

# COMBAT NURSES

*of* **WORLD WAR II**



*Wyatt  
Blassingame*

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*of* WORLD WAR II



by Wyatt Blassingame  
illustrated by Gil Walker

Purple House Press  
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To  
Kathi Diamant



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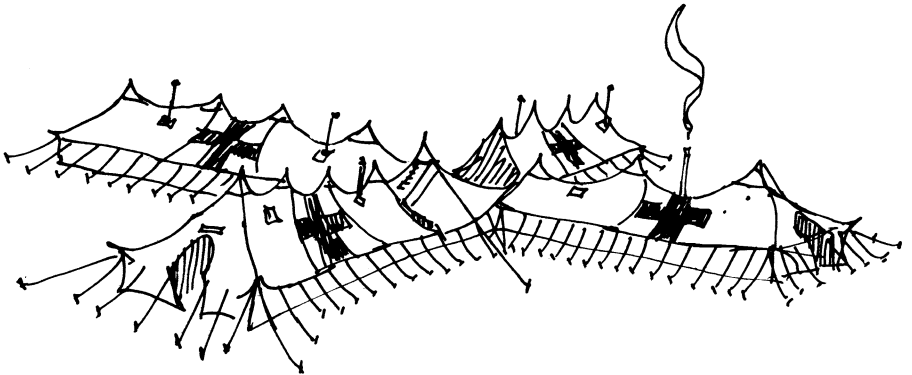
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Jane Kendeigh (p. 106-7) was the first naval flight nurse to set foot on an active battlefield. Seen here March 6, 1945, as she was evacuating patients from Iwo Jima. The flight nurses helped evacuate 2,393 Marines and Sailors between March 6-21, 1945. "Candy" continued her nursing career after leaving the Navy.

