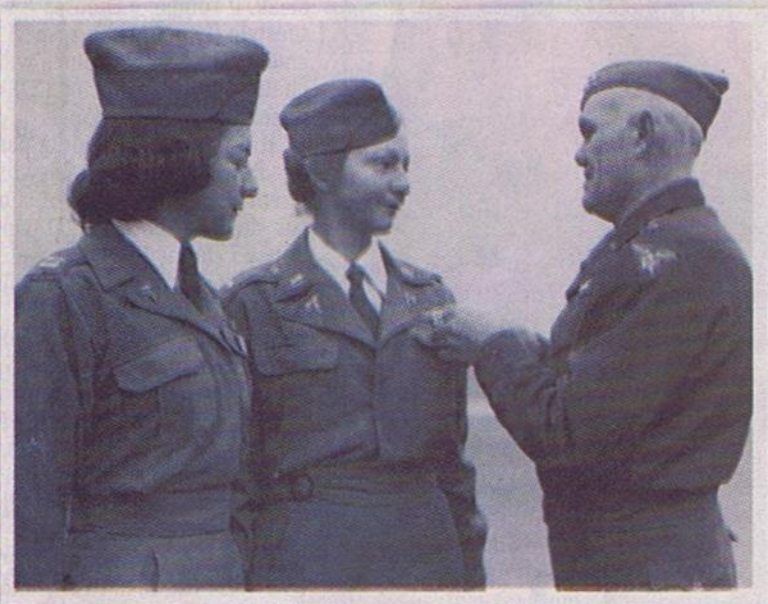




AMERICAN NURSES,  
 MEDICS, STRANDED  
 BEHIND NAZI  
 LINES, SURVIVED  
 THROUGH  
 TENACITY,  
 HEROISM,  
 GENEROSITY



# Rescuing a story

A story of survival, perseverance, danger, and extraordinary courage and generosity extended in the midst of war remained untold for decades, but thankfully not forever.

Life-saving help was given, at great risk, "with no promise of anything in return," as Cate Lineberry put it.



**MARK BENNETT**

TRIBUNE-STAR

Sacrifice is a primary subplot of her new book, "The Secret Rescue: An Untold Story of American Nurses and Medics Behind Nazi Lines." It details the unimaginable chaos that confronted 30 Americans -

13 medics, 13 nurses and four flight crew members - in November 1943 as World War II raged. Their intended mission was difficult enough - to fly from Catania, Sicily, toward the combat zone at Bari, Italy, and evacuate sick and wounded troops.

Instead, they flew into a severe storm and then an attack by German fighter planes, veered more than 100 miles off course, and crash-landed into a country they knew little about, Albania, occupied by Nazis and torn by civil war.



Submitted photos courtesy of Rudy Stakeman, Tribune-Star photo by Joseph C. Garza

**Proud of her service:** Top to bottom, Rudy Stakeman holds a photo of his sister, Grace, at his home on Wednesday. Grace's World War II experience is part of the book, "The Secret Rescue; Grace receives an honor as a flight nurse; a family photo of Grace Stakeman; and at bottom, known by fellow nurses as "Teach," she was the head nurse of the 807th squadron.

► Turn to **BENNETT**, B5

# Bennett: 'It's an unbelievable story in so many ways'

▶ Continued from B1

The nurses and medics of the 807th Medical Air Evacuation Transport Squadron and the airmen had just one gun. They stayed on the run for months, dodging the Nazis, battling the winter cold, starvation and disease, and relying on the kindness of the impoverished Albanian partisans and villagers for food, shelter and cover from the Germans. Aided by underground British and American groups, all were eventually heroically rescued by the Allies.

"These were not the people on the front lines you'd expect to be caught in this situation," Lineberry said in a telephone interview last week. "These were ordinary men and women fighting in the war who rose to the occasion."

The 13 nurses faced a predicament rare in that era, Lineberry said, considering women had been granted the right to vote just 23 years earlier.

"They were very brave women," she said, "going against the grain of the time." As the lost contingent trekked through remote hills and rugged rural terrain, the young women – between 22 and 32 years old – kept pace with the male medics and airmen. In total, they walked more than 600 miles to elude capture and gain rescue. "I think their fortitude and dedication was outstanding," Lineberry said.

