

## Naval War College Review

---

Volume 53  
Number 3 *Summer*

Article 21

---

2000

# We Band of Angels: The Untold Story of American Nurses Trapped on Bataan by the Japanese

John N. Petrie

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review>

---

### Recommended Citation

Petrie, John N. (2000) "We Band of Angels: The Untold Story of American Nurses Trapped on Bataan by the Japanese," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 53 : No. 3 , Article 21.

Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol53/iss3/21>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Naval War College Review by an authorized editor of U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu](mailto:repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu).

## 226 Naval War College Review

Norman, Elizabeth. *We Band of Angels: The Untold Story of American Nurses Trapped on Bataan by the Japanese*. New York: Random House, 1999. 272pp. \$26.95

The nation was done a tremendous service when Elizabeth Norman crafted this sensitive and insightful narrative of quiet and enduring heroism. *We Band of Angels* brings to our attention the experiences of nearly a hundred female soldiers and sailors who up to now have, for the most part, been neglected.

We could view their experience as unique, groundbreaking, extraordinary, even tragic. However, any of these perspectives would be unfair to the people we meet in this, Norman's second book. (Her first was *Women at War: The Story of Fifty Nurses Who Served in Vietnam*, 1990.) The "angels" in her title are the nurses who served in World War II; however, they still view themselves as simply having done their parts in the struggle. They are not interested in special attention or in their unintentional roles as prisoners. Their heroic contributions are enhanced by their belief that they were part of a larger, more important effort. Their courage is all the more remarkable in light of their collective self-assessments of the Japanese misdeeds against them in China, especially Nanking (see Iris Chang's superb research on this topic).

The story of each woman comes alive from beginning to end: the onset of the war, each nurse's

decision to join the military, and the successful Japanese campaign on Luzon. The poignant losses of comrades during the conflict heighten the drama.

General Jonathan Wainwright, in command in the Philippines after the departure of General Douglas MacArthur, carefully considered his options for the Army nurses on Bataan. They were taken to Corregidor, and some were evacuated. However, regrettably, eleven nurses were left behind. They were the first to be taken prisoners of war.

The nurses' nickname for MacArthur was "Dugout Doug." The betrayal felt by these women when he left was remarkable. Those who managed to escape to Australia were very public in their criticism of him. The rest were captured, taken from the hospital into the jungles of Bataan Peninsula, on to Corregidor, and finally to internment camps. Malnutrition and malaria, always a threat, became almost inescapable during captivity. Anecdotal references to the Bataan Death March and the Los Baños raid provide depth and texture to the narrative.

Perhaps the most frustrating issue for the women after the war was caused by those who admired them most. Focusing on the nurses' womanhood rather than on their roles in the military, these people trivialized their war efforts. They could not possibly understand what the war had meant to the nurses,

or the situations they had been forced to confront. It is a problem not unlike what women in the armed forces struggle with today.

There is one notable slip in this otherwise exceptional book—stereotyping. While praising the remarkable women of World War II, Norman tells us that “a man’s notion of honor was driven by ego, a woman’s by an inviolable sense of self built on the sentiment of sacrifice.” I must say that when I was commanding officer of a naval station, I found no discernable difference in the character of my sailors based upon any demographic variable, let alone gender. In fact, both types of honor were demonstrated by both genders. Perhaps the author allowed a bit of understandable romanticism to creep in.

This is a powerful story of raw courage. It speaks to who we were as a nation in the early 1940s and to who we became when our collective character was measured. The book also makes clear that during the war Americans usually rose to meet challenges wherever they found them. Meeting our challenges today is the best way to honor the sacrifices and achievements of the men and women who wore the uniform before we were born.

JOHN N. PETRIE  
Captain, U.S. Navy

---

Miles, Wilma Jerman. Edited by Charles H. Miles. *Billy, Navy Wife*. Chevy Chase, Md.: privately published by Charles H. Miles and Murray Miles, 1999. 587pp. \$25

*Billy, Navy Wife* is the autobiography of Wilma J. Miles, wife of Vice Admiral Milton E. Miles, for whom the Naval War College’s Milton E. Miles Chair of International Relations is named. This book begins in 1904, the year of Wilma Miles’s birth, and it ends in 1961, the date of her husband’s death. An epilogue written by her sons, Charles and Murray, contains an account of their mother’s activities and travels until her death in July 1996. Vice Admiral Joseph Metcalf III provided the foreword. In the introduction, Wilma Miles tells why she wrote her story: to inspire and encourage young Navy wives who must cope with their husbands’ long absences and with economic privations, to recount her own life experiences in a smaller and less technologically complex Navy, and to laud the unsung fraternity of Navy wives who play a part (albeit indirect) in all that the Navy does.

By all indications, Wilma Miles’s life was an extraordinary one, marked by adventure; travel to exotic places; social contacts with royalty, heads of state, and diplomats; strong family ties; and loyalty to her husband and to the U.S. Navy. She saw herself first and foremost as a Navy wife, as a