

# **820 MEDICAL AIR EVACUATION SQUADRON**

## **MISSION**

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820 Medical Air Evacuation Squadron

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## **OPERATIONS**

The 92 personnel of the 820th MAES consisted of a CO, 4 Flight Surgeons, one administrator, one CN and 24 nurses, 60 NCO's and one Master Sgt. The class of 43H, flight nurses, received their certificates 21 Jan. 1944 from the AAFSAE at Bowman Fld., KY. During sqdn. activation week, all five sqdns. "passed in review" for Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt, wife of Pres. Franklin D. Roosevelt. The 820th nurses received a unit commendation for excellence.

On 9 Feb.1944, the 820th left Bowman Fld. by train for Camp Stoneman, Pittsburg, CA, arriving on 18 Feb. The next day, they embarked on a small ship but later transferred to the USS West Point, a former luxury liner, which for the duration of the war would be utilized as a transport for military troops. Boarding 19 Feb.1944, they joined a large convoy with Navy ships as escorts. When they crossed the Equator Feb. 28th, there were special Neptune ceremonies. 6 March, we docked at New Caledonia in the Pacific and reached Milne Bay, New Guinea 10 Mar. 1944 7,775 miles from our starting point! Disembarking on 13 Mar. 1944, we were trucked to a staging area for nurses. Many of the nurses had been there for two to six months, restricted to the compound area due to the recent rape of a nurse in this area.

The group set about readying the tents. The humidity, heat and insects had made us a bit short tempered. Occupants of the area fashioned a sign which read, "Creeps Inn." The nurses had certain hours for meals at the mess which was not remembered for its menu many recall the grapefruit jc. and the can of orange marmalade on each table with no bread or crackers to spread it on.

Milne Bay, New Guinea, (APO 928) Base A. (which had represented the first land victory by USAF and militia in Aug. 1942).We were assigned TOY here for one week for orientation and acclimation prior to our first overseas assignment. A nurse, of this station, was assigned as a big sister to each of the 820th nurses to instruct her in tropical living, provide advice and reassurance. As part of the acclimation, we were required to take afternoon siestas!

On to Port Moresby, 19 March 1944, APO 929, our first air evac assignment. This island was occupied by US Troops on 18 Feb. 1943. We landed at the Ward Drome (strip) in compliance with General Order 129 par 2,Hq. 5th AF,APO 925,dated 10 Mar.'44, where our CO, Maj. Ralph M. Lechausee gave our welcoming speech. He started out with, "Ladies and gentlemen, this is it" Many of us remember the beautiful Catholic church, the Dutch priest and the native servers. Our technicians were not with us at this point and some of us flew with the Australian medical technician, MacDonald on flights from Moresby to Saidor. Our technicians had gone ahead of us to prepare out headquarters and camp.

Here we were assigned to the 54th TCW, commanded by Col. Paul H. Prentiss, and under the 5thAF Commander, Ennis C. Whitehead, assigned routine flights with the 375th TC Sqdn. Flying in C-47s, supplies were taken to forward areas and injured soldiers were evacuated back to Port Moresby. We flew out of two airstrips: Ward Airdrome and Jackson Strip. Patients were evacuated from Dobodura and Wau.

Leaving Port Moresby 9 May 1944, we went to Nadzab, New Guinea (Markham Valley) which was captured by the Allies in Sept. 1943, and flew out of airstrips Sagerak, Dampier and Gusop, evacuating pts. from Lae, Tadj, Saidor, Medang, and Finschafen. Flights to Finachafen were over We Wak and some encounters were made with "ach-ach" from a Japanese air base while flying over We Wak.

July 1944, the nurses began R and R some going to Sydney, Australia and others to Cairns, Brisbane and Townsville, Australia. All the wonders of civilization, even breakfast in bed, were highlights of this wonderful leave time. They enjoyed sight-seeing, eggs, steaks, fresh fruits, vegetables and fresh milk. Sydney was a wonderful city with friendly and hospitable people, excellent water and sandy beaches. For entertainment, there were theaters, concerts, zoos with beautiful and rare birds and animals, and good restaurants.

