

829 MEDICAL AIR EVACUATION SQUADRON

MISSION

LINEAGE

829 Medical Air Evacuation Squadron

STATIONS

ASSIGNMENTS

COMMANDERS

HONORS

Service Streamers

Campaign Streamers

Armed Forces Expeditionary Streamers

Decorations

EMBLEM

MOTTO

NICKNAME

OPERATIONS

Many flight nurses as medical attendants aboard medical transport planes participated in numerous long over water flights returning battle casualties to hospitals in the rear area. Many hours of these flights were flown over or within enemy held territory and were subject to

possible enemy interception and anti-aircraft fire. Their devotion to duty and untiring efforts reflect great credit upon themselves and the military service.

Mrs. Jane (Simons) Silva, was on a trip off the eastern coast of New Guinea on a DC-3 when it hit an air pocket and suddenly dropped 1,000 ft. Heavy cargo boxes flew up in the air and came down with such a thud that the entire plane was filled with dust and she thought the plane would break in two.

On another flight to Okinawa in April of 1945, the plane Jane was on prepared to land at a field tent hospital surrounded by mud to pick up the wounded. Instead they were informed to go into a holding pattern for 45 min. while the fighter planes chased off the Japanese planes. She could see the battleships below in the harbor with smoke billowing from their cannons.

On another flight, Jane specialized a patient in an iron lung from the Philippines to Travis AF Base in Fairfield, CA. A third experience was her most unforgettable, was bringing a load of prisoners of war from Harmon field near Manila to Hickam Field, Honolulu. This sqdn. flew the Pacific route with home base being Hickam Field, Hawaii.

We took off at 8:15AM from Catania, Sicily. It was overcast and gloomy for several days. Each day a group went out to go to Italy but could get no weather clearance so returned to quarters. Each day another nurse and a technician would be added to the list to go until we finally had 13 nurses and 12 technicians, who were members of the 807th MAES. We had only been overseas two months. Activated late in 1942, we had been given an intensive 6 weeks training at Bowman Field, Ky. before leaving NY in a large convoy. Cpl. Hornsby from the 802nd MAES stationed in Palermo was hitching a ride back to Italy where he helped the doctors care and sort the patients for us. There was a crew of four. There were 30 of us on board that old C-53 1st Lt. Charles Thrasher was pilot, 2nd Lt. James Boggs was co-pilot.

The weather report was a cold front moving down from Naples but we would get to Bari hours ahead of it well, we evidently met it right off the Coast of Sicily. I've flown some 1,500-plus hours since and know I have never met rougher weather for such a stretch we were in such weather for at least five hours. I remember seeing a couple of water spouts on the sea below us. We were on the deck trying to go under, and then 12,000 feet and over trying to get above to no avail. We did come out over Bari, but the radio either failed just after they gave their name, plane number, etc. and asked for landing instructions, or it was sending and not receiving. The pilots did not hear Bari give us landing instructions (we learned 2 months later that they had had an absolute minimum ceiling, but since we were there decided to let us come on in.) We also found out that all other planes that had left Catania that same day had turned back due to the bad weather! The pilots had dared not come down to 500 feet in the weather as the foothills of 600-plus feet were only 30 miles or so from Bari.

I first realized we were over enemy territory when after more than four hours of flying we came over an open area of sky and saw a field below. Thrasher said, "There's a field, we'll try to make it, fasten your seatbelts tight, it may be a rough landing." As we let down through the hole in

the clouds, we saw puffs of anti-aircraft fire right up beside us a slight clank on the tail and we lurched a bit. We took off into the clouds again. The pilot may have seen planes take off. My belief was that we had gone too far north into Italy.

I was sure sometime before this that the radio was not functioning as I sat in the 2nd bucket seat and could see the radio man desperately checking and trying to work the radio. Having made this same trip before I knew it was only about a two-hour flight.

Sometime after the anti-aircraft fire, I was sitting looking out the window and caught a fleeting glimpse of a mountain off our wingtip through the overcast not unusual but this one seemed to be higher than we were flying. I was sure we did not have enough parachutes (the ones we had been so carefully fitted with at Bowman Field had not arrived as yet!) and I could count about 6 Mae Wests swinging in the rear of the plane.