In their closest brush with the Nazis, three of the women got separated from the group. Scattered in units of three or four in the homes of villagers in Berat, Albania, the Americans awoke to gunfire from German forces. Most ran into the street from their hosts' homes. The family housing those three nurses advised them to hide in their basement. Stunningly, Nazi soldiers burst in and found them, but let the women go. A boy in the home speculated that his father, a winemaker the Germans found friendly, influenced their escape. It took the Allies two extra months to locate and rescue that trio of nurses.

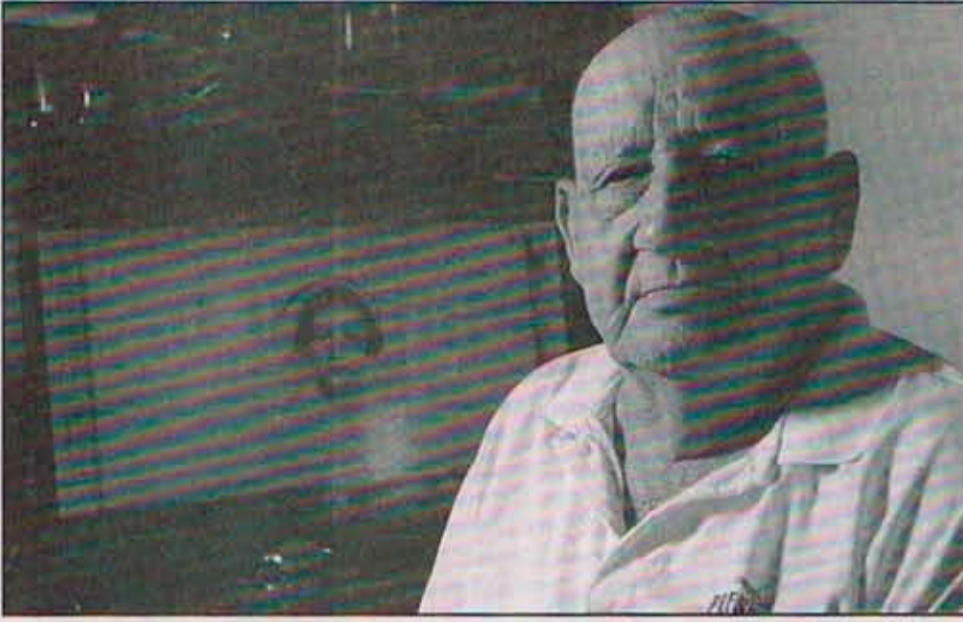
The Albanians, including both factions of their own civil war, risked execution by the invading Nazis by sharing their homes and meager food supplies with the Americans. Harold Hayes, the lone surviving member of the 30 stranded Americans, told Lineberry that when the poor Albanian people "gave them food out of their own hands, that meant somebody in that village would not be eating that day."

"It's an unbelievable story in so many ways," added Lineberry, a former staff writer and European editor for National Geographic now based in Washington, D.C.

Terre Haute holds a link to that story. Grace Stakeman, born and raised here, served as an Army first lieutenant and head nurse of the 807th in Catania. Though she wasn't aboard the flight that crashed in Albania, Stakeman helped train the squadron's 24 nurses, including the 13 involved in that mission. They nicknamed Stakeman – who died in 2001 – "Teach," and held her in high esteem. Hayes, who lives in Oregon, told Lineberry "the other nurses really respected" Stakeman.

Stakeman's spirit reflected the gumption her nurses needed to survive the Albanian ordeal.

The book emphasizes the 30-year-old, blonde Terre



Tribune-Star/Joseph C. Garza

"She was competitive": Rudy Stakeman's late sister, Grace, was a nurse in World War II and her experience is part of the book, "The Secret Rescue." Grace's photo is on Rudy's computer screen behind him.



Submitted photo courtesy Cate Lineberry

A **standout**: Grace Stakeman, second from left, front row, was described in the book "The Secret Rescue" as appearing frail but being anything but that in reality.

Hautean's tenacity, saying, "Though Stakeman's delicate features gave her a somewhat fragile appearance, she, like the other nurses drawn to volunteer for the Army, was far from frail." Her brother, retired Terre Haute printing press operator Rudy Stakeman, agrees.

"She wasn't scared to argue with anybody," said Rudy, now 88. "Like it said in the book, she looked fragile but wasn't." She once used her nursing skills to pull broken glass from Rudy's heel and to comfort another brother stricken with malaria. That calm manner served her well in Catania. There, Stakeman led a nurses squadron that helped evacuate 1,651 sick and wounded soldiers in their first three weeks of action, alone, in the fall of 1943.

