Cemetery. The monument will honor all women who served in the military in World War II.