

Tilting at Washington

WW II cadet nurses lobbying for some respect

"I'd like to hold a flag and say I'm a veteran."

Anne Kakos

Anne Kakos isn't looking for trouble. All she wants is some respect and recognition, not just for herself, but also for the dwindling number of women whose ranks once swelled to 120,000 during WWII as members of the U.S. Cadet Nurse Corps.

Kakos is a spry 79-year-old who can talk endlessly without repeating herself or boring the listener about the work of the women who served stateside in hospitals with the Cadet Nurse Corps and have not been recognized by the U.S. government.

The Yonkers resident earlier this year took up the mantle worn by Ruth Sartori who asked Kakos to take up the fight with Congress after she died. Sartori passed away

at her Leonia, N.J., home in March.

Kakos' diminutive size and quiet countenance belie the fire and zest below the surface in fighting for veteran status for the former members of the corps.

To understand where the fire was first ignited, you have to turn the clock back some 61 years to the summer of 1943. The United States was 18 months into a war that stretched its troops from the Pacific Ocean to Europe fighting the Axis powers. Nurses were being called into service to tend to the wounded soldiers. Some 10,000 nurses were in the Army and Navy in the spring of 1942. An additional 10,000 were needed by July. This put nurses statewide at a premium. To help rectify the nurse shortage, the U.S. Army issued a call for a total corps of 35,000 nurses.

On March 29, 1943, U.S. Rep. Frances Payne Bolton introduced a bill to "provide for the training of nurses for the armed forces, governmental and civilian hospitals, health agencies and war industries through grants to institutions providing for training and for other purposes."

Two and one-half months later, on June 15, the Nurse Training Act, also known as the Bolton Act — for the Ohio Republican — passed both Houses and was ready for

President Franklin D. Roosevelt's signature. On July 1, the act became Public Law 74.

THE CALL TO NURSING

In June of '43, Kakos, then Anne Rosaline Mandzak, was finishing high school in Corning, N.Y. and was considering nursing as a career. A woman she worked for after school suggested that she attend the School of Nursing at Robert Packer Hospital in Sayre, Pennsylvania. The 18-year-old wanted to be involved with the war effort. Recruiting posters urging young women to "Enlist in a proud profession" and earn nursing careers and serve their country were on the walls of high schools, post offices, drug stores and hospitals. In the movie theaters, Dorothy McGuire appeared in the film, "Reward Unlimited," which touted the importance of the Cadet Nurse Corps.

Kakos was sold. She packed her bags and with her 17-year-old sister, Mary, in tow, she headed south to the Lehigh Valley region of Pennsylvania.

Kakos took the pledge, which reads: "In consideration of the training, payments, and other benefits which are provided me as a member of the U.S. Cadet Nurse Corps, I agree that I will be available for military or other Federal, governmental, or essential civilian services for the duration of the present war."

She was admitted on Sept. 13, 1943. She was given a uniform — designed by "leading fashion experts" — complete with epaulets and military patch. She was ruled over by a tough head nurse, attended classes, nursed the ill and had a nightly 9:30 lights out curfew. She also served as a civilian volunteer in the U.S. Army Aircraft Warning Service, keeping an eye on the otherwise quiet skies for any enemy planes. "We were dedicated young ladies."

Kakos suffered through the unblinking glare of the head nurse and was given an education that carried her through the rest of her working life. Her "termination" date from the corps was Sept. 12, 1946.

TIME MARCHES ON

Life after the war moved quickly for Kakos. She worked for the New York



City Visiting Nurse Service, walking into tenements from Hell's Kitchen and along Fifth Avenue to the Hudson River on the Lower West Side giving insulin injections.

From there, it was a move uptown to Columbia Teachers College for courses in Public Health Nursing Education. That was followed by an application for state certification for field service work. Next, a move to upstate Steuben County and then Chemung County, working in public health nursing. Then back downstate to Yonkers where she was a public health nurse for the city. A wedding came in 1953 at Most Holy Trinity Church. Three sons and a daughter followed. "I was a homebody until 1970." Then came a stint as a Yonkers School Nurse-Teacher. She taught safety and health in the cooking classes. The school — Longfellow — was conveniently across Mulberry Street from her home.

