

# **802 MEDICAL AIR EVACUATION SQUADRON**

## **MISSION**

## **LINEAGE**

802 Medical Air Evacuation Squadron

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**Campaign Streamers**

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## **EMBLEM SIGNIFICANCE**

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## **OPERATIONS**

802nd Sqdn. Naples-Foggia; Northern Apennines; Po Valley, Rome-Arno; Sicily; Southern France and Tunisia (ground). Received Meritorious Unit Citation for the period 12 March 1943- 15 May 1945, Go 147, Hq.12th Air Force 3 July 1945.

On 10 Dec. 1942 the 802nd MAES was activated at Bowman Field, Ky. and was sent to North Africa. It had a complement of five medical officers; with Capt. James Gavin, CO; one M.A.C. Officer; 70 enlisted men and 25 nurses with 2nd Lt. Catherine Grogan as C.N.

The next two weeks were spent getting to know one another, issuing supplies, attending classes, immunizations, getting the uniforms in order, making our wills. Our first working uniform would be: Navy blue slacks, navy blouse, overseas cap, tie, white or blue shirt, black shoes with neutral stockings, our wings, gold with the nurse's caduceus superimposed in the center. After reaching North Africa, we made our blouses into the Eisenhower style jackets. Not until June of 1944 did we receive the regulation uniforms.

Dec. 25, 1942, the 802nd left by train for Morrison Fld., Fla. arriving 27 Dec. 1942. Our time was spent in further organization and regimentation, with the rest of the sqdn. joining us there.

21 Jan 1943. We left by train for Camp Kilmer, NJ, arriving the 23rd at the cold and snowy staging area to await a ship for overseas. Besides waiting, we did hospital duty during a measles epidemic. We ate our meals at the Officer's Club, a mile from our quarters, where something of interest was always going on. Four of our girls met their husbands-to-be while at Kilmer. 7 Feb. 1943, we traveled by train to our ship, the U.S.S. LYON, in the NY harbor. The nurses had two very small staterooms. There was smooth sailing until we reached Gibraltar, where the rough seas made it necessary to serve only "hand" food and use disposable dishes. We had special hours to shower and to eat, with special seating arrangements at meals except when the Captain requested our presence at his table; had air raids drills in the middle of the night and abandon ship drills during the day. After dinner, we stood on deck listening to the airmen harmonizing below, and played cards to pass the time.

Arriving at Mersel Kabir, Oran 21 Feb. 1943, we climbed over the side of the ship to North African soil, were assigned two empty villas and spent the night sleeping on cold hard floors in our bedrolls, eating C and K rations for dinner. Next morning, we were taken to MUDHILL, a tent city staging area at Assile Meur, the beginning of outdoor cold showers, latrines, slit trenches, lister bags for water, canteens, stand-up chow lines, mess kits, sleeping on cots with bedrolls and mosquito netting. Our water allowance was one quart for washing purposes per day and one canteenful to drink plus 2 outdoor showers a week. Housed in large ward tents, our time was spent waiting, plus a ten mile hike with full pack, returning with large blisters from ill-fitting high-top GI shoes. One morning while at breakfast, one of the tents had some fire damage due to clothes hanging too close to a candle. Some months later, the sqdn. received a bill for the damages!

3 Mar. 1943 we flew to Maison Blanche, Algiers. Home was an old French barracks building with flowers around it, cold showers, an indoor bathroom, dayroom, double deck bunks and housed four people. A private air raid shelter collapsed before we ever got to use it! Usually at dusk, there were air raids over the bomb run on the Alger's docks and bay. Personnel bombs were dropped on our base at night, we were cautioned never to pick up fountain pens, pencils or cigarette lighters.