Hollandia, which was located on Humbolt Bay and secured by US troops on 22 April 1944 was our next assignment, arriving there 7 Aug. 1944. We operated from three main airstrips: Cyclops, Sentani, and Hollandia Air Drome, evacuating injured from Morti, Wadke, and Owi. On our first flight into Wadke, we had to circle the airstrip to await the removal of planes destroyed by Japanese strafing only one-half earlier. Laila Budd, one of our nurses spent two nights in a trench dug around the air-strip perimeter in Wadke, due to enemy attacks. This was later a "Staging area" for the Jolly Rogers Bomber Grp. Our barracks here were erected on a Japanese burial ground as an area of disabled Japanese aircrafts, Zeros and Bettys were located just below our quarters. Swimming in Humbolt Bay was a treat.

On 7 Nov. 1944, we moved further north to Biak (Netherland East Indies), a coral reef captured by US Forces on 27 May, 1944. Upon our arrival, the 804<sup>th</sup> MAES was already stationed there. They occupied a wooden barracks and we lived in tents. We were placed on detached service with the 804th until they moved to the forward echelon at Buraen, Leyte, and Philippine Islands. We then moved into their vacated quarters. Biak had palm trees, vegetation, hot weather, 90-100% humidity, rain, high forceful winds and monsoons.

As the war in the Pacific progressed our flights increased both in number as well as length. We evacuated pts. from Noemfoor, Sansapor, Morotai, and began flights to Tacloban, Leyte, P.I., which required R.O.N.'s in Pelelieu, Palau Islands and continuing flights to Leyte. The forward echelon of the 820th had located on Baurauen, Leyte which required flights in L-5s from Tacloben to Baurauen and return trips to pick up our flights in Tocloben. Part of the Sqdn. remained in the rear echelon in Biak. It was during this period that two of the 820th personnel were declared missing or killed in action. On Jan. 26, 1945, Thelma LaFave from Georgetown, Mich., flight nurse and T/3 Orla Bittlitter technician were reported missing in flight from Pelelieu to Leyte (presumably over Zamboanga). No trace of plane or crew was found. And on Mar. 10, 1945, Martha F. Black from Ny, NY, flight nurse and T/3 Delbert V. Beery, technician, were killed in Luzon, P.I. in an air crash with patients aboard. All persons on board were killed. The horrors of war and combat were very real to us as we grieved for our lost friends. They shall always remain in our hearts and this history is dedicated to their memory. May we never forget them.

In late Jan. 1945, we moved to Buraen, Leyte, an island in the Philippines, which was captured by Allied Troops 20 Oct. '44. Buraen was a small dirty village from which we flew to Tacloben Airdrome to catch our flights throughout the area. Aerial "dog fights" between the US and Japanese fighters were a usual occurrence. It was here that two of our nurses had a very close call when on 10 Feb., 1 C-47 with a crew and passengers totaling 12, two of which were Lt.

Victoria Lancaster and Lt. Theta Phillips, had blown off course in bad weather, was running low on fuel had lost all contact by radio, was circling searching for a place to land. That morning on orders from Gen. Geo. C. Kenney, four P-51 pilots, Cpt. Louis E. Curdes, Lts. Schmidtke, Scalley and LaCroix, took off from Central Luzon at Mangaldan to do reconnaissance missions, each having certain areas to observe. Having observed Formosa, they headed for the Bataan Island chain looking for enemy activity or air-strip. Spotting an airstrip on a Japanese held island, Lts. Scalley and LaCroix strafed the area. Lt. LaCroix's plane was hit by enemy fire injuring his leg and he was forced to ditch in the sea. When Capt. Curdes learned of the incident, he and Lt. Schmidtke arrived on the scene to help protect the downed pilot. Realizing fuel was running low and night approaching, Capt. Curdes ordered Lt. Scalley to return to base and send a PBY to rescue the downed pilot.

