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First woman to become Air Force lieutenant colonel dead at 93

By Kelley Moore
For the Tribune

Isabelle Miller didn't like to talk about herself. Her pastor, Terry Darnall, didn't learn she was the first woman to receive the rank of lieutenant colonel in the U.S. Air Force until she had been a member of Mesa Palms Seventh-day Adventist Church for eight years. The Mesa woman died **May 24 at age 93.**

Miller spent her life giving to others in more ways than one. She served as an Air Force nurse for 25 years and gave most of her income to charity and to family and friends who could use the help.

She was born **Dec. 6, 1913**, in Bozeman, Mont. Two years later, Bert and Mattie Miller adopted her after her biological parents died of the plague.

"On her own personal life, you almost had to drag it out of her," said Vernon Bretsch, Isabelle's cousin. "She was very private. It wasn't that she didn't have a great history, but she just didn't want people to shove her up on a pedestal."

Miller graduated from Madison College, a Seventh-day Adventist college in Tennessee, with a nursing degree and immediately joined the Air Force.

She served in northern Africa, Spain, France and Germany, as well as at many U.S. bases.

It was during her service in Europe during World War II that she received the title of **lieutenant colonel**. Miller retired from the military at Luke Air Force Base in the West Valley in 1968.

"She just decided she wanted to dedicate her life to helping the sick," Bretsch said. "She thought the military would be a good place to go."

Clara Wallis, one of Miller's best friends and caretaker, said Miller never married or had children but lived a life of service.

"She had to make a choice between a normal married family life and a life of helping others," Wallis said. "She chose helping others. She chose being a nurse."

Miller helped many friends begin college funds for their children and donated more than \$2,000 a month to different organizations, Bretsch said. Her favorite organizations were those that benefited children.

But even Miller's closest friends didn't know the extent of her generosity.

"Very few people really knew Isabelle," said Wallis, who only knew of her donations because she would help Isabelle write her checks. "They never realized that she gave so much of herself and of her funds."

Miller is buried in the National Memorial Cemetery of Arizona, a veterans cemetery in Phoenix. She had a traditional military funeral including a 21-gun salute, the playing of Taps and the folding of the American flag.

"Isabelle was a very special lady," Darnall said. "America should be proud of her."