I can remember cautiously glancing down the aisle at the nurses-trying to see their reactions (four of the 13 were former stewardesses) but mostly they were a group of stoics. Perhaps our training accounted for it nursing, airlines and air evacuation for I could easily see that some of the technicians across the aisle were frightened and apprehensive. Because of their fear, I didn't want to appear to be too anxious about our situation. Nonetheless, as I saw it we had very slim chances, and with these thoughts I started "writing off" all the passengers. The nurses I knew fairly well (2 were married), I knew a few of the technicians and then only by name. I sat studying each one, wondering which might be married, and perhaps be leaving children as well as wives. After having gone down the entire line (some of the fellows were shaking so they had clasped their arms around their knees in an attempt to keep themselves still.) and after checking us all off, I decided I didn't want to know when we hit that mountain so I fixed our Musette bags, loosened my belt and lay back somewhere along there I must have dozed off.

Thrasher came out some time later and said that we were going down through this hole because it looked like level ground down below. We were to fasten our seat belts tight as we were to make a wheels up landing and it could be rough. He did put the wheels down,, it was wonderful those first few seconds to feel the wheels roll under us, but immediately we caught and could feel the drag as we mired in and the nose of the plane rooted in the mud. Sgt. Shumway (crew chief) sat in the back of the plane hoping to hold down the loose ends of equipment. He held onto the doorknob of the toilet for support. He could not hold on, and came through the air striking his forehead on the metal ceiling braces and cut his knee on the rough metal floor. I believe he later ascertained that he had kicked Lois Watson on the cheek as he flew past. She received a small cut on the cheek and loosened some teeth. We cleared the plane quickly. Shumway was carried out and placed on the tail of the plane. Later the men removed part of the bucket seats and fashioned a litter to carry him to a farmhouse.

We had landed in a cornfield which was part of a dried lake bed It was absolutely empty and we were sure we were miles from nowhere. Suddenly from behind almost every stump, bush and tree, a dozen or more men and boys came running toward the plane. All were carrying guns slung over their backs and some had hand grenades. One man came running right toward me

with a big smile on his face, and I just stood watching him come, evidently believing his smile and ignoring the gun. I felt no fear, standing there watching his approach. As he reached me, he grabbed my hand jabbering wildly of which I could not discern, "Americano, Americana!" Still thinking we were too far north in Italy, I pointed to him and asked, "Italo?" (Italy invaded Albania in 1939 and the Albanians were not happy with Italy). He drew back, puffed himself up and pointed to the red star on his blue uniform-type hat, and said, "Russia!" I was dumbfounded thinking, "We can't be in Russia, we were over water about ninety minutes ago. He had been telling me his allegiance, and I had been asking for the country in which we had landed. He went on to welcome the others and I turned to go back in the plane to get some things. Ann Maness, another flight nurse, was coming out. I stopped and must have stared at her for my mind was in a whirl and all I could think of was, "Ann is here too!" Since I had "written us all off" a short time earlier, I had to shake myself to bring myself back to reality. (Later Ann and I were discussing this and I explained as how I had "written us all off." Ann asked me jokingly, "which way did you think you went, since you were so surprised to see ME there!"

Some of us had gone back into the plane to salvage what we could. Boggs came running to the door to inform us we were in Albania and it was occupied by the Germans. In fact, they were not far away and may have seen the plane crash. We grabbed what supplies we could K-rations, bouillon, parachutes, Musette bags with personal items in them. The pilots took out the navigational equipment and the natives ruined the radios trying to salvage them.

Boggs explained that the man on the white horse would lead us to a nearby farmhouse. We walked about 2 miles, uphill, through open fields of stubby grass, bushes and stumps, and there was that constant cold miserable drizzle of rain. The farmhouse where we stayed two and a half days was a primitive place a fireplace but no chimney, tiny windows with no panes, no furniture. We slept on the floor around the fire it was a tossup as to whether we would freeze to death or suffocate from the smoke!

