

Nurses from Springfield school first in after the D-Day landing

Marijean Brown Phillips and Suella Bernard Delp were featured in Air Force exhibit last month.

By Tom Stafford
Staff Writer

SPRINGFIELD — The first two nurses to land in Normandy after the D-Day invasion met long before they boarded the Army Air Force transport plane and lifted off from England.

In the fall of 1938, Marijean Brown and Suella Bernard both enrolled as members of the Springfield City Hospital School of Nursing Class of 1940.

This past March, the two were honored by being featured in the exhibit "The Winged Angels: U.S. Army Air Forces Flight Nurses in World War II."

The permanent display can be seen at the National Museum of the United States Air Force at Wright Patterson Air Force Base.

"We went in on D-Day plus four," Marijean Brown Phillips said in a telephone interview from her home in Burlington, Vt., "and it was quite an experience."

Phillips, who grew up in Columbus, said she came to what later was known as the Community Hospital School of Nursing and what is now the Springfield Regional Medical Center School of Nursing because of family ties.

"My mother graduated from there and my sister graduated from there," said Phillips. Suella Bernard Delp, who died in 2002, originally was from Waynesville.

"We lived in the nurses' home, which was right beside the hospital," Phillips said, "and we went through the tunnel to get on duty."

Brown and Bernard, who were single then, went on to Wilson Memorial Hospital in Sidney and were working there when war broke out.

"Both of our brothers were in the Navy, and my older sister was in the Army," Phillips said. "We said, 'We've got to join up.'"

They went into Army Air Force because it offered their quickest route in.

Kentucky and beyond

Training for the nurses was at Bowman Field, Ky.

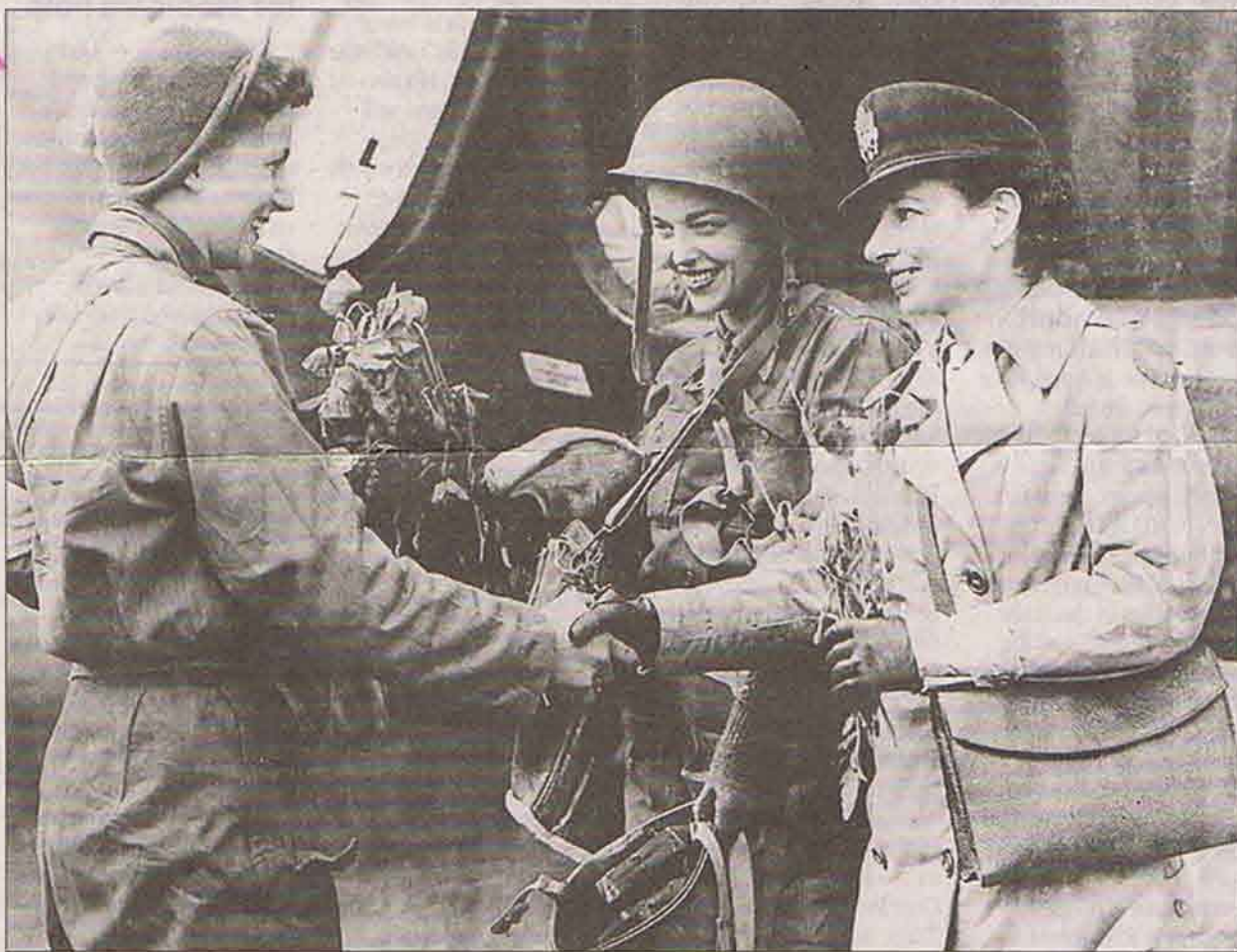
"We learned to ditch (into the ocean) and just take care of patients in the plane," Phillips said. "It was not too intensive."