She wasn't the only member of her family stationed overseas in the Armed Forces during World War II. Three of Joseph and Ethel Stakeman's other children – sons Rudy, George and John – were on duty at the same time. At the time, Rudy knew little about his older sister's role in the evacuation operation. In fact, even after they returned home, "She never said anything about it." In fact, the 30 Americans kept silent about the episode, initially under military orders and later out of concern for the safety of their Albanian benefactors who lived in a communist dictatorship until 1995 and faced reprisals for aiding Westerners.

Grace left writings about the 807th, though, as a chronicle of the squadron's history. Her notes proved valuable for Lineberry, who decided to write the book after stumbling upon an old newspaper clipping in 2011 while researching another World War II topic. Grace "was the one that really helped me learn what it was like for those nurses," Lineberry said. Nurses, for

example, received half the pay of their equally ranked

male counterparts, the author learned. (Flight nurs-



Submitted photo courtesy Cate Lineberry

**Remote location**: The town of Berat, Albania, shown here, became a familiar spot to 30 American military service members in 1943 when their transport plane crash landed in that Nazi-occupied country.



Submitted photo courtesy Cate Lineberry

**Key points**: Harold Hayes, the lone surviving member of the 30 U.S. service men and women who were stranded in Nazi-occupied Albania in 1943, shows author Cate Lineberry (right) significant spots on a map of that country.

es earned an extra \$60 a month.)

In Albania in 1943, they all managed to live and be rescued. Their page in history is now revealed as Lineberry's book – published by Little, Brown and Co. – hit store shelves nationally

May 7, three weeks before Memorial Day. "It's an unbelievable story in so many ways," she said.

And no longer forgotten.

Mark Bennett can be reached at 812-231-4377 or [mark.bennett@tribstar.com](mailto:mark.bennett@tribstar.com).

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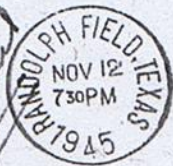
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Capt. Grace H. Stehman A. M. C.  
807th M. D. C. S.  
School of Aviation Med.  
Randolph Field, Texas

air mail



111111

Mrs. Fred L. Hawren  
1700 A. Avenue  
New Castle  
Indiana

807<sup>th</sup> Med. Air Evac Sqdn  
School of Aviation Medicine  
Randolph Field, Texas

11 November 1945

My Dear Mrs Howard-

Sorry to be tardy in answering your letter of 3<sup>rd</sup> Nov but it has taken a few days for mail to catch up with me because of all this travelling around.

I am glad you wrote to me even though your letter is most difficult to answer. Betty's short tour of duty with the squadron made her no less popular. All of us thought a great deal of her and she was especially endeared to me because we were both Nurses. She was a person and nurse who "fit" right from the very beginning in our small group. We were all deeply touched when she was lost.

You no doubt realize that we could not give you any details of the crash before now. We were not even permitted to talk or write of the horrible accident in our letters and must of all mention any names. Cruelty can seem very cruel in war time but it is necessary.

Weather in the winter time in Sicily and Italy can be very nasty. Sometimes it was difficult to fly thru - other times we were grounded altogether.

This particular morning Betty and another nurse, assigned different aircraft were to take patients from Catania Sicily to Algiers to a general hospital.

The weather was not good. What had happened was the ship crashed into a mountain just a few minutes after the take off. Whether the weather was bad or something went wrong with the ship we don't know. But investigation did reveal that it was an instant happening. I am positive none of those aboard suffered any prolonged agonizing death even for a minute or two. The investigators were of the belief that the sudden terrific impact dealt the horrible blow to those aboard instantaneously. That was a comforting thought to all of us - to think they never suffered any agonizing moments of fear or that they had any suffering or trapped feeling after the crash. We girls too were concerned about this point Mrs. Hansen and I think you can be assured that Betty's death was instant and painless and without fear. She died doing the work she loved. One of my other nurses was killed in that crash - she was a patient returning home. We also had a Sgt aboard. Our loss to the Squadron was a tremendous one.

The crash happened near Ponte Alivo, Sicily. Betty is buried in the small military cemetery at Ponte Alivo. It's a very beautiful well kept spot and the cemetery is built on the side of the hill. There are soldiers there in constant attendance and guard. Not only is it <sup>so</sup> pretty good to us in life but also honors and cares for us in death. Betty is by the side of my other nurses buried there, Mildred Wallace and Dorothy Booth.

