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LIFESTYLE

Sun-Sentinel, Thursday, November 11, 1993 Section E
FN.

A woman remembers war WWII flight nurse says it's 'about time' for memorial

By MARGO HARAKAS
Staff Writer



Lewis

World War II flight nurse Edith Mize Lewis saw first-hand the horrors of war: men with limbs ripped away, minds shattered, bodies seared in cocoon-turned-inferno tanks.

No wonder she suppresses the details. "I know I black things out," she says. "I don't want to re-live the war."

It's enough to say, important even half a century later to assert out loud, "I never lost anybody in

my care."

That reality, part luck perhaps, is more dear to her than the Air Medal earned for 50-plus missions, or the four battle stars.

In 1985 in a special issue of *Life* magazine devoted to World War II, Lewis and her war album filled a full page.

"It was about time," the Boca Raton woman says, that military nurses were accorded recognition. Just as it's fitting, right and overdue, she says, that today in the nation's capital a memorial is to be formally unveiled to honor women who served in Vietnam. It

is the first national memorial to America's military women.

"We didn't have to go, you know? We were all volunteers."

Lewis was 23, a lieutenant in the 816th Medical Air Evacuation Squadron of the 9th Air Force, when she landed overseas in 1944.

"I wanted to be an airline hostess," she says, throwing the conversation into reverse. "And in those days, you had to be a registered nurse."

She took her nurse's training in her hometown of Gary, Ind., and upon graduation realized a far more vital mission lay ahead.

She joined up and waited for her first assignment. It came quickly enough. March 1943, she arrived at the Boca Raton Air Station Hospital (where Florida Atlantic University now sits).

"What I really wanted was to be a flight nurse," she says. So while in uniform serving at a base hospital, she fired off a letter to Washington, D.C., detailing her qualifications. "I didn't know I wasn't supposed to do that," she says.

She was disappointed with the seemingly unenthusiastic response, a letter saying her name would be added to the waiting list. But two weeks later she was ordered to Bowman Field in Louisville, Ky., for



Photo from 1944 shows flight nurse Edith Mize Lewis during the war in Europe.

PLEASE SEE LEWIS /7E



Edith Lewis, left, with two compatriots as they leave Camp Kilmer, N.J., for the trip overseas.

FROM PAGE 1E

Ex-flight nurse recalls her tour in World War II

flight nurse training.

January 1944, she graduated. A month later she was married to an officer she met in Boca, and within days she was kissing her husband farewell. She was shipping out, first to Grenham Commons, England, then Prestwick, Scotland, and finally France.

Her job was to tend to the sick and injured as they were airlifted, 24 at a time, to hospitals in England, Scotland, and occasionally the United States.

Her patients were strapped into bunks built into the sides of C54s and C47s, cargo planes. The latter she describes as "put together with glue."

"We had no air coverage, no red cross [painted] on the plane," she says. Nothing to identify the flights as medical missions. There was always the fear "you'd be shot at," she says. Yet, through luck or circumstance, her planes never drew ground or aerial fire.

"You saw all kinds of medical problems. Wounds, hepatitis, ulcers and psychoneurotics," she says. "The psychoneurotics would be heavily sedated."

"I watched them all closely. I'd change their bandages, make them comfortable. I'd see that they had food and water."

Some, she recalls, refused to talk.

Others sought only the solace of sleep.

For a few brief hours, she was all the battle-weary warriors had. A Florence Nightingale of the clouds, hopping from one landing strip to another.

Six days after D-Day she was in Normandy, airlifting the wounded out.

She either won't or can't summon from the psyche the darker images. Only in an unguarded moment does she mention the collision over one of her bases. Two planes were returning from a bombing mission.

"They were friends of mine," she says.

The next day, wanting to ride out to the countryside, she went to retrieve her bicycle from a nearby building. As she stepped through the door, she was confronted by the bodies of the crash victims, laid out on the floor.

"I had a cat," she says, quickly changing the subject. Seems the house she was staying in was infested with mice. So one morning, she grabbed her perfume and cigarettes, bicycled up the road to a farmhouse and bartered for a cat.

After the war, the cat returned to the States with Lewis and became a family hero of sorts.

"My sister Doris had fallen asleep with a cigarette," Lewis says. As the bed began to smolder, the cat leaped on top of Doris, awakening her and averting tragedy.

Edith Mize Lewis

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Lewis with her French friend Henri. She found him, hungry and ragged, sitting on a curb in a bombed out village.

“He looked at me . . . with eyes too big for his face. He was thin from lack of food. Perhaps he was 10 . . . he didn’t say,” she writes. “I wanted to make him smile and laugh, but I could not. There was nothing to laugh about.”

