

## World War II Navy Flight Nurses

*Do you know of any local WW II Flight Nurses?*

*Please let us know ([info@veteranscouncilsjc.org](mailto:info@veteranscouncilsjc.org)) as we would like to recognize and Honor their unsung heroics at our upcoming Veterans Day Event in St. Augustine*

Veterans Council Chairman Bill Dudley recently received an email from a former class mate asking him if he was aware of the heroic work of the World War II Navy Flight nurses? This piqued Bill's interest and Chairman Dudley and I opened up the history books.

The email was from Maureen Christopher, CDR, NC, USNR, Retired, a former Navy nurse. Though retired as a Navy Commander, she continues her interest in all things military as National Board Co-chair of the oral history committee in the Navy Nurse Corps Association (NNCA) (<http://nnca.org/>). Her committee's primary mission is to preserve the history and legacy of Navy nurses through videotaped oral histories. The videos are then transcribed for research, and possible entry into the Library of Congress. You're most likely aware of their chapters throughout the United States.

In Maureen's mothers class, which was the second class, we only know that she and one other are alive. Ages 96 and 97. Such brave women who hardly spoke of what they did, just knew they were "doing their job!" She never even told us she was in battle of Okinawa.

Maureen's 97 year old mother was one of the original 108 U.S. Navy flight nurses mentioned above. On one of mine and Ken's visits in Colorado, we were discussing her mom and Maureen asked if we'd like to see her mom's video (92 years old at the time) as she spoke about her experiences as a Navy flight nurse during WWII. It seems pretty remarkable that a force as great as America's U.S. Navy only established and trained five elite units, consisting of just 108 U.S. Navy nurses, to airlift injured military from Iwo Jima and Okinawa to field hospitals in the Pacific. Even more interesting is that those 108 woman seem in sad parallel to our Viet Nam veterans who've only recently begun to be honored for their service.

Another unique item of interest is that they named a darling Warrior canine doggie after my mom Jacqueline, "Jackie". (Golden and Labrador Retrievers) It was voted upon at the Navy nurse (NNCA) convention/ reunion in Seattle last year. I will also send you Mom's story as a reference and there is a Facebook page on Warrior Canine Connection (WCC) which covers "Jackie's" antics every so often! If you punch in Warrior Canine Connection out of Maryland, you can see live cams etc of these wonderful dogs who live with puppy parents after growing a bit bigger and are then given to wounded veterans as service dogs, after 2 years of growth, to help and support them! Great mission!

There are quite a few references to the nurses on the internet:  
<http://www.med.navy.mil/bumed/nmhistory/Pages/showcase/Innovations/FlightNurses/main.aspx>

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## Angels of the Airfields: Navy Air Evacuation Nurses of World War II

*By Andre Sobocinski, historian, U.S. Navy Bureau of Medicine and Surgery*

When the Naval Air Transport Service (NATS) R4D broke through the clouds of volcanic dust and smoke to land on Iwo Jima on March 6, 1945, it carried more than whole blood and medical supplies for the wounded.

On board this flight was a 22-year old Navy nurse named Jane Kendeigh, marking the first time in history that a Navy flight nurse appeared on an active Pacific battlefield. Kendeigh may have become a symbol for casualty evacuation and high altitude nursing on that day, but she was far from alone in this daring mission.

From 6 to 21 March 1945, Kendeigh and her fellow flight nurses air evacuated some 2,393 Marines and Sailors from Iwo Jima. Pictures of these first combat nurses show them offering encouragement and comfort to the rows of littered patients along the battlefield runways

In a recent telephone interview, Mary Hudnall, one of the first flight nurses on Iwo, recalled one patient being so grateful of his rescue that he insisted on giving her a memento from the battlefield. "He asked me to take a small

medicine bottle and said ‘It’s sand from Iwo Jima. I don’t want you to forget what we did here.’” When he fell asleep she tucked the trinket under his blanket. However, when he awoke he begged her to take it. As of April 2013, Hudnall still had this souvenir and still remembered the sacrifice of the men on Iwo.

By the time of the invasion of Iwo Jima, the concept of air evacuation was nothing new. On 1 September 1942, the joint-service South Pacific Combat Air Transport Command (SCAT) began using cargo planes to evacuate wounded servicemen during the Guadalcanal campaign. These missions were initially free of medical personnel until November 1942, when Navy pharmacists mates were added to flights

In March 1943, SCAT formally established a joint medical section comprised of Army and Navy flight surgeons to supervise and select casualties for air evacuation in theater. Flight nursing first took off when the U.S. Army employed nurses on evacuation missions to North African campaign in December 1942. A year later, in June 1943, the Army formally established the Army Air Force School of Air Evacuation at Bowman Field, KY to offer specialized training for its flight nurses.

Owing to the need for flight nurses in the Pacific war, the Navy established its own School of Air Evacuation Casualties at Naval Air Station Alameda, CA in 1944. Overseeing the school was a former United Airline stewardess and registered nurse named Mary Ellen O’Connor, later dubbed the most “flyingest woman in the world” for her long career aboard airplane. On 10 December 1944, the first class, consisting of 24 Navy nurses and 24 pharmacists mates, commenced.

The eight-week course consisted of lectures and demonstrations on survival training, air evacuation techniques, physiology of flight, first aid with emphasis on shock, splinting/redressing wounds, and treatment of patients in non-pressurized cabins. Students also learned about artificial horizons, and altitude through flight simulation exercises. Hallmark in the course was the intensive 18-hour “watermanship” training organized to simulate conditions of a water landing/crash scenario. The prospective flight nurses were required to swim under water, swim one-mile, and be able to tow victims 440 yards in 10 minutes.

Following graduation in January 1945, 12 of the first flight nurses were sent to Naval Air Station Agana, Guam, to prepare for their first battlefield mission while the others were used to transport casualties in the Continental United States and from the (Territory of) Hawaii. By the end of March, after two more classes graduated from the school, the Navy had 74 trained flight nurses in its employ; almost all would be used for the next big challenge, perhaps the biggest of them all: Okinawa.

The Battle of Okinawa alone accounted for 17 percent of the total Navy and Marine Corps casualties suffered in World War II. Owing to the enormous casualty totals, Okinawa was the largest combat casualty evacuation operation in U.S. military history and marked the first time the Navy evacuated more casualties by air than sea. Unsung heroes in this campaign, the Navy flight nurses, now using larger R5D which could accommodate up to sixty patient litters, would help evacuate some 11,771 to Guam.

After Okinawa, many of the flight nurses were used to repatriate Prisoners of War from the Philippines to Guam. A few who stayed in service years after the war would participate in the Berlin Airlift.

Owing to a longstanding ban on marriage that was renewed after the war, the choice of service and family was not possible for flight nurses and most left the Navy.

Today, the story of the brave women of Iwo Jima and Okinawa remains a footnote in most histories of military nursing; they never achieved any medals for their service let alone much notoriety. Then again, most would say that they were just happy doing their jobs.

As ENS Jane Kendeigh would remark about her service: “our rewards are smiles, a slow nod of appreciation, a gesture, a word, accolades greater, more heart-warming than any medal.”

Pictures attached below (3):



1. Maureen's mother in 1945 Guam



2. Service dog "Jackie", named after Maureen's mother



3. A Navy Flight Nurse on the Battlefield