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Silent Heroines

By Kathi Gunio

On Rita Lemery's 21st birthday, she not only became a member of the adult society, she became a member of the Army Nurse Corps (ANC) in World War II. She felt, she says, it was her destiny.

"I think there was more patriotism back then. My father had been in World War I, and had fought long and hard for his country. I knew what it meant to serve your country." Lemery, a Fairport resident, was stationed at Fort Dix in New Jersey, and served her country for 14 months; 12 hours a day with only ½ day off a month. It was never questioned. "We just went where we were sent and followed orders to the best of our abilities," Lemery said.

Lemery is just one of thousands of nurses – veterans – who also served their country in times of war. But, unfortunately, not enough is known, or said about them. A sort of silent heroine, they took care of and nursed several thousand servicemen back to health in camp hospitals in Germany, France, England and throughout the United States. In the Kennedy General Hospital in Memphis, TN, a hospital that was erected solely for the purpose of World War II, Mary Wojcek was also doing her patriotic duty as a member of the ANC.

While serving her one and a half years, Wojcek administered medications, changed dressings, assisted in various procedures, and consoled the soldiers who had become sick or injured in the war. She remembers vividly the enormous wooden hospital structure that housed 300 patients per unit, and having to ride a bicycle through its hallways to get around. She also tells of administering so many Penicillin injections, that by the time she was finished, she needed to begin again.

Despite the tragedy of war, Wojcek said, "It really was a wonderful experience. I felt I was doing my part (for my country). All of us, including the patients, had to work together. It was great to see people who were wounded or handicapped helping other people."