

MY WONDERFUL LIFE

Written by Lillian M. Keil

Capt. Lillian M. Keil

Reminiscing about all the major events of my life, I still wonder how truly astonishing my life has been! In a very real sense, I took part in history.

I was raised in a convent by the Sisters of St. Joseph, at the Nazareth Academy, in Eureka, California. After completing high school, I joined the staff of student's nurses at St. Mary's Hospital in San Francisco. Upon graduation, being too young to take the state board exams, I entered Stanford Lane University Hospital, for post-graduate courses in Outpatient Obstetrics Operating Technique.

I joined the Army Air Corps. I did so for three reasons, the main one being a desire to help in the war effort as a flight nurse. The other two reasons were a coupling of nursing and flying! I requested a leave of absence from the United Air Lines, which had offered me the position of Chief Stewardess in San Francisco. If it was overseas I wanted, I could fly the new Hawaiian schedule and even work the inaugural flight. As it turned out, I did join the Army Air Corps, and upon my return from the War, I retained my position on the Hawaii-San Francisco flight.

Was sent to Bowman Field in Louisville, Kentucky, to the School of Air Evacuation. After graduation from the official first class, I was assigned to duty aboard the SS Cristobel, one of 88 ships sailing the Atlantic in the greatest convoy to cross up until that time. Several times the ships' engines were turned off, silenced because of German submarine activity.

We arrived for training at the Outer Hebrides, Guroch, Scotland. Flight nurses were given assignments upon arrival, mine being Special Services Officer at Botteaford, England. Before D-Day, I was reassigned to the base hospital at a B-17 air station at Bassingbourn, to do ambulance line duty. We would wait for the returning bombers and the planes with wounded would fire a flair and that was our signal to be ready with our ambulances. My tasks consisted of removing and assisting wounded crew personnel who had suffered wounds from shrapnel, flak, millimeter shells, or frostbite. I was based at Bassingbourn from November through December 1944. It was not uncommon for one of these "ambulance rides" to be forced to ditch in the English Channel on their return from bombing raids of V-2 bombsites over Germany. I found myself in London during its first blitzkrieg. How frightful!

After D-Day, following gliders and C-47's filled with provisions for the Normandy beachhead; we evacuated wounded from the front lines on converted supply aircraft. Our Ninth Troop Carrier planes followed General George Patton's Third Army across France, Belgium and the Rhineland, carrying gasoline, oil drums, ammunition, weapons, and supplies. Because of our cargo, we could not have the Red Cross symbol on the aircraft, because we carried military supplies to the front. And, so if our planes were grounded by bad weather, Patton's Third Army couldn't move either.

By the war's end, I had flown 250 missions and crossed the Atlantic 25 times. I returned to United Air Lines, which honored me for my military service with the position of Assistant Chief Stewardess.

I returned to active duty in 1950 for the Korean conflict. Originally, there were only 12 flight nurses in Japan, awaiting the Inchon invasion. The number increases to 30 by the end of June. We landed at Kimpo airfield shortly after it had been secured during the Inchon invasion. I was there during the retreat of UN troops down the Korean Peninsula, evacuating wounded from Yang-Pong, Wonson, Sinanju, Kimpo, Taegu, Pusan, to the hospitals in Japan. I flew with the First Marine Air Wing and the

Kyushi Gypsies (C-47's) to the Chosin Reservoir, tending to Marines who had been trapped there. There were 125,000 Chinese against the 15,500 Marines. It was also the turning point of the Korean War. The soldiers were severely wounded, cold and horribly frostbitten, some with only blackened bone stubs for fingers and toes. In all, I spent a grim 16 months in Korea, accruing 1,400 flight hours and flying 175 evacuation missions. I was also the first flight nurse to be sent some under combat crew rotation.

The Air Force assigned me to Castle AFB at Merced, California, as Chief Nurse, Operating Room. After only three months, I was reassigned to Hamilton AFB, near Ignacio, California, where my job was public Liaison for Headquarters, Fourth Air Force with the Surgeon General's Office, Washington D.C. Later, I recruited nurses for the military at colleges, State Nurses Association conventions, high schools, and nursing schools.

In 1953, I was "loaned" to Republic Pictures Studio as a technical adviser for the production of *Flight Nurse*; a film based on my experience s while serving with the 801st Medical Air Evacuation Transport Squadron. I formed permanent friendships with Joan Leslie, the star, and John Ford, the famed director, and the two even became the godparents of my first child, Lillianne.

When the film was completed, the Air Force and Republic Studios sent me on a nationwide tour with its stars. Thereafter, Norton AFB became my new assignment a Chief Nurse of the Outpatient Clinic at San Bernardino, California.

For twelve years of service on the Air Force and after the Normandy Invasion the Bulge, the Inchon Invasion, and the Chosin Reservoir, I received the Air Medal with three Oak Leaf Clusters, the European Theatre ribbon with four battle stars, a Presidential Unit Citation with one Oak Leaf Cluster, the Distinguished Unit Citation, the World War II Victory Medal, the American Defense Medal, the Korean Service Medal, Republic of Korea. I am fortunate to be among the most decorated women ever to wear the American uniform.

4 Air Medals

2 Presidential Unit Citations

1 Meritorious Unit Citations

1 American Defense Medal

1 American Campaign Medal

1 European-African-Middle Eastern Service Medal

with 4 Battle Stars

1 World War II Victory Medal

1 National Defense Medal

1 Korean Service Medal with 7 Battle Stars

1 United Nations Service Medal

1 Korean Presidential Unit Citation

1 Korean War Service Medal

250 Air Evacuation missions in World War II

175 Air Evacuations in Korean War
425 Total Combat Missions

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