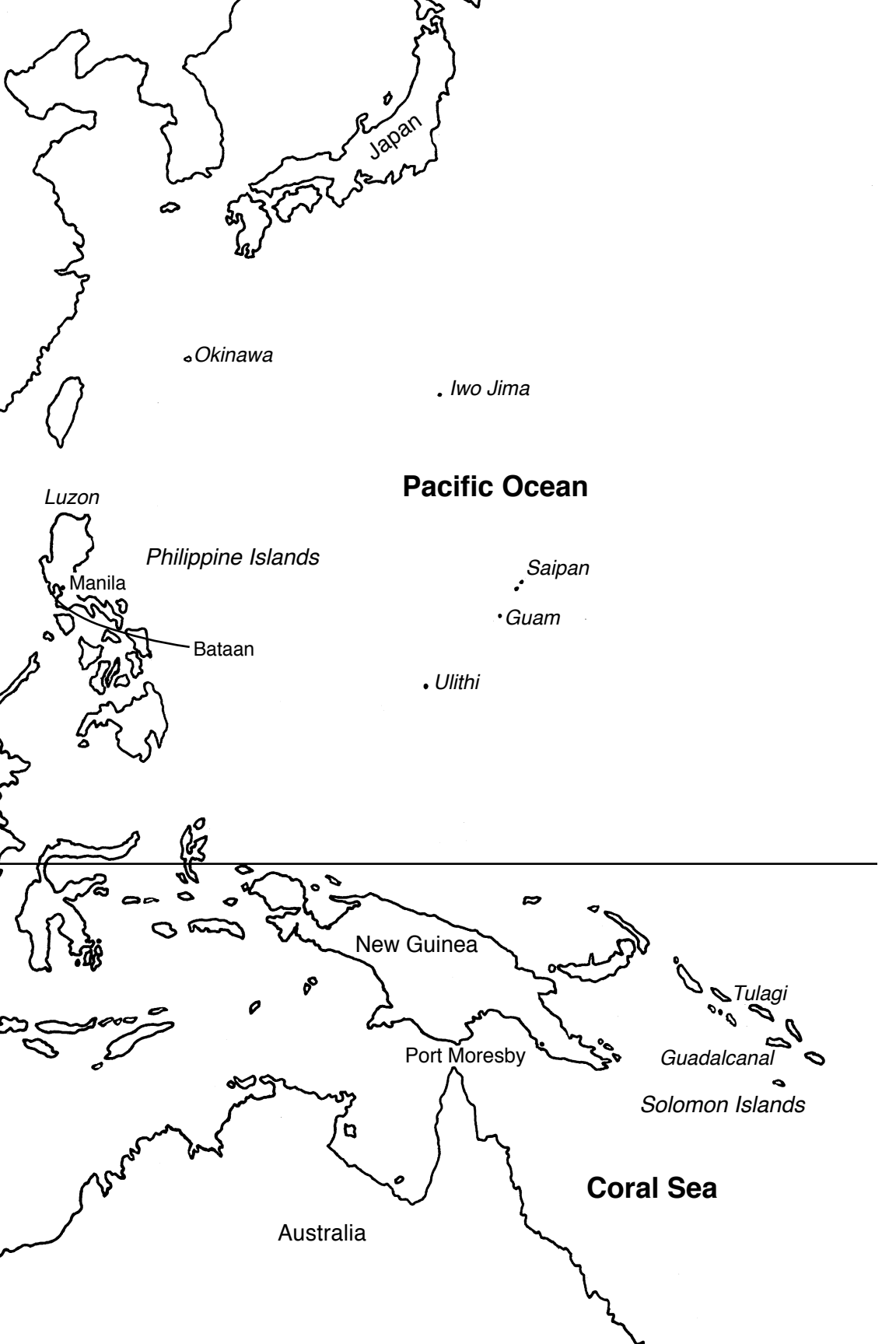


## **THE BEGINNING**

### CHAPTER ONE

It was a Sunday morning, December 7, 1941. In Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, the hospital ship *Solace* lay quietly at anchor. She had been newly converted and her fresh white paint glittered in the early sunlight. Down her white side, from stem to stern, ran a broad green stripe. In the center of this was a huge red cross. Another red cross was painted on the white smokestack. Against the placid water of the harbor the ship looked very peaceful and very pretty.

At five minutes to eight Lieutenant Grace Lally, Chief Nurse on the *Solace*, was in her cabin dressing for church. She could hear airplanes, but this was not surprising. Both the army and navy had airfields nearby and planes were always passing overhead. Even when Miss Lally heard the sound of guns she thought only that it was another drill—



Japan

○ Okinawa

● Iwo Jima

**Pacific Ocean**

Luzon

Philippine Islands

Manila

Bataan

Saipan

Guam

● Ulithi

New Guinea

Port Moresby

Tulagi

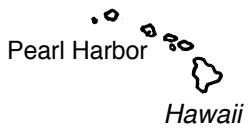
Guadalcanal

Solomon Islands

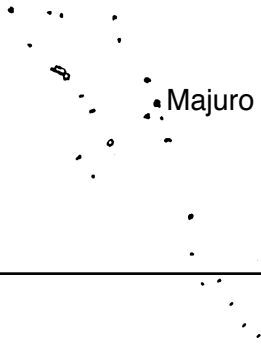
Australia

**Coral Sea**

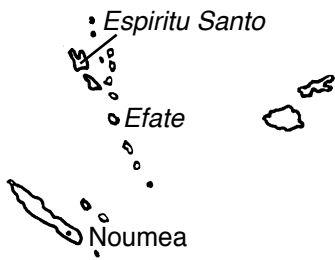
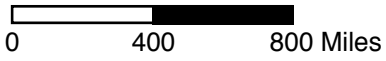
# The Pacific Theater



**International Date Line 1940s**  
(different than today)



Equator





these were held frequently now—and she stepped to the porthole of her cabin to look out.

From here she could see a good part of the United States battle fleet: cruisers, destroyers, and the great, gray battleships tied up close together alongside Ford Island. On the deck of the *Nevada* several sailors were fishing. Overhead an airplane was diving toward them but the sailors, intent on their fishing, did not even look up.