I should not even want to move her if I were you - she is with her friends there and you can rest assured that the grave will always be taken care of and guarded. It really is a lovely peaceful spot.

I flew over to the funeral which was short but most sincere and heart felt. we never viewed the body - we wanted to remember her as the grand lively person she was - I shall never forget her - her spirit and personality is one that will live for ever in our hearts. The services were military of course - the sermon, marching to the grave - behind the casket under the American flag - we all saluted as the ceremony was brought to a close and then "taps".

Love a pretty good soldier, I think but the tears rolled down to my chin - we all suffered a great loss but we had also had the privilege of knowing and learning from a fine nurse, a wonderful girl.

If I were you I would never attempt moving her back to the States. She is still over there among the Army - the Army she knew and got along with so well. You see the entire crew and load of patients are there to-gether - I like to think she is still caring for them - she is that kind of Soldier.

I was back to Pauls Alms several times - no better care could be given to their resting spot. No matter how bitter we may feel toward the Italians their art of gardening is supreme. These are the men who work under military supervision in the care of our lost ones homes.

Betty's spirit has been an inspiration to us all to carry on to the end which we did.

After signs of war some of the other girls and myself were awaiting a boat in Naples that would take us direct to the Pacific direct to fight another war - Fortunately the war ended at that time so we got to come home instead.

now I'm here at Randolph trying to help deactivate the Sgan. My job as Chief nurse is to write the Squadron history. It will be a tough one to write. I lost 3 nurses and had 13 missing in enemy territory. We really had our share of tough luck.

Seven of the girls have volunteered to carry on in times of peace. Like all new ventures several have failed badly to establish something worthwhile and new - but we all will attempt to prove that those noble kids didn't die in vain because compared to the loss many lives, <sup>many</sup> of personal, have been saved by air evac.

I just came from home and reported for duty here. but before too awfully long I should be going home again to see my folks in T. H. I hope that I shall have time and be allowed to call on you - It isn't too awfully far from T. H. -

Incidentally my home address now is R<sup>#</sup> 6 Box 419 Terre Haute, but you can address me here at Randolph if you want to write again - I would feel it a privilege to hear from you -

I do hope I've answered your questions and put your mind at ease some what.

Sincerely  
Grace H. Stokeman

Jaargang 21, nr.6 2002

# DDA Magazine



tijdschrift voor historische luchtvaart





Zij vlogen in C-47's in de Zuid-Pacific, Noord-Afrika en Europa; zij werden beschoten door Japanse Zero's; zij brachten uren door in schuttersputten op Guadalcanal; zij toonden inzet, moed en gaven de gewonden aan boord aandacht en hun glimlach werd niet vergeten:

## Engelen aan boord



*First Lt Dorothy White een Army Nurse uit Detroit neemt even pauze tijdens een evacuatievlucht met 17 soldaten die minder dan 24 uur voordat deze foto werd genomen gewond zijn geraakt. (foto: Sgt Paul Hunter van Mats in het voorjaar van 1944).*

Op Bowman Field, Kentucky werd begin 1942 een school opgericht voor opleiding tot Flight Nurses of Flight Technicians. Veel stewardessen van de Amerikaanse burgerluchtvaartmaatschappijen meldten zich aan. Na hun studie werden de Nurses en Medical Technicians ingedeeld in Medical Air Evacuation Squadrons (MAES). Hun taak was het begeleiden en verzorgen van gewonden, die per vliegtuig geëvacueerd zouden worden. Behalve een uit-

Nurse en één Technician maakten samen een team uit voor een C-47, zij moesten toezien op het in- en uitladen van de patiënten en de medische verzorging onderweg. Er werden 31 MAES opgeleid.

Vanuit de haven van New York vertrokken schepen naar Engeland of Afrika. Aan boord van één van de schepen - onderweg naar Engeland - bevond zich een groot aantal verpleegsters. Op de naburige schepen klonk gefluit en geschreeuw! Zonder problemen kwam het konvooi in Schotland aan en ging de reis per trein verder naar hun bestemming in Zuid-Oost Engeland. Hun huisvesting bestond meestal uit een Quonset- of nissenhut, welke samen met andere Nurses gedeeld werd.