It was a chance encounter in 2000 with another nurse that got Kakos to think of the U.S. Cadet Nurse Corps. She eventually hooked-up with Sartori, who was running a one-woman operation trying to get a bill passed in Congress that would give veterans benefits to the former members of the nurse corps.

In a March 2003 article of the American Journal of Nursing, Sartori said, "We want to let the world know that we were contributing to our country in WWII."

Sartori said that the nurses feel entitled to the same benefits enjoyed by veterans and wartime nurses, since they were part of the U.S. Public Health Service.

"We wore military-type uniforms and the insignia of the Commissioned Corps of the Public Health Service, which (President) Truman declared to be a branch of the military on June 21, 1945." Executive Order No. 9575 became effective June 28, 1945.

But Sartori learned that executive orders don't mean anything if you can't get Congress to pass a bill. Sartori took her grassroots fight to the grave.

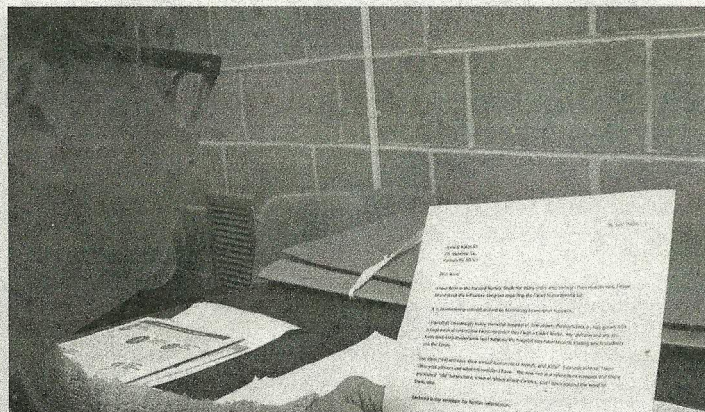
STIRRINGS IN FOGGY BOTTOM

On Oct. 6, 1986, Rep. Jim Slattery of Kansas was apparently the first national lawmaker to attempt to help the for-

mer members of the nurse corps — not to receive veterans' status, but rather to receive financial recompense. According to the Congressional Record, Slattery brought H.R. 2663 to the floor, a bill that would "credit time spent in the Cadet Nurse Corps during World War II as creditable for civil service retirement."

Slattery said: "The U.S. Office of Personnel Management states that their membership in the Cadet Nurse Corps is not Federal employment, primarily because the cadets were not 'officially' appointed into the Federal civil service. ...A technicality should not stand in the way of fairness. These women do not

Continued on page 10



Anne Kakos reads a reply from a former cadet nurse.

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CADET NURSE CORPS NEWS

"In consideration of the training, payment, and other benefits which are provided me as a member of the U. S. Cadet Nurse Corps, I agree that I will be available for military or other Federal, governmental, or essential services for the duration of the present war."

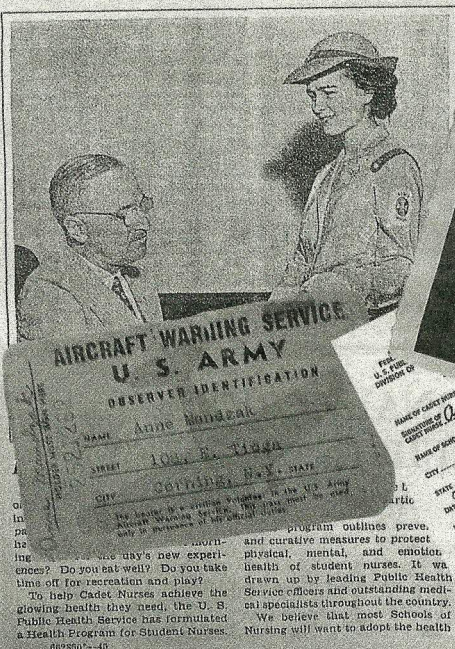
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PRESIDENT ANNOUNCES CORPS