We were attached to the 51st TCW of the 12th AF. After the invasion of North Africa Nov.1942, the need to move patients was so critical that Capt. Fred Guilford, a Flight Surgeon in a TCG gave a crash course in the care and handling of litter patients to volunteer medical techs of the TCS. Without authorization or supplies, they brought back patients from the front lines on troop carrier planes that had carried cargo forward. When the 802nd arrived, these techs were transferred to the 802nd and Capt. Guilford replaced Capt. Gavin as our CO. Our nurses were the first flight nurses to fly in a combat area. While the cargo was off-loaded and the plane set up for patients by the tech and crew chief, the nurse assessed her patients. These patients had received first aid and their wounds were not many hours old. When they landed, these patients were taken by ambulance to an Evac or Gen. Hosp. There, they received further care and were either sent home or back to the front.

When scheduled for a mission, we arose at 4 AM, ate breakfast, waited at the airfield for the plane to be loaded with cargo and our name called, would then fly to our designated air field, pick up our patients, care for them enroute, off-load the patients to the waiting ambulances and return to home base. Often we had to RON (remain overnight) to wait for the next day's patient load. Takeoff depended on the hour and how many patients were ready. Our pick-up for patients was the nearest air field to the front. After each invasion, we had fighter escort, depending on the degree of fire power on the ground as we witnessed many dogfights. The air fields were temporary with portable runways made of sections of heavy metal materials. As the airfields were so near the front lines, we could hear the sound of guns during the day and see the flash of gunfire at night. Our doctors and some of the techs were stationed at all the forward and rear areas to coordinate collection and delivery of patients. Our patients were of all nationalities - American, British, Canadians, South Africans, Australians, Indians, Gurkhas, Punjabs, Zouaves, French and German POW's, accompanied by 2 guards.

We carried fruit juices, water and coffee and for longer flights, made spam sandwiches. Frequently we relied on K rations. The Red Cross girls met each flight with coffee and doughnuts, and the British were there with their tea and biscuits. Both welcome sights!

Near Bizerte, North Africa, we picked up a group of German prisoners from a recently captured German hospital. The Germans left in such a hurry they abandoned their patients and equipment, which was of the finest quality.

9 July 1943, we moved on a moment's notice to Ben Auros, Foch Fld., Tunis, and North Africa to cover the Sicilian campaign. Our quarters consisted of two old villas with a day room, bathroom with cold water and each room held two bunks. Elizabeth Reilly was our first replacement as one of our nurses was sent home for health reasons. Julia Riley was married here. Air evac of Sicily began on 0 plus 6 from Ponte Olivio, 12 miles from the enemy lines. Our forward stations moved ahead at the same rapid pace as the front lines. To relieve the hospital situation in the Mateur and Tunisia area, patients were carried back as far as Algiers. We were busy flying almost daily missions, worked hard but morale was high and found time for squadron get togethers on the sandy beaches.

4 Sept. 1943, we moved to Licata, Sicily, remaining there a month living in the Light Keeper's home, a three story house situated next to the light House, where we watched the fishermen mend their nets and set sail for the catch, reminding us of "Red Sails in the Sunset". While there, the Mayor and his wife invited us for 4 PM tea and cookies. Lena Van Sickle became our second nurse to marry. At Agrigento, we saw our first and only prison camp. The prisoners were behind barbed wire and seemed interested in seeing us. As was all the country, for it was very unusual here to see women in slacks, our working uniform.

Air Evac from the Salerno Beachhead began 17 Sept. Italy capitulated and church bells rang, there was joy and dancing in the streets.

30 Sept. 1943, we moved to Palermo, Sicily, lived in a five floor apt. building in the middle of the city. The Red Cross beauty shop was across the street, the electricity often failed and left us with wet hair. Shops were reopening, the Opera House was across the street, and our Mess Hall was behind the Opera. The girls would attend the Sunday matinee and at intermission rush to the mess hall for dinner and get back for the final act. The Hurdy Curdy man and his monkey stopped beneath our windows every day and played our requests. We even had a laundry lady and sent our laundry out in large loads. Once a \$75 load was lost. We had to make special requests home for things we needed and it took quite a long time to replace all that was lost. Another nurse was returned stateside for health reasons and Jean Ackerman joined us. Jo Sansone and Sylvia Van Antwerp were married while here.

