Major Frances Nash

Major Frances Nash was born 20 October 1911 in Washington, Georgia. She went to nursing school at Grady Memorial Hospital before joining the Army Nurse Corps (ANC) in 1935. Major Nash, then a Lieutenant, worked in the Pacific Theater of Operations as a Nurse. She was responsible for assembling operating rooms and managing all aspects of surgical procedures. She and 66 other Army Nurses became prisoners of war when General Wainwright surrendered Corregidor on 6 May 1942. For 37 months Frances Nash and the other nurses were POWs; and while in captivity, Nash's responsibilities increased. She continued to manage operating rooms but also became responsible for ensuring the health of the other American Military Nurses. Santo Tomas was liberated on 3 February 1945 and the Nurses began to make their way back to the United States. Nash remained in the ANC until 1950. During her 15 years in service, Nash was awarded 2 Bronze Stars, 2 Oak Leaf Clusters, a Purple Heart, a Distinguished Unit Medal, an Asiatic-Pacific Medal, and a Prisoner of War Medal. The U.S. would not see another female prisoner of war until Rhonda Cornum was captured in the 1990s. Major Frances Nash died 15 August 1979.

VIEWPOINTS

THE NASH HOSPITAL?

Name VA center after Georgia nurse who was POW

By Dr. Evelyn Monahan

Military nurses are often referred to as "Angels of Mercy," but that well-meaning phrase is misleading. They are courageous women of whose history Americans have generally remained unaware.

Georgia can take a step toward correcting that by naming the Veterans Administration Medical Center in Decatur for one of the state's Army nurses who was taken prisoner of war by the Japanese in World War II.

Lieutenant Frances Louise Nash was among 100 military nurses captured as POWs when American forces in Corregidor, the "Rock" fortress, surrendered to the Japanese in World War II.

When Japan attacked the Philippines on Dec. 8, 1941, Frances Louise Nash was transferred from Fort Stotsenburg, about 6 miles outside Manila to a makeshift hospital set up in the heart of the besieged city.

In an article for the Atlanta Journal-Constitution in Dec. 8, 1942, Lieutenant Nash contrasted her work at Grady Hospital, where she had trained, with her work in Manila, Bataan and on Corregidor:

"I thought I had seen whole-sale emergency at Grady Hospital on Ted Saturday night," she said, "but Grady was mild compared to what we had to contend with. Instead of a few wounded bodies, there were amputations by the score. It was really due to my training at Grady that I knew how to make the best of the situation and treatment under emergency conditions."

On Christmas eight, around 11 p.m., she was ordered to leave Corregidor for the Bataan, and to cope to Bataan as follows: "We went zigzagging across Manila Bay on a little inter-island steamer. The moon was shining bright and we could see the glow of burning buildings on shore and flaming ships in the bay. What deep I got that night I caught snatched out on the top deck, wrapped in a blanket and using a newspaper in case of an accident in the crossing.

"At 10 a.m. the next day, we arrived at Bataan's Lamao docks and I spent the rest of the day with fighters winding our little boat."

When the air raid eased up slightly, they headed into the jungle and Lieutenant Nash spent her first three hours in a jungle foxhole. Hours later, she was setting up a hospital at Limay.

On April 9, 1942, Lieutenant Nash was ordered to set up a second hospital in the jungles of Bataan. During the second deliverate Japanese bombing of that hospital, a shrapnel piece lodged bone in her right arm. The stopped work just long enough to have her wound treated, and went back to caring for wounded soldiers.

On April 9, 1942, the nurses received word that they were to quit Bataan for Corregidor, the rock fortress across the bay. Since there were no ships to carry patients, they were ordered to go.

Years later, Lieutenant Nash recalled that fateful day: "One of the most difficult things we ever had to do was to leave our wounded on Bataan. If anyone had guessed what would happen to them, that the Japanese would kill them in their cots or leave them to die on the beach, we made none of us would have left."

For a few days, Malinta Tunnel, deep in the rock fortress of Corregidor, seemed a much safer place than Bataan. Nash and her staff was stationed where the Japanese turned their full attention to "The Rock."

Finally, on May 6, 1942, with the Japanese threatening to turn their flamethrowers into Malinta Tunnel, General Jonathan Wainwright surrendered Corregidor. Nash and the other nurses were taken prisoners of war. Weeks later, they were moved by their captors to Santo Tomas, where they were joined by other POWs who had been taken captured by the Japanese.

These nurses, everyone a volunteer, would remain prisoners of the Japanese until they were liberated by American forces in February 1945 — 37 months after their capture.

Lieutenant Frances Louise Nash received the Purple Heart and Bronze Star, the Prisoner of War medal, the Prisoner of War medal and many other decorations. She retired from the Army Nurse Corps with the rank of major after 20 years of military service.

She worked as a nurse in Veterans Administration hospitals until shortly before her death, caused by cancer, on Aug. 15, 1979.

Frances Louise Nash's spirit and passion for caring for wounded servicemen stands like a beacon for all military nurses — and for all Americans.

We have a past practice for naming VA medical facilities for particular heroes. This helps us remember at what great indemnity the freedom we enjoy our freedom was purchased.

Today, there are more than 20 Department of Veterans Affairs Medical Centers named for Vietnam War veterans who served as part of Army. Naming the VA Medical Center in Decatur for Georgia native Frances Louise Nash would give Georgia the distinction of being the state that honored the first female POW. (Another VA hospital in Saginaw, Mich., is named for an Army nurse. But she was never a POW.)

Dr. Evelyn M. Monahan is president of the National Association of Women Veterans.

Georgia native Maj. Frances Louise Nash, an Army nurse, was taken prisoner by the Japanese in World War II.

EDITOR'S NOTE: A drive is under way in Georgia to name the Department of Veterans Affairs Medical Center in Decatur for Georgia native Frances Louise Nash, an Army nurse from World War II who was taken prisoner during the Battle for Corregidor. Those wishing to support the campaign can be sent to Dr. Evelyn Monahan c/o P.O. Box 191114, Atlanta, Ga. 31119-1114

VA Medical Center in Decatur: Nursing home care unit is on right, the hospital on left. Should the center be named after a nurse POW?