### Kerstmis 1943 in Albanië

Op 8 november 1943 bevonden zich 13 Flight Nurses and 13 Medical Technicians aan boord van een C-53D (42-68809) van de 314th Troop Carrier Group. Het toestel steeg op in Catania en was - samen met twee andere C-47's - onderweg voor een vlucht van twee uur naar Bari. Kort nadat het toestel was opgestegen, kwam zij in een zware sneeuwstorm terecht. De radio operator van de 809 kreeg geen contact met Bari en uiteindelijk kwam de vijf-koppige bemanning tot de conclusie dat men verdwaald was. De twee andere kisten waren nergens te ontdekken. Na vier uur vliegen, verbeterde het weer. De piloot ontdekte een vliegveld en maakte zich op voor de landing. Opeens werd het toestel beschoten en moest de piloot een noodlanding (wheels up) maken



*Dezelfde Dorothy C. White in 1944 op 24 jarige leeftijd*

gebrede medische opleiding, werden brancards in- en uitgeladen; zij gingen op bivak en kregen tekst en uitleg over kaart- en kompas lezen. Er werd ook aandacht geschonken aan eventuele landingen op water. De Flight Nurse controleerde de gewondenlijst en keek toe of alle gewonden veilig vastgesnoerd zaten. Een MAES bestond uit 25 Nurses, 5 doktoren, een administrateur en 70 Technicians. Eén Flight



'Staatsieportret' van het 807th Medical Air Evacuation Squadron voor een C-47 op Bowman Field Kentucky in juli 1943.

Op de eerste rij: Gertrude Dawson, Elna Schuwant, Lois Watson, Ann Maskowitz, Lucia Slopen, Lillian Tacina, Mary Smith, Ann Kopeso, Edith Belden, Chamion Villa.

Op de 2e rij: Hoofdverpleegster Grace Stakeman, Wilma Lytle, Pauleen Kanable, Agnes Jenzen, Doris Kirkpatrick, Elizabeth Ruminski, Frances Sale, Ava Maness, Helen Corten, Anna Sheldorf, Linnie Saumer, Helen Welch, Frances Nelson, Dorothy White en Eugina Rutkowski,

in een modderig veld. Hij waarschuwde de passagiers voor een ruwe landing. Het toestel werd vervolgens omringd door een aantal gewapende Partizanen en al gauw bleek dat men zich in Albanië bevond. Gelukkig waren deze Partizanen pro-Amerikaans. Er was haast geboden en men ging op weg om een veilige schuilplaats te vinden. De tocht was ruw en koud, het sneeuwde, het vroom en de Nurses waren hier totaal niet op gekleed. Voedsel was schaars. Men trok over moeilijke paden om de Ballista (pro-Duits) te ontwijken. Men trok van dorp tot dorp en samen met de Partizanen vierden zij kerstmis. Op 27 december 1943 trok men verder. Al gauw kwamen de Duitsers hen op het spoor en de groep werd beschoten. Gelukkig kon men op tijd weggelopen, doch de groep raakte wel gesplitst. Drie verpleegsters raakten achter. In de tussentijd was er door de Partizanen contact opgenomen met de Geallieerden en werden Britse commando's in hun nabijheid gedropt. De gehele groep trok naar de kust, waar zij door de Britse marine geëvacueerd werden. Op 9 januari 1944 kwamen zij in Italië aan, de drie achtergebleven verpleegsters werden door de Partizanen naar Italië gesmokkeld waar zij in maart aankwamen. De eerste evacuatievlucht in Normandië vond plaats op D+4. 's Ochtends werden de vliegers op de hoogte gesteld dat er later op de dag een evacuatievlucht gevlogen zou worden. Eerst werden een Flight Nurse en een Technician opgepikt, vervolgens werd de C-47 volgeladen met munitie, voorraden of de bekende jerrycans met benzine om vervolgens door te vliegen naar een pas veroverde landingsstrip nabij de frontlinies. Veelal zaten de Nurses en Technicians boven op de lading. Vaak vlogen er meerdere toestellen op zo'n vlucht. De toestellen

waren niet voorzien van Rode Kruizen en werden door de Duitsers beschoten. Nadat het toestel geland was, werd de oorlogsvracht uitgeladen. De ambulances met de gewonden stonden al te wachten. In de tussentijd werd het toestel voor het vervoer van gewonden in orde gemaakt. De Nurse had de regie. Lopende patiënten namen plaats op de zittingen aan de zijkant van de cabine en/of gingen op de bodem van het toestel zitten. Voor de zwaarder gewonde patiënten en die per brancard vervoerd moesten worden, werd een 'stellage' aangebracht en werden de brancards boven elkaar 'geladen'. Meestal werden er 21 brancards geladen. Zodra de patiënten aan boord waren gebracht, was het team voor het wel en wee van