Below, Anne Kakos, with her sister, Mary, at the wheel of a Jeep, with an unidentified classmate. Left, a photo used in the Cadet Nurse Corps recruitment campaign. Above left, a copy of the Cadet Nurse Corps newspaper featuring President Harry Truman on its cover. Above right, Anne Kakos in her uniform at Robert Packer Hospital in Sayre, Pennsylvania. Underneath, an identification card showing her date of admission to the corps.



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Continued from page 9

want anything to be given to them. They merely ask to be credited for something that have already earned."

The bill passed. According to Kakos, Pennsylvania gave nurses three years of pension credit, while New York refused. She does not know why.

In 1979, a review board with the Department of Defense rejected a request for veteran status saying the women were not subject to military law. But Kakos said the Defense Department was not in existence during World War II, not being created until 1947. "How can you determine if the nurse corps should get veteran status if you weren't around then?"

Go forward to 1996 and a bill to give veterans benefits to the cadet nurses is introduced by Rep. Nita Lowey of Harrison. It dies in committee. It was reintroduced in 1999 by Lowey and Rep. James Oberstar, D-Minn., but again died in committee. Another attempt was made in 2002 with the same results.

On Jan. 29, 2003, the U.S. Cadet Nurse Corps Equity Act of 2003, H.R. 476, was introduced in the House of Representatives. It sits with the Subcommittee on Total Force, where it has been since Feb. 13, 2003. The subcommittee, which falls under the House Armed Services Committee, is chaired by upstate New York Republican John McHugh.

Over in the Senate, Nevada Democrat Harry Reid introduced S. 1948 on Nov. 24, 2003. It sits with the Committee on Veterans' Affairs, which is chaired by Arlen Specter, R-Pennsylvania.

STILL HOPEFUL

Another Veterans Day has passed and still no recognition. Nevertheless, Kakos keeps her hopes up by sending out newsletters to interested former cadet nurses urging them to contact their respective representatives in Washington. She includes

letters beseeching lawmakers to co-sponsor and vote in favor of the bills. All that the recipient has to do is write in the name of the legislator and pop it in the mail. Just the price of a stamp, a small cost to get overdue recognition, Kakos believes.

The crux of the problem — the ability to obtain veteran status — eludes Kakos. "What is really holding this legislation back?" The cadet nurses are not looking for money. "Most of us worked and are on decent pensions."

Replies from lawmakers fall along the lines of this she said: "I will consider it, but it has to get out of committee and onto the floor."

"Unfortunately, Congress does not act on legislation as quickly as we sometimes would like," said Julie Edwards a spokeswoman for Lowey. "It has taken, and will continue to take some time to educate members as to the importance of honoring these women."

To add some perspective, it took more than four years to pass "a sensible food allergy labeling law and several years to begin to increase funding for important health-care initiatives like breast cancer research," Edwards said. Lowey, she said, is committed to passing the nurse legislation and "she will continue to work toward this end."

Kakos said that the government may say that the nurses were not in the military or saw any action, but "there are men who were soldiers who didn't fight," staying instead in the United States.

"Did you feel you were going into the military? We didn't think that way. We wanted to be nurses. We worked and worked and worked. We didn't have reveille, but we had to get up," she said. While Kakos did not have to go to drills, nurses at other hospitals had to.

"I was in the color guard with my sister who held the flag. We marched in the V-J Day parade at Packer Hospital."

"We worked on the homefront. Weren't we defending the homefront? The homefront is important today, isn't it? They have the homeland defense department, don't they?" she asked.

Kakos was homebound this past Veterans Day, still recuperating from being sick. "If I was well, I'd be down at Getty Square at the Veterans Memorial" for the ceremonies.

"I'd like to hold a flag and say I'm a veteran."