Capt. Curdes gave the Jap held air strip his full attention and strafed it from one end to the other. Pulling up, he suddenly saw another plane approaching which appeared to be a transport. He climbed to get in a good position to fire when he recognized the American insignia on the transport. Using his radio, he attempted to warn the transport of impending danger on the Jap held island but got no response from the transport. Ignoring his efforts to divert it, he was forced to fire a round of ammunition at both engines crippling it and causing it to ditch alongside Lt. LaCroix in the water. When the door of the downed transport opened, out crawled 12 people, two of them nurses. They ditched safely and soon the two dinghies were tied together. Another crew of P-51's came to relieve Capt. Curdes, who had been keeping watch overhead. He returned to base and returned the following morning with a PBY to rescue the stranded personnel. Later, Capt. Curdes was awarded the DFC for deliberately shooting down an American plane and he proudly painted the American flag on the fuselage of his plane!

We prayed this would be the end of our troubles but on 11 Feb. 1945, a C-47 pilot was wounded by artillery fire while the plane was on the ground at Clark Fld., Luzon in the Philippines. On board, were Lt. Mary Coughlin and T/3 Joseph Pelletier, members of the 820th. The rest of the crew returned to base intact. Sad to say, on 17 Feb. 1945, tragedy struck again when one of our ground crew members, Louis Ellenberger was drowned in the surf at Dulag, Leyte Island in the Philippines.

Dulag was our 2nd assignment in the Leyte area. We lived in tents built upon stilts. The airstrip consisted of corrugated metal runways. While awaiting "take-offs" in our revetments, the noise from the fighters and bombers taking off was almost unbearable. From Dulag, we evacuated injured from Panay, Negros, Mindoro, Cebu, Samar, Baguio, San Fernando and Lingayen. On 3 June 1945, our CO, Maj. Hugh Crumay, M.C. was transferred to Far Eastern Air Forces in Manila as Flight Surgeon of FEAF. We greatly missed him and his fatherly concern for all of us, but it represented a promotion with an increase in rank to Lt. Col. His new post would unify all air evac operations in the Southwest Pacific area. Capt. Leopold Snyder, 804th Flight Surgeon and Senior Air Evac Officer in the 5th AF became our new CO. Our Chief Flight Nurse, Capt. Alice Ristine, received orders for duty change and Capt. Mary Kerr, 804th MAES was appointed to Chief Flight Nurse of the 5th AF. She was the first female to hold a staff post in the 5th AF Headquarters.

The 820th flight personnel were very busy with many rapid moves in the Philippines which were: Dulag, Leyte Island (Feb. 27, 1945); Camp Dau, Luzon Oune 11, 1945); Camp Statsenburg, Luzon (Aug. 6, 1945). Aug. 22, 1945, we moved to Motobee, Okinawa Island, of the Riukiu chain. The sqdn's. stay there was short due to a typhoon which demolished the area. We were evacuated to Kadena and then to Yantan, Okinawa.

We reached Luzon, P.I. 11 June 1945. Manila had fallen to the US Troops on 5 Feb. 1945. We were assigned to Camp Dau and occupied a barracks (brick) which was quite modern with a solarium and was formerly a Japanese Officer's barracks located near Clark and Nicholas Air Fields. The only drawback to our plush quarters was an over abundance of bats, which necessitated the use of mosquito nets. It was great to be in civilized surroundings again with paved highways and to watch the caribou wandering about. Patients were evacuated throughout Luzon.

The last few months of the war were near; the atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima, Japan 6 Aug. 1945. American C-54s arrived from England and were used to transport our prisoners of war to the US. The C-54s were quite a contrast to the C-47s and C-46s which we had been flying in. We flew with the large transports to Finchafen, Fadge, adzab, Lae, Hollandia, Momote, Biak to Leyte, Luzon and Okinawa.

Some of the personnel witnessed the green strip down the runway when the Japanese came for the signing of the surrender of the Japanese to Gen. Douglas MacArthur.

Our personnel were rotating stateside, changes occurred swiftly and replacements came to fill each vacancy. Already we began to miss those that had left, we had little or no information or communication. The time in history for us in the Southwest Pacific was over, our work was completed and each of us had given our best effort to the war.

820th Sqdn. Leyte; New Guinea; Western Pacific (ground). Received Philippines Presidential Unit Citation for the period 17 Oct. 1944-4 July 1945 GO 47-50.

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Air Force Lineage and Honors

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Sources

Air Force Historical Research Agency. U.S. Air Force. Maxwell AFB, AL.