



SERVICE OVER SELF: Nurses on their day of rescue from Santo Tomas in 1945

Nurses Who Have Touched Our Lives

From icons to teachers to those working beside us

by Geneviève M. Clavreul, RN, Ph.D.

One Thousand Days in a Prisoner of War Camp

On May 6, 1942, seeing no other choice, Lt. Gen. Jonathan Wainwright surrendered his starving and exhausted troops to the Japanese. This episode would later become known as the infamous Bataan Death March. An estimated 20,000 prisoners died during this forced march from the Bataan Peninsula to the prison camps, and Sally Blaine-Millett, RN, would be one of 86 nurses who would find themselves interred during this period. She would be held there for almost 31 months working split shifts to handle the oppressive heat of the daytime, with night shifts beginning at 6pm and ending at 7am.

Nurses maintained a daily routine and were required to wear khaki blouses and skirts.

In a 2004 interview for the *North County Times*, she recalled that when she was captured all she had were her orders, a comb, a lipstick, a toothbrush and maybe a powder puff in her pocket. "As this thing started to wrap up," she said in reference to the liberation of the camp by the American military, "I thought I had to start taking care of my appearance. You want to put your best foot forward."

When I read this, it rang true to the woman I met while attending nursing school all those years so long ago. Most of my nursing class knew that Millett had been one of the survivors

of the Bataan Death March and the Japanese internment camps during World War II, but it wouldn't be until much later that the magnitude of her suffering would dawn on us.

Millett often credited the leadership of Capt. Maude C. Davidson, a 57-year-old nurse with 20 years of service experience, for helping the nurses at Santo Tomas endure their 1,000-plus days as prisoners of war. Davidson maintained a regular schedule of duties and insisted that all nurses wear their khaki blouses and skirts. Ironically, the very routine that so many nurses complain about helped these nurses endure their captivity.

I found myself drawn to this extraordinary person and nurse in part because many the hardships she suffered in the Japanese camps mirrored the experiences my brothers Robert and Lucien spoke of during their years in the German work camps of WWII; but also because her extensive and comprehensive knowledge of nursing was something I, as a young nursing student, willingly absorbed and applied as I made my way through the didactic and practicum parts of my education.

We often endow individuals who inspire us with extraordinary powers, even deem them heroes. Unfortunately, this appellation is all too often overused in our society; but not so with Millett and the other nurses of the Bataan Death March, the apt named "Angels of Bataan and Corregidor." They were heroes in the purest sense of the word, and yet Millett would often demure and argue that she simply did what she loved to do, which was to be the best nurse she could possibly be, even in those

horrid conditions. Her selfless attitude in the face of such adversity has always helped me keep my nursing experiences, no matter how bad I thought they might be, in perspective.

Nursing School as a Savvy Business Decision

I met Donna when I was a bright-eyed LPN student at Kaw Technical School (now Washburn Institute of Technology). Donna was what we would characterize as an "older" student, and it was our mutual placement as such that drew us together. I was already a mother of three, with a fourth on the way. Donna was a mother as well, with the added benefit of being a business owner. Just as our age set us apart from our peers in LPN school, so did our willingness to challenge our nursing instructors to bring their "A game" to class.

My desire to have a profession to fall back on and career

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that would keep me occupied while my husband was stationed overseas was the major reason I had gone to school, but Donna had an even more practical reason. Her family owned and ran several well-known and respected nursing homes in our state, but a recent change in state law required that all nursing homes have at least one LPN at all times. Ever the shrewd businesswoman, Donna realized she might not always be able to ensure that their facility would have the 24-hour LPN coverage. Nurses call in sick, are late and sometimes don't show up, so she decided to get her LPN license, thus making sure the facility would always have an LPN available.

This novel thinking was what first drew me to Donna; that and our shared enjoyment to stretch the boundaries of our knowledge and push our nursing instructors to up the intellectual ante. Most of the instructors were up to the challenge, save one for whom I'm sure we became the bane of her existence. Nurse Lata soon came to fear having us in her class, as we were both quick to challenge her when she presented us with weak arguments on the fundamentals of nursing. This, and our friendly competition of who got the better grade, bound Donna and me in a solid friendship that was based in mutual respect.

