

er Medal

hia Nurse Getting Air Medal



Rita Marie Dowd

Pacific division, on Coulter, chief of staff of the Pacific division, presented the award to Lieutenant Dowd at the Air Force Hospital, Fort Ord, California. Lieutenant Dowd is currently assigned to the 2618 Swain st., in Oahu, Hawaii. A former General Hospital nurse, Lieutenant Dowd was awarded the Air Medal for meritorious service during repeated, long over-seas duty, during which she cared for wounded men.



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Rita Marie Theresa Dowd Smart -

Monday, July 3rd, 2000 we lost another eye witness to history. Rita Marie Theresa Dowd Smart, born August 26, 1919, died seven weeks short of her 81st birthday after a short but intense bout with terminal colon cancer. This is her story.

High battlefield casualty mortality rates were a significant consideration at the outset of World War II. In early 1943, the United States Army Air Force "Air Transport Command" began air lifting wounded directly from the front lines of North Africa to rear area Station Hospitals. Eventually this program spread to every Theater of the War. This single program was credited with a major reduction in the high mortality rate among battle casualties that was a consequence of modern warfare. "Flight Nurses" -- specially trained and qualified women with professional nursing backgrounds and in peak physical condition -- provided enroute medical care and attention to as many as twenty-five casualties per plane load. They not only made this program possible -- they made it successful. Of the 1,176,048 patients air evacuated throughout the war, just 46 died in transit -- a tribute to the outstanding nursing skill and patient care demonstrated by this elite band of sisters.

From the inception of the program until the end of the Second World War, only 500 women were trained and qualified as Flight Nurses. Rita (Dowd) Smart was one of these exceptional women.

Rita, a Philly girl through and through, was raised on Swain Street, just a

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few blocks from the Art Museum. She graduated from Hallahan Catholic Girls High School in 1937. In 1939, she entered the nursing program at Philadelphia General Hospital. She completed her training and earned her nurses cap in early 1942. As a newly minted R.N., she served as a surgical ward nurse at Fitzgerald Mercy Hospital and later as a charge nurse caring for tuberculosis patients at Philadelphia General. She entered the Army Nurse Corps in February 1943.

Rita's initial duty station was Coral Gables, Florida. The Air Transport Command's burgeoning medical air evacuation mission required rear area Station Hospitals, where wounded could receive intensive care and treatment. Rita was part of the team that established the Headquarters, A.A.F. Regional Station Hospital in Coral Gables. She eventually supervised several other nurses and a number of Corpsmen at that facility. General Henry "Hap" Arnold -- a native Pennsylvanian and a strong proponent of the Air Evacuation mission -- visited the facility on its completion. Rita -- also a Pennsylvanian -- was appointed hostess for that visit. Arnold invited her to join him for dinner that evening. We don't know how the conversation went, but seven months later, at the age of 23, Second Lieutenant Rita Dowd reported to Bowman Field, Kentucky to begin her training as a Flight Nurse.

A qualified air evacuation nurse was trained in crash procedures, field survival in ocean, jungle, desert and arctic environments and the effects of high altitude on various types of patients. A rigorous physical training regimen insured graduates of the program were in peak physical condition. Rita, all of 5' 4" and 112 pounds, successfully completed the training on

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September 23rd, 1944. Five days later she received her "birthday present" -- written up in typical military jargon:

Medical Section, Air Transport Command, Pacific Division 1503d AAF BU, Port of Aerial Embarkation, Hamilton Field, CA: certifies "Dowd, Rita Marie, 2nd Lt. ANC" as qualified for overseas duty.

She was on her way to join the 500 Army Flight Nurses who served as members of 31 medical air evacuation transport squadrons operating worldwide.

As a Flight Nurse assigned to the 828th Medical Air Evacuation Squadron (MAES) in the Asiatic-Pacific Theater of War, Rita island-hopped with planeloads of wounded battle casualties from places like New Caledonia, New Guinea, New Hebrides, and the Northern Solomons. Later, when the 828th was consolidated with the 830th MAES, she routinely flew from Hawaii to the Marianas, Manila, Luzon, and Okinawa evacuating wounded G.I.'s. She spent six weeks on Guadalcanal assisting with pre-evacuation patient preparation.