Next day we headed for Berat, a village of 600 houses. The day we arrived, the U.S. B-25s bombed a German installation nearby. We were greeted by the townsfolk with flowers and songs. They thought we were the invasion forces of which they had prayed for. In Berat, we stayed with different families breaking up into groups of 2 or 3 to a house. During the day, we were given a tour of the city the local shrines and other sights of interest. We remained at Berat three nights. On the 4th morning, the Germans began shelling the town. Ann Kopsco and I were awakened and went to the door just as two of the technicians went by on their way to ask the pilot what they should do. We decided to head out of town and the small road was crowded. The pilots managed to hitch a ride on a bright orange truck and stopped and picked us up. The Albanians also crawled on board. German planes were bombing the town and each time they passed over we abandoned the truck for cover. We decided to go up into the hills and wait out the raids. In the meantime, the planes strafed the road and the truck we were using.

When we reassembled on the road, we realized we could not account for three of the nurses - Maness, Lytle and Porter. Not only were these three nurses missing but of the 27 accounted for

when we crashed, 17 had gone up to hide. The other 10 plus an American speaking Albanian, who had been with us seemed to vanish.

We had been in Albania one week, exactly. We spent four days following a young boy, who actually did not understand a word we said! On the 3rd day, we came upon a village and there waiting for us was the missing 10! While they were waiting for us to catch up to them, they had had a chance to bathe. I was sitting by Jean Rutkowski telling her of our trek when she said, "You know, you positively stink!" We had all picked up body lice and fleas from the native homes. They often pushed a goat out of the way to make room for us at the fire. They did not have any covers to offer us for the Germans took moveable belongings and often hostages so any extra blankets, dishes etc., were all carefully buried.

We wandered from village to village in search of food. The 27 of us, plus guides, interpreters, and "hangers-on" would eat all their available food. They were anxious for us to move on because of the fear that the Germans would find us there. Their fear of the "Ballista" (opposite of Partisans) who were sympathetic to the Germans was great. The permanent German encampments were fairly easy to skirt but the Ballista slipped about in small groups. For the first three weeks, our main reason for moving was for food and to dodget he enemy.

Thrasher sent a note via a runner to the British the 2nd week. We received an answer via the runner the day after Thanksgiving. They advised us to try and reach them as we were fairly near a village near Korcza almost to the Greek-Yugoslav border and we got there Dec. 1st. There we met Gary Duffy and Blondie, his wireless expert. They notified their headquarters in Cairo that we were accounted for. The Army notified our parents that we were in Allied hands. The British SAS made a supply drop and we received shoes and socks which were badly needed as our shoes were worn out. The clothes dropped were men's sizes and the small girls put six pairs of socks on to fit in the huge shoes. The British assigned Duffy and Blondie to accompany us to the coast, where we would meet a boat for pickup.

Our topic of conversation for most of our waking hours was food! The staples for the Albanians was cornbread with no salt and leavening and boiled beans. Occasionally goat-milk cheese which was a strong flavored food was added.

The day after Thanksgiving, we crossed a mountain rather than go around it for the Ballista had taken a position in a town along the route. Later we learned the Albanians never crossed that route or peak after Sept.! Near the top of the mountain, a dark cloud moved in and suddenly we were in a blizzard. This compared to blizzards I had witnessed in Northern Minn. as a child. The guides panicked for the trail was being covered by the snow. Our long line of travelers began slipping, falling and disappearing from sight. The wind was howling so strongly, we could not pass the word to regroup. One of the technicians managed to get up to the head of the line and slow up the guides. Miraculously they stumbled out of the storm, down the mountain to a little village.

The numbing cold had left some with frostbite of fingers and toes. We noticed that as we came into the village some of the natives were chattering and gesturing toward us. This was the usual reaction of the natives so we ignored it. They were excited because we had crossed the second highest mountain after September! This was the second time on this adventure that I didn't expect to make it.