The flight nurse program was, however, part of what Jeffrey S. Underwood, a Ph.D. and a historian at the National Museum of the United States Air Force, suggests was the United States' first real attempt to think globally.

"One of the reasons (medical evacuation) works is the U.S. Army Air Forces created an airlift system around the world," he explained.

Before the war, there was no international air traffic system to speak of, he said. But just as the ocean floor was first fully mapped for purposes of naval warfare, the system of air routes was established to deliver troops and supplies to battlefields worldwide.

Air evacuation was added as an element of airlift essentially by running



Lt. Suella Bernard (Delp) (left) and Lt. Marijean Brown (Phillips) (center) are congratulated by their unit's head nurse after returning from the first Ninth Air Force air evacuation mission to Normandy following the June 6, 1944, D-Day invasion. The poppies were picked from a mined field near the landing site in France. Photos courtesy of National Museum of the United States Air Force



This exhibit about Springfield City School of Nursing Graduate and Waynesville native Suella Bernard Delp is part of the permanent exhibit about flight nurses at the National Museum of the United States Air Force at Wright Patterson Air Force Base.

the system in reverse. The transport planes that took men and munitions abroad had empty space on return flights, room in which injured soldiers could be brought home.

Still, necessity turned out to be the mother of the swiftness of its invention. Responding to Allied casualties in Operation Torch in North Africa, Underwood said, generals cut flight nurses' training short "and sent them over without graduating."

Although the less severely injured might be able to survive the weeks-to-months-long sea voyages to hospitals in the United States, the critically injured needed faster transport.

That launched a kind of ad-hoc, fly-by-day-and-night approach to transporting the wounded.

By the time Phillips and Delp found themselves caring for those injured in the land war in Europe, the basics of that system were in place.

Two links

Phillips split her Army nursing days in two essential links in that system. One was at an air field in

Scotland.

"We picked up patients and brought them back to New York," she said.

The flights were on a C-54 "which we thought was a huge plane," she added, estimating she made six or seven such flights.

"We only lost one doctor and the crew, when they were coming back from New York," Phillips said. "We never heard from them. We just supposed they were shot down."

Her other regular route was the first leg of the journey for soldiers injured on the continent. Loading planes at field hospitals in France, "we would take them back to England to the general hospitals," she said.

Some then went on to the United States on trans-Atlantic flights. But, as the war went on, more were treated at hospitals in England, eventually without fear of German air raids.

Amid those duties came the trip to Normandy for Phillips and Delp.

D-Day plus four

"There were six of us that went" on June 10, 1944, Phillips said.

After the captain landed their plane and went in search of the field hospital, "We thought, well, we'll pick some poppies," she said. "Of course, there was a dead German there, and that scared of us to death."

After the captain returned and saw Phillips, Delp and others holding poppies, it was his turn to scare them to death.

The poppy field, he told them, was mined.

"He really read us the riot act," Phillips recalled. Remarks both made after the flight are preserved in the transcript of an interview NBC correspondent Ed Haaker did with them the next day.

After Phillips told Haaker the injured they'd flown back included six German soldiers, a Japanese man raised in Germany and American soldiers, Haaker asked how the nurses felt about transporting enemy wounded back for aid.

"I, for one, didn't think much about it," Delp told him.

"No, they were our patients," Phillips added.

"And it was our job to see they were as comfortable as possible," Delp said, adding "for the most part, they seemed very happy about getting out of the combat zone."