— Edith Lewis

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“Henri,” Lewis says. She insists now on talking about the French boy who periodically muscles his way into her thoughts. “I’ve written this story about him that I’m trying to get published,” she says, digging through her files to retrieve his picture and her story. For the past 20 years, Lewis has been writing articles, poetry and children’s literature.

“War is awful. Some day it will be over and you will be safe again. There will be no bombs. People will rebuild . . . You and your family will be happy again.”

A far-off drone halted the conversation. It built to a roar as the sky darkened with planes.

“Don’t be frightened,” Lewis told the boy. “They are friendly to us.”

Henri sat there brave and silent.

As Lewis got up to leave, she said to the boy, “. . . some day you will tell your children about this war and they will ask you many questions. What will you tell them?”

“I will tell them that war is bad,” Henri said. “I hope they will never live like I live now. I hope they will not be hungry. And they will live in nice houses and there will be no bombs.”

Years later, Lewis says, “I’ve always wondered what happened to him and his sister and his mother.”

Lewis was in Paris on V-E day (Victory in Europe), May 8, 1945. But she didn’t dance in the streets or party in the sidewalk cafes. “I did nothing. I was too tired,” she says.

The day before, when the unconditional surrender was actually signed, was Lewis’ birthday. She spent it washing clothes. Within weeks, she was on her way back to the states.

“We were told ‘if any of you have husbands in the U.S., you can go home.’ There were four of us,” she says.

She spent a month with her husband in Texas, then reported to her new assignment in Miami Beach. That September, not feeling well, she went to the base doctor. “Lieutenant,” he told her, “you’re pregnant.” And, oh yes, “You’re through.”

Lewis welcomed the discharge. “I was exhausted,” she says. “I was just plain worn out.”

Henri symbolizes for Lewis all the innocent young victims of war. She found him, hungry and ragged, sitting on a curb in front of his house in a village virtually destroyed by bombs.

“He looked at me . . . with eyes too big for his face. He was thin from lack of food. Perhaps he was 10 . . . he didn’t say,” she writes. “I wanted to make him smile and laugh, but I could not. There was nothing to laugh about.”

As she looked around, Lewis wondered what had become of the people in the bombed-out homes. She didn’t ask.

Henri stared at her. He wore a soldier’s cap. She smiled and sat down near him. “Would you like a candy bar?” she asked.

“Yes,” he said shyly.

“He grabbed it quickly . . . ate it fast,” she writes.

Lewis could see a woman and a small girl watching. She gave Henri candy for them as well.

“You are lucky,” he told her in English, when he learned she was from the United States. “There is no war where you live.”

“I know, I’m sorry,” she said.

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Nurse flew mercy missions in war

By Barbara McCabe
Staff Writer

Edith Mize Lewis has come full circle. Young Lt. Mize was stationed at the Boca Raton Army Air Force base in 1943 until she was transferred overseas to be a World War II flight nurse with the 816th Medical Evacuation Squadron.

Two years ago, she returned to make Boca Raton her home.

Her days as a flight nurse gained attention recently when Mize, now married to retired U.S. Army Col. Harry Lewis, was featured in Life magazine's special issue commemorating the 40th anniversary of V-E Day in May.

But Mize, now a free-lance writer and a member of the Boca Raton Branch of American Pen Women, was disappointed with the minimal coverage the magazine gave the many women who served in World War II.

"There were a lot of women in World War II," she said, "but all we're reading about is the men. I am very proud of what they did, but what about the women who volunteered? They weren't drafted. It's not that we need a pat on the back, but how about mentioning the women who were in the service?"



Edith Mize Lewis flew more than 50 missions in WWII

Staff photo by Jack Hutton

Mize didn't start out wanting to be a flight nurse; but the war changed all that.

"I wanted to be an airline stewardess," she said "In those days, the stewardesses had to be registered nurses. When I got out of nursing school, there was this war going on. All the airline stewardesses were going away to become flight nurses, so I volunteered."

After a brief stint as a nurse in the Station Hospital at Boca Raton Field, Mize went to Bowman Field in Kentucky for flight training.

She met her first husband there, married him, and got shipped overseas three days later.

As a flight nurse who won the air medal for flying 50 or more missions into a combat area, Mize saw her share of action.

She was at Normandy. She was at the Battle of the Bulge. She was in the Rhineland and Central Europe.

As soon as it was possible to land behind the front lines, she said, she would be flown in on a plane capable of holding about 24 wounded soldiers.

"It was the nurse's job to care for the seriously wounded soldiers and return them to hospitals away from the combat area," she said. "They were responsible for the pa-

tients on the plane. There were no doctors aboard."