Een geallieerde soldaat die minder dan 24 uur van te voren werd gewond wordt vanuit een ambulance in een C-47 gedragen. Op de voorgrond copilot First Lt S.P. Taliaferro



de patiënten verantwoordelijk. Soms waren er 28 brancards aan boord (4 boven elkaar). De bemanning had grote bewondering voor de Nurses. Nadat het toestel opgestegen was, onderzochten de Nurses de patiënten. Zij hielden een praatje, verschoonden het verband of gaven de patiënten te drinken. Soms vlogen er twee Nurses mee.

### Gevangen genomen

Luitenant Reba Z. Whittle van de 813th MAES werd op 27 september 1944 door de Duitsers gevangen genomen. Zij was aan boord van een C-47 van de 436th Troop Carrier Group. Het toestel werd beschoten en maakte een noodlanding achter de vijandelijke linies. Lt Whittle had tijdens de ruwe landing verwondingen opgelopen. Desondanks hielp zij mee om gewonde bemanningsleden uit het toestel te krijgen. Opeens verschenen er Duitse militairen en werden zij gevangen genomen. De Duitsers keken toch wel naar op dat één van de gevangenen een vrouw was. De gewonden ontvingen eerste hulp en werden vervolgens naar een gevangenkamp (Stalag 9-C) getransporteerd, waar zij afzonderlijk werd ondergebracht. In het kamp waren geen faciliteiten voor vrouwelijke gevangenen. Reba verzorgde geallieerde gewonden. Zij bracht vier maanden in gevangenschap door en vierde kerstmis 1944 in Duitsland. Door tussenkomst van het Rode Kruis werd zij – samen met andere gevangenen – uitgewisseld. Luitenant Whittle was de enige Amerikaanse vrouw, die door de Duitsers gevangen was genomen.



*Captain Willie Hammon en zijn crew van het 96th Sqdn TCGp. De Flight Nurse is 1st Lt Betty Cronquist van 816th MAES.*

### Kerstmis 1944

De Flight Nurses van de 817th MAES vierden kerstmis 1944 samen met een aantal Franse weeskinderen. Er werd een kerstboom neergezet en uiteraard was er ook een kerstman. Na een uitgebreid diner ontvingen de kinderen cadeaus. Eén van de Nurses was 1Lt Christine A. Gasvoda. Zij kwam op 13 april 1945 om het leven, toen haar C-47 bij Paderborn neerstortte. Zij werd – samen met de bemanning – begraven op de tijdelijke Amerikaanse begraafplaats Margraten in plot/rij/grafnummer GG-5-107. Na de oorlog werd zij op Margraten herbegraven en ligt nu begraven in F-19-4.

Eveneens op Margraten ligt begraven 1Lt Wilma 'Dolly' Vinsant (806th MAES). Wilma was op 20 februari 1917 geboren. Haar vader was arts, haar moeder verpleegster. Wilma volgde haar opleiding tot verpleegster aan het John Sealy Hospital in Galveston. Haar aandacht voor de luchtvaart werd getrokken door Amelia Earhart. Kort daarna solliciteerde zij bij de MAES. Wilma was aan boord van een C-47 van de 436th Troop Carrier Group, die op 14 april

1945 nabij Eisenach neerstortte. Wilma ligt thans begraven op Margraten in B-17-4. Beide graven werden door Nederlanders geadopteerd en tijdens Memorial Day voorzien van een boeket bloemen. Het plaatselijk ziekenhuis in San Benito (Texas) draagt de naam Dolly Vinsant Memorial Hospital. De Dolly Vinsant Trofee wordt jaarlijks aan de meest verdienstelijke Flight Nurse van Amerika uitgereikt.



*Het graf van Christine A. Gasvoda op de begraafplaats Margraten in Zuid-Limburg. (foto's: archief Jan Bos)*

Louise Anthony (816th MAES) merkte dat één van de zwaargewonde militairen aan boord van haar toestel er erg slecht aan toe was. Zodra de C-47 opgestegen was, ontdekte zij dat de militair overleden was. De andere gewonden hebben hier niets van gemerkt. Tijdens de vlucht gaf Louise de gewonden alle aandacht, ook aan de overledene. Zij schudde zijn hoofdkussen op en praatte tegen hem. Zo voorkwam zij onder de anderen paniek en verwarring. Toen de C-47 in Engeland landde, werd de overledene als laatste uit het vliegtuig gehaald.

