

# Good memories for Nurse Cadet Vera Amyotte

Rhonda Silence

For as long as she can remember, Vera Peltz Amyotte wanted to be a nurse. But she didn't know when she entered Bethesda Hospital School of Nursing in St. Paul in 1942 that her nursing career would lead to a stint in the nearly 180,000-strong US Army Nurse Cadet Corps.

Before she was even born, Vera's family may have set the wheels in motion for her career as a nurse. When her older sister was hospitalized for an appendectomy, the nurse treating her was named Vera. When Vera was born shortly after, she received the nurse's name and heard the story of the nurse's kindness. She knew as early as high school she wanted to pursue nursing. Her Belle Plaine High School yearbook described her as "industrious and accomplishes everything she sets out to do" and declared that she would be a nurse someday.

She was working toward that goal, in college at Bethesda Hospital School of Nursing in Minneapolis, with only six months left of training, when the call went out for nurses to help the nation. The Bethesda Supervisor of Nurses handed out applications. "They were so short of nurses, they needed anyone who could work," recalled Vera over coffee at her cozy Grand Portage home. "They wanted cadets to sign up for six months of service."

America was facing a health care crisis as nurses joined the Army and Navy in record numbers and were sent overseas. Hospitals and clinics were closing; immunizations had been halted; and hospitals were overwhelmed by the polio epidemic. The Federal Security Administration met with nursing organizations looking for solutions. The answer was the creation of the US Cadet Nurse Corps in 1943 with Public Law 34, introduced by Ohio Congresswoman Frances Payne Bolton. The US Cadet Nurse Corps paid tuition, room and board and a stipend to young women who joined, pledging their lives to their country and promising to engage in essential military or civilian nursing.

Vera and some of her friends applied for the program. "We all decided, what the heck, we'll try it."

Vera noted that most of the nurse cadets served in civilian hospitals. However, Vera and two other nurses from Bethesda found themselves on the way to Schick General Army Hospital in Clinton, Iowa in August 1944. It was an exciting challenge for the young nurses. "We learned more than we would have otherwise," she said.

Vera worked in a variety of depart-



ments for two weeks at a time—in the surgical department, the post-operative ward, with people with mental health issues, and even on the maternity ward assisting military wives. She recalled lines of nervous soldiers lined up for immunizations. It was sometimes very stressful, such as when young nurses were responsible for a room of eight patients in casts and traction devices. "There were some people who were so sick," she said.

The nurses worked eight-hour days in three different shifts and also participated in physical exercise two times a week. "We didn't really need it," she said. "We walked and walked around Schick Army Hospital—I think we walked 10 miles a day, just doing our job!"

A job that was rewarding for its educational opportunities, but not financially. The stipend monthly promised did not go far. "When all was done, I had \$25 spending money," remembered Vera.

However, she made many lifelong friends, whom she sees occasionally at nurse's reunions. "It was the

most fun I ever had in my life," said Vera. "I look back and laugh."

Another reason her Nurse Cadet experience was so memorable is because that is where she met her husband of nearly 62 years, William "Bill" Amyotte. Bill passed away July 6, 2007. Staff Sergeant Amyotte was assigned to Schick Army Hospital while recovering from osteomyelitis of his hand, complications of an injury he suffered while stationed in Alaska. Vera spotted Bill in the hospital cafeteria, his injured arm in a sling, and she thought he looked really cute. She encountered him again when she was his nurse and he fought a 107-degree temperature. Finally, they met in happier circumstances, when they ended up sharing a cab to an off-post destination. That led to dates—with Sergeant Amyotte careful to get his sweetheart home back to the nurses' dorm before the 10:00 p.m. curfew. The couple was married in Grand Marais on July 25, 1945.

By then Vera had completed her nurses training. She graduated from Bethesda on January 28, 1945. She went on to work at Swedish Hospital



**Left:** US Army Nurse Cadet Vera Amyotte in the gray uniform designed for the young nurses assigned to the US Public Health Service during World War II. **Above:** Vera, with her future husband, Staff Sergeant Bill Amyotte. **Right:** Retired nurse Vera Amyotte would like to see the Nurse Cadets recognized for their service to the country.



in Minneapolis for 25 years, then the Minneapolis Veterans Administration for five years and St. Joseph Hospital in Grand Rapids for 10 years. She and Bill enjoyed traveling all over the world, continuing the adventure begun at Schick Army Hospital.

However, Vera is saddened that the US government has never acknowledged the contribution that the Nurse Cadets made to war efforts. Between 1943 and 1948, 179,000 women enlisted in the US Cadet Nurses Corps. In 1945 Cadet Nurses provided 80% of the care in our nation's hospitals.

Vera appreciates the efforts of US Representative Nina Lowrey of New York, who has introduced legislation nine times, attempting to recognize the Nurse Cadets. The latest bill, HR 1522, United States Cadet Nurse Corps Equity Act, was entered March 16, 2009. The purpose of HR1522 is to classify service in the Cadet Nurse Corps between July 1, 1943 and December

15, 1945 as active military service. The act requires the Secretary of Defense to issue an honorable discharge to each person whose service qualifies. This change in status would give corps members access to services administered by both federal and state's Veterans' Affairs departments.

Contacted by phone, John Schadt of Congressman James Oberstar's office said the 8<sup>th</sup> District representative has co-sponsored the bill in the past. Schadt said unfortunately the latest version of the bill has gone to the Committee on Veteran Affairs. "The problem is we do not have direct jurisdiction over this," said Schadt. "Certainly Congressman Oberstar supports this and would vote for it."

Other supporters of the legislation, such as Elizabeth Yeznach of Gales Ferry, Connecticut, another nurse cadet, and Producer/Director Shirley Harrow, who is documenting the stories of the thousands of former Cadets, believe it is time to finally acknowledge the service of the Nurse Cadet Corps service. Contacted by the *News-Herald* about her work with Representative

Lowrey, Yeznach said the closest the cadets have come to being recognized was inclusion in the gathering celebrating the 10th anniversary of the Women's Veteran Memorial at Arlington Cemetery in Washington DC in November 2007. The last picture in the presentation was of nurse

cadets, said Yeznach, but they are still not considered veterans. "It was very moving to see those young women in uniform. We were recruited, we took the pledge, and we served. Then we went home like good little girls," Yeznach said. "It would be nice to see official recognition."

In e-mail correspondence, Harrow said, "The US Cadet Nurse Corps is a significant part of World War II history. The Cadet Nurse Corps prevented the collapse of the nation's healthcare system in WWII. They were veterans. They deserve recognition now."

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