Mize is very proud of the fact that she never lost a soldier in flight.

"They never did die on my planes," she said. "I was fortunate. Only one time I told the pilot to radio ahead for an ambulance because I had one soldier who didn't look like he was going to make it much longer."

The horror of war was difficult, but Mize said she coped well.

"I was trained as a registered nurse," she said. "I was young. Nothing bothered me. It's not that I didn't appreciate the wounded, but it was my job as a nurse to care for them. If we got upset and worried about it, we never could have done the job."

The objectivity she was able to maintain with her patients, however, was shattered in 1973 when her 26-year-old son died of cancer.

"I was very objective in Europe," she said, "but when it's your own immediate family and your only son who you think will outlive you, you bet you suffer. Parents suffer more than anyone because they never expect their child to die first."

Please turn to NURSE page 2A

Edith Mize Lewis
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Boca Raton News FL

Page 2A — Monday, June 10, 1985



Mize at the Boca Raton Army Air Force Base in 1943

Nurse

From page 1A

As therapy, Mize turned to writing, raising money for cancer research and participating in a support group for other parents who have lost children.

Excerpts from her manuscript titled "Grief Hurts" appear in psychiatrist Elizabeth Kubler-Ross's book, "Death: The Final Stage of Growth."

In 1976, Mize's first marriage fell apart. After living on Long Island for 30 years, she left New York and moved to Lighthouse Point.

There she met and, ~~in 1973~~ ^{in 1983}, married Lewis, a widower from Plantation. The couple then moved to Boca Raton.

"She's got two more combat stars than I do," said the retired colonel, who led a battalion of 700 soldiers down China's Burma Road during World War II.

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A Caterpillar

Falls asleep, turns inside out

To a Butterfly.

(Hint: What is metamorphosis?)



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Edith Mize Lewis

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About 300 words

HOW NOT TO BE A NURSE

As a student nurse in a hospital, I sometimes did the wrong thing at the wrong time. But I was an eager and willing student. One morning I had to cook eggs for the patients on the maternity ward.

I cooked gobs of eggs, cleaned the stove, and put the large frying pan on the windowsill to cool. I started to leave and noticed the pan wasn't there. I peeked out the window. I was on the fourth floor overlooking the parking lot. I couldn't see the pan. Had it landed on the roof of a car? Or hit someone on the head? I was dumbfounded. I sneaked down the backstairs and hoped no one would see me.

Lucky me! It hadn't hit anything but there was a big hole in the ground where it landed. I yanked it out and went up on the elevator. Suddenly, the door opened and the Supervisor of Nurses got on. I tried to hide the frying pan and backed into the corner.

She looked at me and said, "Why aren't you on the maternity ward?" She looked again. "Is that a frying pan you're holding?"

I didn't answer. "Come to my office now," she said. I was in trouble.

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Mize Lewis Nurse

Page 2

I managed to talk my way out of an impossible situation. It wasn't easy. "Go back to where you belong," she said.

There's a happy ending. I graduated, joined the Air Force, attended flight school and went to Europe. I served as a 1st Lt. Flight Nurse. I didn't cook any eggs. There weren't any where I was.

I came home with the Air Medal and surprised my former Supervisor of Nurses. She smiled when she saw me in uniform. Thanks to her, I learned how to overcome obstacles. Especially, when I knew the enemy was shooting at me.

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SCENES FROM A NURSE'S ALBUM



Mize heads for Normandy.

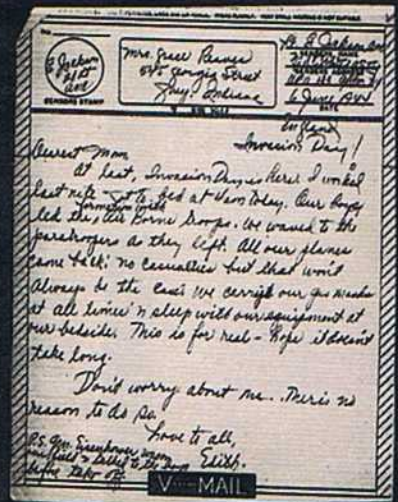
A flight nurse in the 816th Medical Evacuation Squadron of the 9th Air Force, Lieutenant Edith Jackson Mize, 23, went overseas in 1944—three days after her wedding. She was flown behind front lines to nurse the wounded as they were airlifted to hospitals in England and the U.S. Action in the air was punctuated by hours of waiting on the ground. Mize's "favorite pastime" was pasting photographs into an album and writing captions for them. A letter home shows the dichotomy of her days. "Dear Mom," she wrote in March 1945. "Each of us in the squadron is to be presented with the Air Medal—50-plus missions. You can also send me a shower cap (one with elastic, not a tie), a crochet box for thread, Forever Amber by C. Windsor (a new novel), rattail comb and movie magazines." Today she lives in Boca Raton, Fla., is married for the second time and writes articles and poetry. ➔



"German Field Hospital, taking shrapnel out of abdomen." Mize wrote of the photo taken by her commanding officer.