Ann M. Krueger (817th MAES) haalde met gevaar voor eigen leven, 27 patiënten uit een brandende C-47. Jeanette Gleason kreeg van de piloot te horen dat de C-47 in moeilijkheden verkeerde. Zij gespte haar parachute om en sprong uit de C-47. Toen zij neerkwam, ontdekte zij dat zij alleen was. Zij sliep in haar parachute en werd de volgende dag door een Chinese familie ontdekt. Na een ontbijt van rijst, werd zij naar de geallieerde linies gebracht.

In totaal sneuvelden er elf Flight Nurses en zes Technicians in Europa. Ondanks alle ellende was er ook nog tijd voor afspraakjes en romantiek. Vaak vlogen de Nurses met dezelfde bemanningen en ontstonden er romances, die resulteerden in huwelijken.

Jan Bos

<b>Subj:</b> English translation of story Flight Nurses <b>Date:</b> 3/15/2003 11:48:45 AM Eastern Standard Time <b>From:</b> circle82@wishmail.net (Jan Bos) <b>To:</b> Dorothyce1920@aol.com
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Dear Dorothy,  
 well finally, here is the English version of the story about the Flight Nurses which I wrote on behalf of the Dutch Dakota Assn. You have the magazine, only with the Dutch text, hope you like it. Space was limited, I could have written much more

all the best

Jan Bos

Angels  
Angles on board.

They flew in C-47s in the south Pacific, North Africa and Europe; they were fired upon by Japanese Zeros; they sheltered in foxholes for hours in Guadalcanal; they were brave and gave attention to the wounded on board the planes; their smiles will never be forgotten.

Early 1942 a school for Flight Nurses and Flight Technicians was founded at Bowman Field, Kentucky. Many stewardesses from American airliners reported for duty. After training they were divided among the Medical Air Evacuation Squadrons (MAES). It was their task to take care of the wounded, who were evacuated by airplane. They had a medical training and education. Stretcher were loaded and unloaded; they went on bivouac and they were instructed in map and compass reading. Attention was paid to ditching on water. The Flight Nurse checked the list of the wounded and noticed that all wounded were securely buckled up. A MAES had 25 Nurses, 5 doctors, one clerk and 70 Technicians. One Flight Nurse and one Technician were one team for a C-47; they had watch loading and unloading of the patients and had to take of the welfare of the patients on board the planes. 31 MAES were activated.

From the harbor of New York the ships left for England or Africa. On board of one of the boats bound for England were many nurses. On the adjacent ships the men whistled and yelled to the women. Without difficulty the convoy reached Scotland and the voyage to Southeastern England was by train. The women were housed in Quonset- or Nissen huts.

Christmas 1943 in Albania.

On 8 November 1943 13 Flight Nurses and 13 Medical Technicians were on board of a C-53 D (42-68809) of the 314th Troop Carrier Group. The plane left Catania together with two other planes and head for Bari, a flight of 2 hours. Shortly after he planes had left Catania, it came into snowstorms. The radio operator on board of this C-53 could not get radio contact with the control tower at Bari. The crew decided that they were lost. No trace of the other two planes. After some four hours flying, the weather cleared. The pilot discovered an airfield and prepared for a landing. Suddenly the plane was fired upon and the pilot had to make a forced landing (wheels up) in a muddy field. The pilot warned the passengers for a rough landing. When the plane came to a halt, armed men surrounded it. These men were partisans and it turned out that the plane had landed in Albania. Luckily the Partisans were pro-American. The men were in a hurry and took the Americans to a safe place. It was cold and over rough terrain, it snowed, it was freezing and the Nurses Nurses were not wearing the proper clothes for this trip. There was hardly any food. They did their best to avoid the Balista, who were pro-German. They traveled from village to village and together with the Partisans Christmas was celebrated. They all moved on 27 December 1943. Soon the Germans were after the group and the group was fired upon. The group could get away, but they were separated. Three nurses

stayed behind. In the meantime the Partisans had contacted the Allies and British commandos were dropped near the group to assist them. The entire group moved in the direction of the coast, where a boat of the Royal Navy waited for the group. The group arrived in Italy on 9 January 1944. The three nurses, who were separated from the group, were smuggled to Italy by the partisans and arrived in Italy in March 1944.

