

SATURDAY, OCTOBER 6, 2001

WWII flight nurses gather

By KATHERINE ULLMER

Dayton Daily News

WRIGHT-PATERSON AIR FORCE BASE — They flew without fear. Then and now — during World War II and after the Sept. 11 World Trade Center disaster.

The 23 World War II flight nurses who flew into Dayton for their annual reunion and to dedicate a plaque Friday in the Memorial Park at the U.S. Air Force Museum to honor all World War II flight nurses, came from far and near — Maine, Florida, California, Massachusetts, and Cincinnati, among others.

Between 1942 and the end of 1944, 1,514 nurses and 907 enlisted men were trained and 18 medical air evacuation squadrons were formed, according to VerNell Bjerke, 80, of Manhattan, N.Y., president of the group, the World War II Flight Nurses Association, Inc., which numbers about 430.

Bjerke, like Agnes Flaherty, 80, of Portland, Maine, treasurer of the group, flew in the Pacific with the Army Air Corps, which later became the U.S. Air Force.

Bjerke, like Flaherty, helped care for the wounded that were air evacuated from the battlefields of Guam, Okinawa, and Iwo Jima. Though they weren't fired on, "we would see firing in the background of Okinawa," Flaherty said.

Juanita Engelbrecht, 84, of Cincinnati flew with the 807th Air Evacuation Group from North Africa up through Sicily, Italy and Germany, often picking up war prisoners along the way. Like the others, she volunteered to serve her country, because "it was what you felt you had to do," she said.

Most of the flight nurses flew on C-47s or C-54s, prop planes that didn't have heat. There were many other inconveniences.

"A nurse wasn't allowed to have any dependents, even if you supported your mother," said Edith (Brown) Rothenberg, of San Antonio, Texas, whom the others in her squadron still call "Brownie."

Rothenberg spent 25 years in the service, serving through the Korean War and the early part of the Vietnam War. She and three other members of the 806th squadron, who flew air evacuations from France to England, Jean (Foley) Tierney, of San Antonio, Joan (Denton) Jervis, of San Francisco, and Geraldine Dishroon Brier, 85, of Cheyenne, Wyo., shared memories over lunch at the museum. The four have kept in touch by phone during the years.

Flying in over enemy territory with a plane loaded with fuel created stress, and they became a sisterhood, Jervis said. "We knew each other's family. Everybody shared letters."

Their squadron was "the first to go into the Omaha beachhead on invasion day" to pick up the wounded, Brier said.

Brier, the first graduate of flight nurse school in the country, recalled flying into a British air base and being refused access to the officers' mess hall. She was told no ladies were allowed, but her pilot replied, "She's no lady. She's an officer in the U.S. Army Air Corps." The man left, only to come back and say, "you're welcome to be in the mess hall," she said.

Flight nurse training was at Bowman Field in Louisville, Ky. Since they hadn't ordered any wings for the women, when she graduated in

Feb. 1943, "Gen. David Grant took his wings off and put them on me," Brier said.

Of the 1,176,048 patients evacuated by air, only 46 died in the air, Brier said.

Bjerke was 21 when she entered the service. After her two-year tour of duty, she worked for TWA for 41 years as a flight attendant, a purser, and service manager.

"Nothing ever scares me," she said. She lives about 30 blocks from the World Trade Center, but wasn't in town Sept. 11 when terrorists flew two commercial planes into the towers.

"When I worked for TWA I was with their trauma team, but I was out of town. In a way, I'm glad, too. It's really traumatic." She walked to the site last Saturday and was amazed at the pile of rubble, she said.

Still, "I never thought to be afraid to fly," she said. "I would have gone up the next day. If you've been through the war, you don't worry about anything," Bjerke said. "If we weren't going to come back, we would have been gone a long time ago."

It was a day for remembering, and about an hour before the flight nurses dedicated their plaque, a somewhat larger group from the 380th Bombing Group, which flew in the southwest Pacific during WWII, met to re-dedicate its memorial plaque in the park.

Former Speaker of the U.S. House ('87-'89), Jim Wright, 78, of Fort Worth, Texas, a bombardier with the group, and his former crew member, Delmar (Curly) V. Sprouts, 87, of Olathe, Kansas, a gunner target specialist, were among those present.

JOAN DENTON JERVIS
Feb.10, 1916 – March 28, 2011



Photo courtesy of Hilary Stock, taken 3-19-11

We would like to recognize and celebrate the long and remarkable life Joan lived. Much of what follows has been taken from notes made by family and friends as she talked of her experiences over ninety-five wonderful years.

