




Ordinary Hero

Read between the lines of the lives of the quiet and unassuming among us, and you may find an extraordinary woman like Margaret King.



By Janet C. Pittard

A black and white portrait of Lt. Col. Margaret Belva Mizelle. She is wearing a dark military uniform with a matching garrison cap. Her hair is styled in a bun. The uniform has "LT" insignia on the collar. The photograph is set against a white background and is framed by a thin red border. Above the photo, there is a decorative gold and white patterned border. To the right of the photo, there is a vertical strip of red and white polka-dot patterned paper.

Lt. Col. Margaret Belva Mizelle
(circa 1942) gave the United
States Army nearly three decades
of dedicated service.

Her letters home were not filled with stories of the war and its dramatic turns — that was not her style. The memories of her service to her country, now part of the military collection at the North Carolina State Archives, reflected her humor and her humility. She was Lieutenant Colonel Margaret Mizelle King of the United States Army Nurse Corps.

Born in 1918 in the town of Windsor in Bertie County, Margaret Belva Mizelle was the daughter of Charles Wesley Mizelle and Mary Ellen Asbell Mizelle. Her mother died when she was a young child, and her father married "Miss Lucille," who raised Margaret as her own, along with a sister and a brother. Margaret was devoted to her stepmother, to whom she addressed her wartime correspondence, and to her two siblings.

After high school, Margaret attended nursing school at Presbyterian Hospital in Charlotte. "She was a good nurse," recalls her former roommate, Ernestine Kennedy of Thomasville. "The patients loved her. You couldn't help liking Margaret. She had a good sense of humor and was able to laugh at herself. She never got upset. She was always really modest about her abilities. She was an amazing person."

Margaret graduated from Presbyterian in 1940 and began work as a private duty nurse in Charlotte. She might have stayed that course, but the country hovered on the brink of war, and nurses in the graduating class were recruited for the Army Nurse Corps, with a group of Charlotte medical personnel forming the U.S. Army 38th Evacuation Hospital Unit. Margaret and her friend and classmate, Polly Witherspoon, decided to join up, but Polly backed out at the last minute to marry her fiancé — too late for Margaret to rethink her own "rendezvous with destiny." Three and a half months after the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor, the 38th Evacuation Hospital was ordered into active service.

The unit received training for battlefield operations at Fort Bragg and departed for England in August of the



During Margaret's time in Italy, she and her tent mate, Johnnie Johnson (left), endured all-night air raids and the flooding of their hospital.

same year. "None of us are scared about leaving," Margaret wrote her mother. "I am depending on you and Daddy not to worry about me."

The most unlikely places

The Atlantic crossing, Margaret's first, was thankfully uneventful, despite constant zigzagging to avoid enemy submarines. "There were two or three nurses who were dreadfully seasick, but not me — I was too curious about what was going on around me," she wrote.

When the 38th docked at Liverpool, England, the unit saw the first hard evidence of war and witnessed its first

complete blackout. But Margaret filled her correspondence with descriptions of the beautiful countryside and friendly people and with requests for hard-to-get items, like nylon hose and cosmetics. "I am having a wonderful time and wouldn't have missed coming for anything," she assured her family.

Then it was November, and the 38th set sail, destination unknown. "I always did want to see the world," Margaret wrote en route. On November 8 and 9, 1942, the unit was part of the invasion forces going ashore at the coastal town of Arzew, Algeria. Protected by U.S. Army Rangers, medical personnel worked

under sporadic sniper fire, fought the cold and the dust and then the rain and the mud, too busy to dwell on the horrible realities of the war around them. "I am sure of your prayers," Margaret wrote, "and with them, I feel as safe as can be."

The 38th Evacuation Hospital served in the North African Campaign through mid-September 1943 and then went ashore with the Allied invasion forces at Blue Beach near Salerno, Italy. For the first four days, they slept under the stars in an alfalfa field where livestock roamed freely. Margaret wrote that she was awakened by people shouting her name. "I opened my eyes to find a huge bull staring me in the face. Disconcerting, to say the least!"

"We could hear the bursting of shells in the distance, and at night the sky was lighted up like a Fourth of July celebration," Margaret related in October 1943. The 38th was caring for more patients than ever before. There was hard fighting, and the Italian front shifted often, which meant the 38th

was moving at regular intervals, and mail was sometimes slow to keep up. "Don't worry when you don't hear from me; we're pretty busy these days and working 12-hour duty, so my letters won't be too frequent for awhile," she cautioned.