The first evacuation flight out of Normandy took place on D+4. In the morning the pilots were instructed for the mission later that day. First a Flight Nurse and Technician were picked up, then the C-47 was loaded with supplies, ammunition or the well known jerrycans. Then the plane flew on to the airstrips near the frontlines. The Nurses and Technicians sat on top of these supplies. The planes did not have Red Cross markings and often were fired upon by the Germans. After the plane had landed, the supplies were unloaded. The ambulances with the wounded were already waiting. The interiors of the planes were fixed for the transportation of the wounded. Walking wounded took their seats on both sides of the cabin or sat on the floor. For the more severe wounded, who had to be transported by stretcher, special equipment was installed. The stretchers were loaded one above the other and a total of 21 stretchers could be loaded. Sometimes 28 stretchers were loaded. As soon as the wounded were on board, the Nurse and Technician took care of them. The pilots admired the nurses. As soon as the plane took off, the nurses and technicians checked the conditions of the wounded, they talked to the men, cleaned the bandages or gave the men something to drink. Sometimes there were two Nurses on board.

#### Prisoner-of-war.

Lieutenant Reba Z. Whittle of the 813th MAES was taken prisoner by the Germans on 27 September 1944. She was on board of one of the planes of the 436th Troop Carrier Group. The plane was fired upon by the Germans and was hit. The plane made an emergency landing behind enemy lines. Lt Whittle was injured during the landing. In spite of her injuries she helped the other wounded crewmembers. Suddenly the Germans appeared and all were taken prisoner. The Germans were astonished to see a female among the crewmembers. First aid was given to the wounded and all were taken to Stalag 9-C (prisoncamp). Lt Whittle was separated from the men. There were no facilities for women in the camp. Reba took care of the wounded Allies. She was a prisoner for four months and celebrated Christmas 1944 in Germany. Thanks to the red Cross, she was exchanged. Lt Whittle was the only American woman, who was a POW.

#### Christmas 1944.

The Flight Nurses of the 817th MAES celebrated Christmas 1944 with French orphans. There was a Christmas tree and there was a Santa Claus. The dinner was extensive and there were presents for the children. One of the Nurses was 1Lt Christine A. Gasvoda. She was killed on 13 April 1945, when the C-47 she was in, crashed near Paderborn. Together with the crewmembers she was buried in the temporary American Military Cemetery at Margraten [Holland] in plot/row/grave number GG-5-107. After the war she was reburied in the permanent American Cemetery at Margraten in F-19-4.

Also buried at Margraten is 1Lt Wilma "Dolly" Vinsant (806th MAES). Wilma was born on 20 February 1917. Her father was a doctor, her mother a nurse. Wilma became a nurse at the John Sealy Hospital at Galveston. Amelia Earhart became her inspiring example for flying airplanes. Wilma joined the MAES. She was on board of a C-47 of the 436th Troop Carrier Group, that crashed near Eisenach on 14 April 1945. Wilma is now buried at Margraten in B-17-4. Dutchmen adopted both graves and during Memorial Day both graves receive flowers. The local hospital at San Benito (Texas) has the name Dolly Vinsant Memorial Hospital. The Dolly Vinsant Trophy will be given yearly to the Flight Nurse, who had done her utmost best.

Louise Anthony (816th MAES) noticed that one of the severely wounded in her plane, was dying. After the plane was in the air, the soldier had died. The other wounded men on board never knew this. Louise gave her

attention to the dead soldier during the flight. She talked to the man and by doing so, she prevented panic among the other men. When the plane landed in England, he was the last man to leave the plane.

Ann M. Krueger (817th MAES) evacuated 27 wounded patients from a burning C-47. She endangered her own life. Jeanette Gleason heard from the pilot that the plane was in trouble and he ordered all to bail out from the plane. She attached her parachute to the harness she was wearing and jumped from the plane. After touch down, she noticed she was all by herself. She slept in her parachute and the following morning she walked to a Chinese family, who gave her a breakfast. She was taken to allied lines.

Eleven Nurses and six Technicians lost their lives during the war in Europe. Besides all sad things, there was also some time for romance. Often the same Nurses flew with the same crews and after duty, they dated and some of the Nurses married their pilots.

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----- Headers -----

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