When I was asked to speak at my LPN alma mater's pinning ceremony last year, I took a side trip to reconnect with Donna, who, except for getting older, had changed little from our days in school. She has long since retired from nursing, but her daughter has followed in her footsteps, going one step further and receiving an RN license.

As my daughter and I sat in her living room we recalled the fond memories of nursing school, in particular some small measure of glee over our intellectual torture of Nurse Lata. I

found in Donna a source of inspiration since it was uncommon in my native France to find an adult returning to seek additional education. Here was Donna not only returning to advance her education, but doing so all while running a business.

A Mentor Becomes a Close Friend

Kathy was studying for her bachelor's degree in nursing at the same time I was studying for my associate degree. It wasn't long before we discovered that we were working at the same hospital in San Antonio, and a friendship was formed. Kathy was already an RN at the time and would later become part of the leadership of our large Pediatric Intensive Care Unit. Our bond grew strong quickly, due in large part to her desire to learn French, her Francophile attitude and her quick wit, which made her a hit with my mother. She was rarely rattled by the weirdness that defined our PICU or the strenuous workload that came with such a large unit. In fact, it was often filled with children so ill that the staff would decide at the beginning of the shift in what order the children would be resuscitated.

While in San Antonio, I was most often a "single" mother since my husband was stationed in a M.A.S.H. unit in Vietnam. However, this proved no hindrance to my desire to advance my education, and Kathy played an integral role in helping me realize this goal. At that time, Bexar County was one of the first hospitals in our region to adopt the 12-hour shift. I welcomed this change as it allowed me work 12 on/12 off, which provided me with ample study time and, more importantly, time to plan and take long trips with my children, mother and, sometimes, Kathy.

Even though she and I were on different nursing tracks, it didn't stop us from being each other's study partner. Kathy was as tough a study partner as she was a compassionate and competent nurse, and we'd often study by the pool at her apartment. The day I fell asleep and woke up doing a poor imitation of a poached lobster illicit little sympathy but excellent nursing care. She didn't let me off the hook from my studies, encouraging me instead to concentrate through the pain.

This no-nonsense approach carried over into her nursing as well; she ran our unit with firm but fair determination. PICU filled to the brim, a diarrhea ward for infants under 12 months, a ward recently created to care for diphtheria patients, and far too few RNs to cover the patient load was no threat to her managerial skills, which often went as follows: assign the most experienced LVN (that would be me) to head a team of other experienced LVNs; give them a choice of which end of the unit

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they want to be responsible for; take the remaining LVNs and head for the diarrhea ward, working like mad throughout the night making sure no patient died; when morning comes access the situation as nurses give reports; congratulate all nurses on a job well done; when the next charge nurse comes on rotation and makes a snide comment that we forgot to restock the unit give the team a knowing wink and nod that — like water off a duck's back — we should allow this negative comment to roll off ours; then dash for the pool.

Each and every year, hundreds of hospitals, clinics and nursing homes set aside Nurses Week to celebrate their nursing staff. But I ask you this: When is the last time you, a nurse, thanked the nurses in *your* life that have helped shape, support and enrich your nursing experience and career? Because without those nurses who came before us, where would our profession be today? And but for those nurses who share our day-to-day joys and sorrows, excitement and frustrations, would we continue on?

If not for that nursing instructor who chose to forgo the more lucrative pay of bedside nursing in order to obtain the appropriate degrees to become qualified to teach nursing, there would be one less seat available for instruction, which might have made the difference between you being able to enter nursing school or having to put it off for another year.

If not for that nurse who stepped up and accepted the role

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of preceptorship, your first year straight out of nursing school and on the floor may have ended in a more harrowing or demoralizing experience.

And if not for our fellow nurse who took the time to loan us a shoulder to lean on, to help us grieve over the loss of a treasured patient, who had a kind word or sage advice for us when we needed it most, we might have succumbed to burnout and left our chosen profession.

We are nurtured by our peers and, over time, we return the favor by nurturing the novice nurse who comes after us. Just as we hope our respective managers and administrators will recognize us for our contributions to the reputation of our facility and for excellent care given to the patients in our care, we should not forget those nurses who in turn help us realize our dreams and aspirations — for without them where would we be? **WN**

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