

Ladies D-Day: It was not just one day. It was many days, many months, many years of strategy to end a war of many nations. The day beginning the end of that war, the Allied invasion at Normandy on 6 June 1944, would become known as D-Day.

Addressing the soldiers, sailors and airmen of the Allied Expeditionary Force before the invasion, General Dwight David Eisenhower said: "You are about to embark upon the Great Crusade, toward which we have striven these many months. The eyes of the world are upon you. The hopes and prayers of liberty-loving people everywhere march with you." But it is not noted if the eyes of the world were upon, or if the hopes and prayers of liberty-loving people everywhere marched with, the nurses who served their country along with the soldiers, sailors and airmen, to whom Eisenhower directed his remarks.

During World War II, Congress authorized that women could serve in auxiliary forces to assist the armed services. Hundreds of thousands of American women joined military programs that accepted them: the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps, women's divisions of the Navy, Air Force, Coast Guard, and Marines. More than 59,000 women served in the Army Nurse Corps, many in makeshift hospitals on or close to the front lines.

The Army Reorganization Act provided nurses receive a "relative" temporary rank of second lieutenant to major. Relative rank gave women army nurses the right to wear the military insignia but without military status of privileges, i.e., nurses did not rate the salute, a sign of military respect. Nurses were deemed not to need and did not receive full military training and, they received half the pay of equally ranked male officers.

No one kept records of these 59,000 nurses, not the military, not the U.S. Veterans Administration. Women military nurses after the war were not allowed membership in veteran groups. Schoolbooks did not mention them or their service. All forms of media, all but overlooked them, none of those whom the nurses helped to liberate and keep free, asked about their military service. Unable to answer questions not posed about their military service, they did not speak. The nurses, unnoticed, stood silent.

Lt. Frances L. Nash, RN was one of the nurses deployed to a military hospital in Manila in 1940 as the US prepared for the possibility of war. After the attack on Pearl Harbor and the Philippines, General Douglas MacArthur ordered troop withdrawal to the Bataan peninsula. Nash recalled being told the nurses were to remain until all staff members and supplies had been evacuated and to prepare to be taken prisoner which, in fact she was, along with sixty-six other army nurses who had remained behind with her. Once captured, they worked as nurses in the prison camps for the next three years, until the war ended.

During the first Allied amphibious invasion at North Africa 8 November 1942, Lt. Helen Molony was one of fifty-seven army nurses with meager military combat training serving with the inadequately equipped and staffed 48th Surgical Hospital. They landed with the combat troops to serve in the dangers of a combat zone. Dressed in full battle gear, helmets and field packs, they could have been mistaken as male soldiers, save for the rifles issued to the combat troops but not to the nurses.

When Andrea Noto and her brother were growing up, she never heard her mother

talk about her wartime activities. Occasionally, when a program on TV would show scenes from World War II, her mother would start to cry and say, "What you see on television is just a coating of what it was really like."

Anna Donato, RN, graduated in 1941 from Greenville Hospital School of Nursing, Jersey City, NJ and in 1943 enlisted in the Army. She decided to enlist before she was drafted. The Bolton Act was signed in 1943 to draft nurses into military service. It was never necessary to draft a nurse.

Lt. Donato's military service took her to the beaches of Normandy for the D-Day invasion. Donato recalled being one of only three nurses chosen for a secret mission to land with the troops that day. The Army has never confirmed this only that this information has not been declassified.

Eileen O'Connell Byrne was a Chicago public school nurse during the 1960s through the 80s. What her school children never knew, didn't ask and Byrne didn't tell, was that during the 1940s she was an army nurse who served during the D-Day invasion.

O'Connell grew up on Chicago's West Side, graduated from St. Joseph Nursing School in 1935 and worked psychiatric hospitals with some of the most violent patients until 1940.

She volunteered to serve as an Army nurse when the United States entered the war. Security regulations meant she couldn't tell her father where she was training. She saw active duty when she traveled by landing barge from England to Utah Beach, one of the five sites of the D-Day invasion, to care for the wounded soldiers, both Allied Forces and POWs alike. Observing a German soldier with severe burns being ignored by an American doctor, she pulled rank, took over his medical care stating, 'I don't care who you are, I'm a first lieutenant.'

In 1948 Eileen married Charles Byrne who died young and she was widowed at age 48 with five children. She went back to school and earned her BSN and in 1962 became a public school teacher-nurse. She actively promoted and was part of the training film that introduced the Head Start Program in the 1960s.

For some fifteen of her twenty-two years with the district, Byrne also worked nights in a nursing home for financial reasons. Her daughter Eileen, Jr. noted her mother never slept during this time, only took catnaps as she could. After her mandatory retirement at age 70, she worked at a day-care center, until called back by the Chicago schools as a nursing consultant where she worked until she was 92. And, when the Board of Education budget was tight, she volunteered to serve the schools, as she once volunteered to serve the nation on Ladies D-Day.

National Nurses Week (May 6-12) Every Year

Sources: "Working Without Uniforms," Helen Rameriz-Odell; "And If I Perish," Evelyn M. Monahan and Rosemary Neidel-Greenlee; <http://ww2chat.com/invasion-mainland-europe/3986-nurses-landed-troops-d-day.html>; <http://www.cps.edu/Spotlight/Pages/Spotlight317.aspx>.