Joan was born and grew up in Knoxville, Tennessee, the “baby” in a large and loving family. She graduated in nursing from Northwestern in 1938 and promptly joined United Airlines where, at age 21, she was their youngest stewardess. Nurses were required for the job in the earliest days. Flights were rough and the cabins were not pressurized. There were “burp cups” in holders next to the seats. Coffee was served from a thermos and milk from glass bottles. Meals were often casseroles, but fried chicken was popular.

It happened that General “Hap” Arnold was on one of Joan’s flights in early 1943. He told her he needed her in the Army Air Force. She was 5’5” tall and weighed less than 100 pounds. The official weight had to be at least 105, so they put rocks in the pockets of her lab coat during her physical. She gained weight during the war from eating all the starch and peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, and all the exercise made her hungry. She had to resign from UAL to join the Army Air Force. But Mr. Patterson, the head of UAL, sent her a nice letter and a bonus at Christmas. He said she was considered on military leave and her resignation meant nothing. After the war she was welcomed back at UAL and given two years of employment credit for her time away.

Nurses with flight experience were needed to train at Bowman Field in Kentucky at the Army Air Force School of Air Evacuation. She started at Bowman on 2-10-43, which would have been her twenty-seventh birthday. The nurses from her class were assigned to the 806th squadron of the 8th Army Air Force AIRVAC. The squadron had 24 nurses, 25 T-3 technical sergeants (who took care of the walking wounded), and 42 doctors. The 806th was sent to England and Joan first trained near Newbury at the Welford Park RAF and USAAF base. She spent four months attending lectures and demonstrations, along with road marches every other day. She told the story of being out on her bike one day and meeting a British Major Singleton and his family, and she called out to him, "Howya doin' Major?" In the fall of '43 she went to Langer Field in Nottingham. She was based there into '44, going to Bassingbourn field at one point to train on B-19's. She flew some missions out of Prestwick, Scotland, with the Atlantic Transport, flying to Newfoundland or the U.S. They would take wounded over and come back with whole blood and supplies for the hospitals in England. They had to keep the planes very cold to best preserve the blood products, and she said she vividly remembered being cold herself.

A few days after D-Day, she started making 3 or 4 trips a day to Omaha Beach in Normandy, returning the wounded to Newbury, which was close to a main hospital in Oxford. They took jerry cans of fuel over, returning with the wounded, some of whom hadn't even had first aid yet. They used Robertson litters to take wounded off straight down from the cockpit. As they moved further into France and Germany, Joan's squadron once lost several planes in one day. Because of the dual use of transport planes, usually C-46 or C-47's, they were not marked with the Geneva Red Cross.

In November of '44, her squadron was posted to Orly, and they soon were doing runs for the Battle of the Bulge. On most of these missions they flew into aid stations that were evacuating the wounded from the battle. They lacked hot water and heat at Orly. They used Listerbags (huge bags) for water to drink, and water was brought in daily. She had one canteen of water and one canteen of coffee or tea per day. She could have a short shower every two days and wash her hair very two weeks. Her boots were so heavy that she had to be hoisted up onto a vehicle with help. She also spent two months in nearby Melun, France, where living was also difficult. Although they were quartered in a palatial estate, the Germans had poured concrete into the toilets and plumbing. In time she helped transport some POW's, shortly before and then after V.E. Day (May 8, 1945).

Her longtime roommate was Dolly Vinsant Shea. Sadly, on 13 April '45, Dolly died when her plane went down over Germany. Unbelievably, on the same day, Joan's fiancé Major Jehu Creed Walker, or "J.C.," lost his life. He was on board a newly repaired B-19 which was slow-timing and testing around the airbase in Bassingbourn when it crashed in a field near the base. J.C. was a flight surgeon and was on board only because he needed to fill out his mandatory four-flight-hours per pay period. Joan said she was also "J.C." since she was Joan Clara Denton.

Joan returned to the U.S. in June of '45, and came to San Francisco in 1946 with UAL, where she had a long and distinguished career before retiring in 1971. She met J. Lester Jervis and they married in 1965, after Joan helped convince UAL to allow their stewardesses to marry. They were long-time members of the St. Francis Yacht Club and enjoyed sailing and also many happy years of world travel. After Lester's death in 1984, Joan continued her travels and worked on her hobbies, delighting family and friends with her beautiful oil paintings and intricate needlepoint. She has been a devoted step-mother and "grandma" to the Jervis clan, and leaves and is sadly missed by her nephew Larry A. Denton and his wife Martha of Roanoke Rapids, NC.