The Germans were aware that we were there and visited the villages asking if a party of Americans with 13 nurses had been there. This gave us hope that they had not captured the other three. We constantly worried about the fate of the three missing nurses.

The pilots decided to ask for planes to rescue us in mid-Dec. We had seen a field near Agrisicosta; were told the Italians used it but the Germans never did. And as far as the pilots could tell, it was not mined. They sent a message to the 12thAF Headquarters asking for a plane to rescue us at this site. The weather turned bad the next day and for 10 days we waited. On the 29th of Dec., we got a wireless that a C-47 with fighter escort would arrive about 1300 hours. There was dissension between the pilots and Gary as he didn't approve of this attempt at all. He had been in the country 7 months and was aware of the possibility the plane might bog down and then we would have more stranded to care for.

The Germans took Agrisicosta the day after Christmas. I was at this point that the AF decided to add the Wellington Bomber with bombs to circle the town with orders to bomb. We had wired that if we felt it was safe for them to land, some of the men would be holding a yellow parachute silk at the end of the field. Gary disapproved of the signal. He was not aware that eighteen P-38s and a bomber and 2 C-47s would be used. Our messages had been very garbled. We were up on a nearby hill and it was too far for us to reach the area without keeping the planes on the ground too long. We were amazed that the AF would put out that much equipment for so few of us! The rescue could not be made and the planes flew away as the stranded party stood and watched. Then came the long forced march of 7 days to the sea. By now, more than half had dysentery, two were seriously ill with jaundice, and another with pneumonia. Finally reaching the rocky Atlantic Coast, the nurses were met by a British Officer, who fed them chocolate bars and candy. Through the next silent hours of the night they were transported in one row boat, a few at a time, to the waiting British motor boat. Shortly after midnight, they headed away from Albania to the Allied-occupied Italy, reaching there 9 Jan., 1944. The saga was not ended, though; for not until 25 March 1944 did the three nurses, who had become lost from the party, arrive by an equally circuitous path at 12th AF Headquarters.

Ava Maness, Helen Porter and Wilma Lytle were left behind at Berat. Ava Maness, one of the three mentioned above, tells her story at the WWII flight nurse's reunion May 1988. "We were taken to the city of Berat and hidden in various homes. The next morning, 27 of our group went off to meet an American OSS Officer. Three of us remained hidden in a home. The Albanians told us to keep wearing our uniforms, to act natural, and that if the Germans found us to immediately admit to being American nurses. In two days, we saw Germans out of the windows. Some Hungarian soldiers, forced to fight for Germany, found us. When they found

out that we were nurses and Americans, they shook our hands and upon leaving told the Albanians hiding us, 'Take care of the girls'."

Around April 18th, we were told to make dresses so that we would look like Albanian women. Our hostess taught us how to make it in the style of an Albanian dress. When not making dresses, we played three-handed bridge. One night after being in the home four months, we three nurses began driving with two Albanian men who told us we would be coming to a German roadblock and we were to keep our eyes lowered in the manner of Albanian women. We did as we were told; the German walked all around the car and then let us pass. That night, we camped in hills that looked a bit like the Texas Hill Country. The following morning, the OSS Officer met with us. He was the same OSS officer who met with the second group of refugees.

We got a lot of help from the British, who were well liked by the Albanians. The Albanians who helped us wore red caps and were called partisans. The talk was that they were backed by the Russians. Even an Albanian administrator, who was working for the Germans, helped us. The OSS man was paying money, but these people helping us took risks that money alone could not buy safety. Late one night we were put into a boat on the southern coast of Albania and were ordered below deck. It was a rough ride in the Adriatic Sea and all night long there was the risk of the Germans finding us. The next morning, we put into a southern harbor of Italy called Brindisi. It is precisely at the top of the heel of the map of Italy. It was under Allied control and from there we were taken to Bari, Italy.

The Army gave us orders to keep our mouths shut. I suppose because of the OSS Officer. To this day, I have never talked with the press. At long last, I would like to let the people know some of the things women went through for our country. I am simply telling you history."

Air Force Lineage and Honors

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Sources

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