Later it would seem to Lieutenant Lally that what followed was something she had dreamed or seen in a movie. Along the leading edge of the plane's wing little blinking lights began to flash. Instinctively Grace Lally knew they were guns. At the same time one of the sailors fishing on the *Nevada* shuddered and fell backward. Another went stumbling across the deck before he fell. Then the plane was gone and Grace Lally stared after it, uncertain of what she had seen. Had that really been a red circle painted on the wing—the emblem of Japan?

Grace Lally turned and ran from her cabin to the wardroom. The windows were wide here, the view better. Before one of the windows the ship's paymaster stood as if frozen. Miss Lally joined him. Neither spoke. There was no time for it. They watched an airplane come out of the sky in a long, steeply slanting dive. They saw the bomb detach itself from the plane's belly and flash downward to strike the battleship *Arizona*. A great mass of flame and smoke blotted out the sky.

There could no longer be any doubt in Grace Lally's mind. I must get the emergency wards set up, she

thought. Her voice was quite calm and steady as she began giving orders to the young nurses who came running into the wardroom. Soon the officers' lounge, where members of the crew had been gathering for the church service a few minutes before, was filled with sixty-seven double-decker bunks. Other beds were set up in the crew's recreation room, even on the open decks. Blood plasma bottles, drugs, bandages were piled ready.

Around the *Solace* bombs were still falling. Ships burned and exploded. Guns roared at the flashing planes. But Grace Lally and her twelve nurses had no time to look or listen. Already the wounded were being brought aboard.



The hospital in the navy yard at Pearl Harbor was an old but pretty building on a hill above the harbor. The Sick Officers' Quarters were on the second deck, and shortly before eight o'clock Ensign Ann Davidson stood at one of the windows looking out. It was a beautiful morning, she thought. Hibiscus and frangipani bloomed in the yard below her. Yellow-billed myna birds hopped about on the grass. Above the harbor the sky was an incredible blue.

Ann Davidson sighed and turned away from the window. In her starched white uniform she was a very efficient nurse and it was time now for work.

From behind her, somewhere out over the harbor, came the sound of guns. Like Grace Lally, dressing for church on the *Solace*, Ann paid little attention at first. Just another air raid drill, she thought.



Abruptly the whole building quivered. From the harbor came the sound of explosions, one after another. Ann ran to the lanai, the wide porch that extended the full length of the quarters. Other nurses were here, and medical corpsmen, even some patients wearing their hospital pajamas. All were leaning over the rail, stretching their necks to look upward.

They heard the planes before they saw them, a heavy, rumbling thunder that made the building shake. Then the planes swept into view: dark brown, so low they barely cleared the roof of the hospital, the red emblem of Japan clearly visible on the wings as they flashed downward toward the harbor and the long line of anchored battleships. Moments later the ships were wrapped in billowing clouds of flame and smoke as the torpedoes struck.



All the guns in the harbor were firing now. Shrapnel began to rain on the roof of the hospital and in the yard. Someone on the lanai cried, "Look!" and Ann Davidson saw, high overhead, a plane spiraling downward with a banner of smoke streaming behind it. Fire mingled with the smoke. The spiraling plane seemed to grow suddenly large in Ann's eyes. It hurtled straight toward the hospital, missed, crashed through a hedge of scarlet hibiscus flowers, and burst into fragments that showered on the tennis court and on a row of rabbit pens beyond.

Somewhere a man said, his voice sounding strangely calm, "We are at war."

Ann's first impulse was to run, to hide from the sound of the guns, the bombs, the great rumbling explosions that went on and on in the harbor. Then she forced herself to

be still. She forced her hands to stop trembling. I have a job to do, she thought. We've had drills to prepare us for this. I know what my work is.

She turned quietly back into the Sick Officers' Quarters. A lieutenant was sitting on a bed, hacking with a pocketknife at the plaster cast on his knee. Before Ann could speak he had knocked the cast free. "I've got to get back to my ship," he said, and was gone. The next bed was also empty. It had held a navy doctor whose appendix had been removed three days before. Later Ann would learn that he had gone straight to the operating room and had worked two days without relief.

There were other patients, however, who had to be taken care of. Those who could walk were moved to tents set up by corpsmen on the lawn. Bed patients were carried on stretchers to the basement, making room for the casualties soon to arrive.