"May 7, 1945, another birthday in the Army. Washed my clothes," noted Mize of the day before V-E Day. The letter above marked a 1944 event, D Day.



Left: "Thanksgiving Day chow line," was how Mize (fourth from the doorway) captioned this picture taken in Istres, France, in 1944. She was away from her unit, in a place where nurses were more urgently needed.

Right: "German civilians forced to view camp—super race couldn't take it," Mize captioned this picture taken shortly after the liberation of Buchenwald.





6, 1988 at Memorial Garden adjacent to Edward H. White Museum —
 Brooks AFB, San Antonio, Texas.



816th MAES F.N. — L-R: Edith Mize Lewis, Jenny Boyle Silk, Louise
 Anthony deFlon. Jupiter Florida, 1986.

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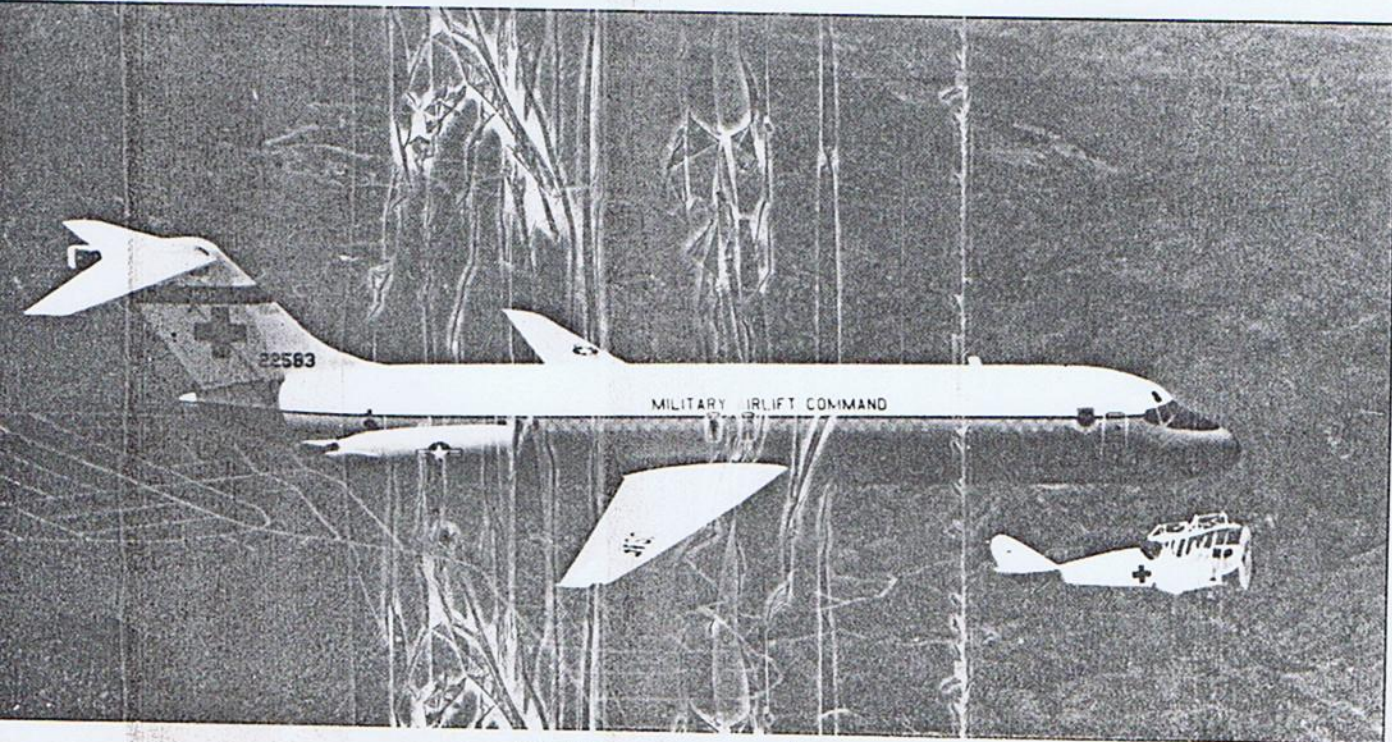
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