Usually only one nurse and one medical corpsman were assigned to a flight. A typical military transport plane of the era could hold up to twenty-five patients. During the flight Rita would check the pulse, respiration and bleeding of her patients. She would also adjust and apply bandages and dressings, relieve pain, administer oxygen and care for those who were airsick or suffering from "battle fatigue". The transport planes -- C-46s, C-47s and C-54's -- used in patient evacuations doubled as cargo planes, so they could not display the markings of the Geneva Red Cross to protect them from enemy fire. As a result, Flight Nurses, like

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Rita, were at greater risk from enemy aircraft attack and anti-aircraft fire than their land-based counterparts. Seventeen flight nurses were killed in action during the war.

In March of 1945, some of Rita's front line experiences and observations, described in a letter home, were quoted in a local newspaper article. Recently promoted First Lieutenant Dowd wrote:

"In evacuating the wounded by air from the Philippines, the flights sometimes take 20 hours or more. During that time we pass out soup, coffee, sandwiches and chewing gum, but what we urgently need are magazines for the boys to read enroute. If you could get the neighbors to collect magazines and forward them to me the wounded would greatly appreciate them. The G.I.'s especially like 'Look', 'Pic', 'American', 'Yank' and 'Readers Digest'. Even if the magazines are two or three years old these magazines are greatly appreciated as they are a link with civilization and that's what the boys need most."

"One day while I was changing one of the fellow's dressings he said to me: 'Nurse, do you mind if I touch your hair just once? It has been so long since I've seen an American girl I sort of forget what it's like to touch one or talk to one.'"

"It's things like that which sort of leave you all choked up inside and at a loss for words."

Nurse Dowd has nothing but praise for the wounded she helps evacuate. "These G.I.'s can't be beat. They always have a smile and a joke. I would not change my present job with anybody. It really makes me feel my efforts are not in vain."

Flight Nurses went where the casualties were. In another letter home, Rita wrote that she was the 10th nurse to land on Okinawa on D-Day plus 12 while terrific shelling and fires were raging. She described this

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experience in a letter dated April 23, 1945:

My flight to Okinawa Isle in the Ryukyu Group -- off the East China Sea not too far from Tokyo -- was a memorable experience. We had been sent to Guam and were lucky enough to be there on "D" day which was April 1, 1945. We started sending ships in on the 6th -- two a day. I started out on the 10th of April and was the tenth nurse to go. We went in the order our names were on the roster. It took us seven hours and twenty minutes to get there.

As we neared the island one could see an occasional ship or two on the water leaving a white foaming trail of water behind them. We dropped about 6000 feet and flew around 3000 feet as we approached our destination. This was a safety measure because then our ships could easily identify us and not mistake our plane for a 'Zero.'

As we came nearer to the island we saw millions of ships in the harbor. All kinds -- Carriers, LST's, Cruisers and so on. Must have been five or six hundred. Looked like the entire fleet was out. It was a beautiful sight. There we were, high up above the sea and the islands -- deep blue sea everywhere with a sort of turquoise color of shallows around each little island. All the ships in the harbor like toys in a bathtub. Some of them were firing on the island, on the opposite side to where the air strip was.

The island itself is pretty big. As we flew over it you could make out the half moon shape tombs where the Japs bury the remains of their sacred dead. Roads were clearly visible and a truck or two could be seen rolling along.

When we landed there were Majors, Colonels, Captains and a one star General on the ground waiting for us. Everyone pitched in and helped unload the water storage tank that we flew in. They had been shelled during the night and early that morning and were expecting another siege very shortly so we were told we had to 'get the hell out as quickly as we could.'