By nine o'clock these casualties began to reach the hospital. Some came in ambulances, one load after another. Some were brought on stretchers directly from the harbor's edge. Soon they filled the beds. They filled row after row of mattresses laid on the floor.

Ann Davidson worked as she had never worked before. She and the other nurses cut away uniforms soaked with blood and oil. They gave morphine to ease the pain of the wounded. They cleaned shell wounds and horrible burns. They gave blood transfusions. As soon as one person was taken to an operating room, the nurses tore the bloody sheets off the bed, replaced them with clean linen, and

motioned for corpsmen to bring another patient. In the operating rooms doctors and nurses worked steadily, not even pausing between patients.

Ann lost track of time. She was surprised when a corpsman handed her a bowl of soup. "Here," he said. "You'll need this before the job is over." She drank the soup and went back to work.

Night came but there was no letup in the work. New casualties were still being brought from the burned and battered ships. The windows of the operating rooms had been hastily painted black so that no light would show outside. In the wards the nurses moved swiftly among the crowded beds and blood-stained mattresses, carrying flashlights covered with blue paper. No one knew when or if a second attack might come. Wild rumors swept the hospital: Japanese troops were landing on the north side of the island; they were landing on the south side of the island; they were being dropped by parachute. Guns in the harbor were quiet, then suddenly began to fire, then fell quiet again.



On board the *Solace* there was a sudden alarm when American antisubmarine craft began to swarm around the hospital ship. Depth charges hurled great geysers of water into the air. The *Solace* rocked with the explosions. A pale-faced nurse told Grace Lally, "I heard one of the officers say there is a Japanese submarine hiding right underneath us. We may be sunk by our own ships trying to get the submarine."

“Nonsense,” replied the Chief Nurse. “And we don’t have time for nonsense now. Help get these patients ready for the operating room.”



So the work went on. At the old hospital in the navy yard Ann Davidson felt someone touch her arm. It was her friend Catherine Richardson. “Lie down over there in the corner and sleep an hour,” Catherine said. “Then I’ll wake you and you can let me sleep an hour.”

“All right.”

It was the only rest either would get that night. The next day, Monday, was almost as bad. It was Tuesday before the number of patients waiting for the operating rooms began to thin out—before the nurses, staggering with exhaustion, could sleep more than an hour or two at a time.

By then the war had already moved on. There would be no second attack on Hawaii. But in the Philippines the army and navy nurses were already facing an even more dangerous and terrible situation than those in Pearl Harbor had faced.



The International Date Line lies between Hawaii and the Philippines. When it was eight A.M. on December 7 in Hawaii, it was three A.M., December 8, in the Philippines.

On Corregidor Island, the army’s fortress guarding Manila Bay, Second Lieutenant Ruth Stoltz, a nurse from Dayton, Ohio, slept peacefully. It was daylight when she awoke and her friend Minnie Breese, who had joined the service with her, was standing beside her bed.

“Wake up!” Minnie said. She had been on night duty and had only now come from the hospital. “The Japanese have bombed Pearl Harbor!”

Ruth yawned. “I don’t care if—” She stopped. “What did you say?”

“The Japanese have bombed Pearl Harbor. We’re at war!”

“I don’t believe it,” Ruth said. She had known, of course, that the United States and Japan might go to war. But she had believed, as did everyone else—and this included the admirals and generals—that if war did come, it would begin with a Japanese attack on the Philippines, not Pearl Harbor. “I don’t believe it,” she said again.

“Get up to the hospital. You’ll find out.”

Corregidor is a small, tadpole-shaped island, so hilly that the nurses and soldiers living there divided it into three sections called Topside, Middleside, and Bottomside. The hospital was on Middleside. There were only a few patients and little work to do. The morning slipped by in a kind of eerie calm. The only planes that passed overhead were American planes going out to search for the enemy. They found nothing and returned to their airfields about noon.