The wounded on both sides were given cigarettes and cookies, and nurses said they never felt in danger during the flight.

"We had excellent flight cover," Delp told Haaker. The flight also gave them a bird's eye view of evidence of the largest amphibious invasion in history.

Said Phillips: "As far as we could see, the Channel seemed to be clogged with ships of all descriptions ... battleships, PTs, landing barges, and a lot more."

Delp told Haaker that on the Channel side of the French airfield, she saw abandoned boats destroyed in the invasion and added that inland "the scene was the one you'd see in England ... farms under cultivation. The only thing, most of houses were demolished. Enemy snipers had been using them and apparently our forces had been forced to lay them low."

Telling Haaker they'd

been given a 24-hour pass to go to London for the interview, Phillips said "that means tomorrow or the next day ... we'll be off to France again to bring back the wounded from the fields of battle."

It was Delp's first trip into Germany that would earn her place in flight nurse history.

Glider mission

The Ludendorff Bridge over the Rhine River at Remagen holds a special place in World War II history. The German failure to destroy it in retreat enraged Adolph Hitler and allowed Allied Forces to quickly establish a formidable presence on the German side, making the advance much easier.

Those things contributed to the story being made into a motion picture, a 1969 release that starred, among others, George Segal and E.G. Marshall.

The role Delp played at the bridge was the result of Allied generals' decision in the hours and days after the bridge's capture to make the traffic one-way into Germany so as to pour in as many men and as much materiel as possible.

One consequence was that no roads were available to bring wounded U.S. troops back into France, leading to the rare use of gliders to transport the wounded.

On March 24, 1945, Delp, serving with the 816th Medical Air Evacuation Squadron, was on the second of two CG-4A gliders that landed near the bridge to pick up the wounded. Because there was no airstrip, the gliders, after being filled with a dozen patients each, were towed into the air by C-47 transport planes, trailing wires to snatch them.

In a story on the episode in Mobility Heritage and Heroes magazine, author Murdoch Moore said the system required only 100 feet of clear ground for the glider to take flight.

Moore reports that four of the most seriously injured on Delp's glider were German soldiers, something that led to bitter complaints from U.S. wounded.

The 30-minute flight

back to the 44th evacuations hospital in France went wasn't altogether smooth.

Writes Moore: "One of the nylon straps supporting the litters was pulled loose from its tie-down.... Nurse Bernard (Delp), who happened to be near the strap when it gave way, repaired it before it could cause any further injury to the patients."

In her own account in the same magazine, Delp said "there was quite a jolt on takeoff" that caused the strap to give way and that, on landing, "one of the wheels collapsed.... and we came to rest against a fence (but) had a smooth landing in spite of it."

Two air medals

Delp also said in the story that the glider system "could have become a successful ongoing operation" but was rendered unnecessary once traffic went both ways across the Rhine and trucks and ambulances could transport patients to usable air fields.

In his story, Moore quotes her as saying that what she had done wasn't at all heroic. Phillips also recalls her friend saying the trip "wasn't too bad."

"But then, she didn't think anything was too bad," Phillips said.

As the only nurse to make a glider rescue in a combat zone during the war, Delp was awarded an Air Medal to go with the one she earned for flying 50 air evacuation flights.

Underwood said flight nurses' medals were well-deserved.

"These women were in harm's way a lot more than they were supposed to be," he said. "These were aircraft flying into a combat zone," and because they typically brought munitions and equipment in with them, then took patients back, they were fair game as targets.

Moore notes that "glider crew members in a combat zone had roughly a 20 percent lethality rate per mission. This was roughly the attrition rate of B-17 crew members flying unescorted missions over Germany in 1943."

Return to Normandy

The two nurses were stationed in the French coastal city of Marseille awaiting orders to be transferred to the Caribbean, when the war ended.

By then, Marijean Brown had been married to Capt. Tom L. Phillips in a ceremony held outside Paris.

Months later, Suella Bernard became Suella Bernard Delp at a wedding in Carlisle, Pa.

"I used to see her there, but not frequently," said Phillips, who raised two sons with her physician husband, starting in Louisville, then in Paducah, Ky.

Phillips said her friend died in 2002 but was very much on her mind when she returned to Normandy with a fellow flight nurse last year.

"It was very moving," she said, particularly the visits to the cemeteries — and to the place where she and another graduate of Springfield City of Hospital School of Nursing made their own historic landing more than 65 years ago.

Contact this reporter at (937) 328-0368 or tstafford@coxohio.com.