We were entertained by Bob Hope and his troupe and met the reporter; Ernie Pyle. Mondello Beach was the site for the sqdn. party. There were beautiful churches in Palermo. The paintings and mosaics reflected the culture and art of the many different countries which had occupied the island over the ages. There were no kneeling benches in any of the churches in Italy.

Ellen Church, Retha Rodgers and Jo Sansone were chosen to transfer to England to coordinate air evac there. Palermo was our longest residence in any one place. Christmas 1943, we celebrated with a party for the sqdn. We were busy covering the Southern Italian Campaign from Palermo. On 30 Dec. 1943, we received a recommendation for the work done in the preceding 10 months in the Tunisian, Sicilian and Italian Campaigns from The Commanding General of the 12th TCC. The occasion coincided with the arrival of the 50,000<sup>th</sup> patient evacuated by the sqdn.

The 807th Sqdn. arrived in Sicily to help us with evacuations on May 26, 1944. On May 31st, we moved to Naples, Italy. We lived in luxury for 6 weeks in a Baroness' villa located on the Bay of Naples. Mt. Vesuvius was one direction and the Isle of Capri in another. Mt Vesuvius had erupted earlier in the year; red flames and smoke could be seen for miles, making it very easy to spot spies. When ships were in the harbor, barrage balloons were over each ship to protect them. The harbor was mined after each air raid. Then it had to be cleared before ship activity could take place.

From Naples, we covered the Salerno Beachhead, Rome and Cassino Campaigns. Some days when the need was great, each plane made several trips a day, getting in and out fast with only one plane allowed to land at a time. One day alone, we evacuated 1000 patients. While in Naples, we received 9 replacements. They were: Jane Wyatt, Emmy Lou Bowen, Barbara Watts, Barbara LeFever, Anne Shanley, Elsie Brennan, Clara Pomphret, Ruth Riley, and Mary Wilson. Leona Idzikowski and Kenneth Benson were married in our villa in Naples.

22 July 1944, we moved to Lido de Roma, 10 miles from Rome, a vacation spot built by Mussolini, a seaside resort. Most of us had an audience with The Pope; we visited the catacombs, stores were reopening, the Opera House was used for movies, Mass and other religious services. From Lido de Roma, we evacuated patients from the Northern Italian and Southern France Campaigns. Some of us were assigned to TOY at Istres, France near Marseilles, evacuating patients from the Belfort Gap area on the German border. Here we lost our first nurse, Aleda E. Lutz, when the aircraft in which she was flying with 15 patient's enroute from Liexeuil to Istres crashed near Lyon, France. "Lutzie" was loved by all and her death was a great loss to us. Most of our nurses had rotated back to the states being replaced by: Marion Arthur, Bernice Creighton, Eve and Olga Romanovich, Anne Murphy and Billie Burke.

Siena, Italy was our last working station. It was a beautiful old walled city built on a hill in a country setting with green grass and fields. We lived in an apt. house again and remained here until May 8, 1945, the end of the war in Europe. Elsie Brennan was married while here. When the war was over, there was continuous celebrations. We were restricted to quarters for our own safety. Maj. Guilford and Jean Ackerman rotated back to the states and were later married. Capt. Holt became our CO. Our Chief nurse remained until Aug. 1945 at which time the 802nd and 807nd became one unit.

We flew back to the states in a C-54 with only three engines running half of the time. The Statue of liberty was a welcome sight! We arrived at Fort Totten on May 28th, were given leave and later discharged.

By Dec. 1943, the 802<sup>nd</sup> had evacuated 50,000 patients, by Nov. 1944, 107,000 and by 31 Mar. 1945, with a month to go before the end of the war, we evacuated 115,729 patients. All of the nurses received the Air Medal with ten receiving the Air Medal with 4 Oak Leaf Clusters and 10 battle stars on the Theater Ribbon.

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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.