

Women in Bataan: Their names must be hallowed

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Scared, malnourished, isolated and overworked, the Army and Navy nurses who served in the Philippines during the siege and fall of Bataan were true military heroes.

In her book, "We Band of Angels," Elizabeth M. Norman shares the story of American nurses trapped on Bataan and Corregidor by the Japanese during World War II.

Through Norman's extensive research and numerous personal interviews with the women who served, a gut-wrenching picture of their struggles and the overall horror of the surrender of American forces in the Philippines haunts the reader.

Norman spent eight years researching the book, which includes maps, photos, time lines, extensive footnotes, and a bibliography. Her writing is clear and crisp, and she often lets the book's subjects tell the tale in their own words.

Norman's own nursing expertise lends credibility to the book. She is an associate professor of nursing and the director of the doctoral program at New York University's Division of Nursing in the School of Education. Her specialty is nursing history and she is the author of "Women at War: The Story of Fifty Military Nurses Who Served in Vietnam."

The book begins by describing prewar conditions for the nurses serving in the Philippines. The nurses considered the island a tropical paradise, an exotic location for their work.

"It was a halcyon life, cocktails and bridge at sunset, white jackets and long gowns at dinner, good gin, and Gershwin under the stars," Norman writes.

That view would change overnight with the Japanese air strikes on the Philippines that began December 8, 1941.

The majority of the nurses were in Manila at the start of the war. After the fall of Manila, the nurses worked out of two makeshift jungle hospitals. Thousands of patients, were treated at these facilities where a ward's roof consisted of overhead vegetation.

Like their war-fighting male counterparts, the nurses kept working despite dwindling medical supplies, inadequate facilities and lack of food. Many kept performing duties while suffering from dysentery and malaria themselves.

Norman chronicles the heartache of broken promises of support and reinforcements for the allies on Bataan and the final decision to surrender the peninsula. The nurses were immediately ordered to retreat to Corregidor.

They went hesitantly.

"Lucy Wilson was assisting in the operating room when the orders reached her. 'Walking out in the middle of an operation with hundreds lined up under the trees waiting for surgery was devastating to me. This I have to live with for the rest of my life.'"

"The women said nothing to their patients, but lying there in their bamboo beds or on the wet jungle floor, the patients knew. Everyone knew. 'Those eyes,' said Minnie Breese. 'Those eyes just followed us.'"

Norman goes on to relate the fall of Corregidor and the fate of the nurses. A handful were able to escape by sea-plane, but the rest were transported to camps where they remained under harsh conditions — sickness, malnutrition, rape and brutality — until the Philippines were liberated by Allied forces.

Throughout the book Norman does more than simply chronicle the nurse's experiences.

She provides examples of public perceptions of women serving in a combat area. She offers journal entries and writings from male soldiers giving their views on women so close to the front lines. Norman relates some of the nurses' objections to how Hollywood depicted them and points out falsehoods reported about the Nurses by the media of the time.

Norman includes a fitting description of the nurses by General Jonathan Wainwright, leader of the American troops in the Philippines at the fall of Corregidor.

"You may talk all you want of the pioneer women who went across the plains of early America and helped found our great nation...but never forget the American girls who fought on Bataan and later on Corregidor. Theirs had been a life of conveniences and even luxury. But their hearts were the same hearts as those of the women of early America. Their names must always be hallowed when we speak of American heroes. The memory of their coming ashore on Corregidor that early morning of April 9, (1942) dirty, disheveled, some of them wounded from the hospital bombings — and every last one of them with her chin up in the air — is a memory that can never be erased."

"We Band of Angels" is a must read for anyone who wants to understand the hardships and sacrifices experienced by American service members in the Philippines during World War II. For her efforts in writing "We Band of Angels," Norman received the Lavinia Dock Award for historical scholarship, the American Academy of Nursing National Media Award, and the Agnes Dillon Randolph Award.

"We Band of Angels" is available from Simon and Shuster Publishing. For more information visit www.simonsays.com.