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Everyone looked very tired and weary. They carried the litters onto the plane and even the General was helping to secure the litters and so on. We were unloaded and patients on board and in the air in an hour's time. That is plenty fast. Some of the fellows had been hurt the day before -- some that morning -- and they were tuckered out. We had twenty-three litter patients.

After we were an hour out we made hot soup and passed out sandwiches and coffee which they devoured in no time flat. Some of them hadn't eaten in two days -- hadn't slept for some time and were exhausted. We changed dressings and washed faces as best we could what with our limited supplies and gave plenty of morphine. They slept almost the entire time. The pathetic part of all of this is they seemed so young. A few of them were telling the Tech and myself that the fighting was just beginning. The Japs had retreated to the hills when we first hit the island allowing them some leeway. Then as they advanced inland the Japs commenced to sneak out of their caves and really give 'em the works. The artillery fire was the worst they'd ever encountered. And it was growing more so day by day. Just to see these fellows so grateful for the smallest kindness -- eating with relish the ol' dried up spam sandwiches, drinking black coffee, relaxing on the hard litters -- never once complaining -- never demanding -- it actually made my heart ache. I can truthfully say I've never worked so hard and never felt so satisfied with my job as I did when we finally reached Guam and our mission was completed.

Two days later I started out for Oahu and had a plane-load of fellows from Okinawa. They were amazed at the speed with which they were picked up by our planes and whisked away from the scene of battle. Could hardly believe they were on their way to Oahu and the fighting all behind them. Some of them will, no doubt, go back when they have recuperated but, for now, they were only too grateful to get to Hawaii.

In a single sixty day period from May 1st to June 30th 1945, the Flight Nurses and flight crews of the 830th MAES evacuated 56,453 patients from forward combat areas, logging nearly 166 MILLION patient miles.

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And this was done in small, cramped military transports, twenty to twenty-five patients at a time.

Still later, she reported that she was on Saipan on V-J Day. She was also among the first Flight Nurses to transport American POWs from Japan to Manila.

By age 26, she was the recipient of the Meritorious Medal for "outstanding non-combat meritorious achievement or service to the United States"; the Air Medal for "heroic actions or meritorious service while participating in aerial flight"; and the American Campaign Medal with 6 battle stars.

There was another side to Rita during all this. She was a talented vocalist and musician who had enjoyed and been encouraged in her singing, piano and dramatic talents from an early age. While stationed in Coral Gables she frequently sang with the Coral Gables Country Club Band and often toured service hospitals in the Miami Beach area with a Special Service Unit. After her transfer to the Pacific Theater, when on a rear area stand-down, she'd often be invited to sing with the USO troupe that might be in the area. On one occasion, she transported Jack Benny and his troupe to a forward area. She shared a hut with Carol Landis and Martha Tilton, famous entertainers of the time. When they learned Rita could sing, she was invited to sing with the band the following day.

Rita picked up a Martin ukulele in Hawaii, and took it all over the Pacific with her. Sometimes she'd sing to the patients. Othertimes, she might be invited to join a USO troupe for an evening, to sing for the GI's. On one

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occasion, she managed to put together an "evening dress" from discarded parachute silk to add a touch of glamour to the entertainment. When the MC told this to the troops, one wag yelled out, "Where's the rip cord!"

After demobilization at the war's end, Rita returned to Philadelphia. She met and married Henry Smart, of Fairmont -- a Marine Colonel and a decorated hero of World War II. Together, Rita and Henry raised seven children while assigned to various duty stations in Hawaii, California, Virginia, Pennsylvania and Washington, D.C. Henry died November 6, 1993. He is interred in Arlington National Cemetery. Rita will join him there July 17th, in a ceremony with full military honors as befits one of "the five hundred."

Rita was a charter member of the Women In Military Service to America memorial society (www.womensmemorial.org)

Rita is survived by her sons Kevin, Brian and John, and daughters Karen, Claire, Rita and Suzanne. She had twelve grandchildren. And, as she said shortly before she died, she had lived a rich and full life. "I've got no regrets. I'm ready."