Shortly after noon Second Lieutenant Dorothea Daley was reading a newspaper in the office of the Fort Stotsenberg Hospital, across Manila Bay from Corregidor. She had been in the Philippines only a few months, but that had been long enough for her to meet and fall in



love with Lieutenant Emanuel "Boots" Engel. Boots was stationed at Clark Field, only a half mile from Fort Stotsenberg Hospital. As Dorothea read about the bombing of Pearl Harbor she wondered what this war would mean to her and Boots.

Suddenly the building shook so that a mirror fell off the wall. Medicine bottles spilled from a shelf. Dorothea jumped to her feet. There had been no siren, no warning of any kind. But now she could hear the explosions: a long, steady, rumbling thunder of sound. From the hospital porch someone shouted, "The Japanese are bombing Clark Field!"

"Boots!" Dorothea thought. He was at Clark Field. She started to pray, silently, even while she ran toward the ward where she would be needed.

Within half an hour the casualties began to arrive. They came in ambulance after ambulance. They came in automobiles and trucks. They came limping, stumbling across the hospital lawn. For the nurses at Fort Stotsenberg it was much as it had been at Pearl Harbor: there was the burned and bloody clothing to be cut away, morphine and blood transfusions to be given, beds made and unmade. There were the rows of silent men waiting to be carried into the operating rooms where the work went on and on.

For Dorothea there was an added terror. Each time she turned to a new patient she wondered, Is it Boots? Will he be blind, maimed? What will I say to him?

The work went on, all through the afternoon and night, but Boots was not among the wounded. Dorothea

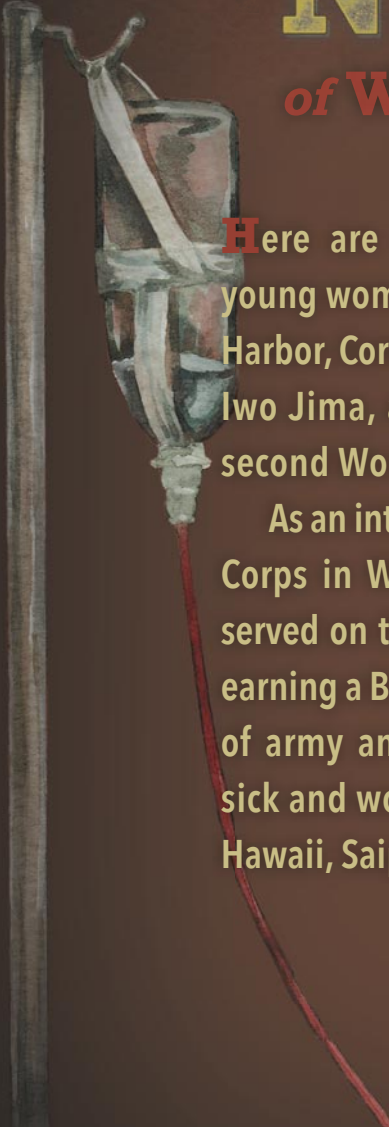
had no way of knowing what had happened to him or where he was.

On Corregidor, Ruth Stoltz and the other nurses learned of the Japanese attack on the Philippine airfields. They heard that almost all of the American planes had been caught on the ground and destroyed. But on Corregidor the afternoon passed in the same strange calm as the morning. Night came. The sky was clear with bright moonlight. Nurses going from their quarters up the tiered steps to the hospital wore white uniforms, and the uniforms gleamed in the moonlight. A colonel saw them. "You want to be killed?" he shouted. "A Japanese pilot could see you a mile away! Change those uniforms!"

To Ruth Stoltz, looking down the flower-covered slopes of the island to the calm, moonlit bay, it seemed impossible that anyone should try to kill them. She would learn better in the days that followed.

# COMBAT NURSES

*of* **WORLD WAR II**



**H**ere are the stories of the courageous young women who served as nurses at Pearl Harbor, Corregidor, Anzio, Battle of the Bulge, Iwo Jima, and other fighting fronts of the second World War.

As an intelligence officer with the Naval Air Corps in World War II, Wyatt Blassingame served on the islands of Tinian and Okinawa, earning a Bronze Star. He witnessed the work of army and navy nurses when he visited sick and wounded comrades in hospitals on Hawaii, Saipan, and Okinawa.

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