No time for fear

In April 1944, the 38th faced what Margaret described as one of their hardest performances, when they landed with the invasion forces at Anzio Beachhead, Italy. "I don't remember being frightened. You didn't have time to be frightened," she said. Close enough to the battle for walk-ins, they saw 400 patients a day. To provide more protection from enemy shelling and bombing raids, tents were pitched atop dugouts, two-thirds of the way underground. Margaret returned from duty to find a bullet had passed through her tent and her bed. Exhausted from hours on duty, she fell asleep while sitting up with her

patients during an all-night air raid. When she woke, one battle-weary soldier shook his head at her, saying, "Lord, nurse, I wish I didn't know no more about this war than you."

Margaret's recollections of the 38th Evacuation Hospital's stint at the base in Pisa, Italy, were dominated by a flood that occurred November 2, 1944, when the Arno River covered the city and adjacent hospital area in water as high as six feet. Hurriedly, more than 500 patients were evacuated; personal belongings and equipment were left to the rapidly rising waters. Margaret was charged with transporting the narcotics cabinet and carried it over her head in waist-high water.

The medical personnel and their patients finally moved to the second floor of a warehouse — the first floor was flooded — and got to sleep around midnight. When Margaret slipped into her sleeping bag on the floor, she felt something furry and discovered that a cat had sought



In June 1949, Margaret (left, with fellow nurse Frances Neal) was recalled into active duty to serve in Korea.

refuge in the bottom of her bag. "I guess I squealed, but not too loud because people were trying to sleep."

"We are all fine," she vouched to her mother after the experience. "I don't even have a cold yet, in spite of the fact that I walked around with wet clothes on for two days and a night." Referring to the loss of her possessions, Margaret rationalized, "One good thing about our disaster is that we got rid of so much junk

that we didn't need but that we just couldn't bring ourselves to throw away."

One of the most difficult things Margaret personally faced was the sudden death from hepatitis of one of her tent mates in December 1944. "We miss her terribly. ... The funeral was awful," she wrote home. "I hate funerals anyway, but military ones are unbearable."

Years of service

Was there a best memory of her wartime experience? "Yes," she would say later. "When they came out and said the war was over. All the cold feet and unappetizing food were worth it." Margaret was in the United States for some well-deserved R&R when the war in Europe ended. She was discharged in January 1946 and placed in the Army Reserve. She worked in veterans hospitals in Ohio and North Carolina until June 1949, when she was recalled to active duty.

From September 1950 until April 1952, Margaret was assigned to the 171st Evacuation Hospital in the Korean conflict. In December 1950, Margaret was put in charge of evacuating the children's ward

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for the withdrawal from Pyongyang, Korea, with the Eighth Army, ahead of advancing Communist forces. She was supposed to stay until all the children were safe. She barely made the last plane out. Back home, a rumor circulated rapidly among friends that her plane had crashed, and she was missing in action. Later, she joked that since people were saying such nice things about her, she felt like a heel for being alive.

In her later years of service — as head nurse, assistant chief, and finally chief of nursing service at Army hospitals in Europe, Puerto Rico, and

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all over the United States, including Hawaii, Margaret was recognized repeatedly for her professional skill and leadership, improvements in the care and treatment of patients, effective personnel counseling, stability under pressure, and persistent devotion to duty. When asked the key to her much lauded personnel counseling technique, her simple reply was, "I just listened."

Lt. Col. Margaret B. Mizelle retired from the Army Nurse Corps on May 31, 1970. In her 28 years of service, she was awarded 16 service medals and overseas bars, including the European-African-Middle Eastern Service Medal with four Bronze Stars; the Army Commendation Medal with Oak Leaf Cluster; the National Defense Service Medal with Oak Leaf Cluster; the United Nations Service Medal; the Korean Service Medal with three Campaign Stars; the Army of Occupation Medal (Japan); and the Asiatic-Pacific Campaign Medal with three Campaign Stars. Margaret viewed these accomplishments with typical modesty. "It was not a big deal," she said.

"I would do it over"

Margaret settled in Raleigh, near her old friend, Polly, and bought a townhouse — the first home she had ever owned. In October 1972, she surprised friends and family by marrying Truman Lewis King. Together they traveled in the country and went abroad, revisiting some of the places where the war had taken each of them. When Truman died in August 1989, Margaret moved to Glenaire Retirement Community in Cary.

Over about a two-year period, Margaret and I pored over old photographs from World War II and Korea, identifying and organizing them. I recorded hours of interviews with Margaret about her military career for the State Archives' military collection. When we finally came to the end of "our project," as she liked to call it, I asked her if, looking back on her military career, she would do it all over again. She reflected on the question for a while. "I saw some brave little soldiers — they weren't old

enough to be in the war," she began, and then her voice trailed off, tears came to her eyes, and she finished softly, "Yes, I would do it over."

Margaret died in the Glenaire Healthcare Center from complications due to Parkinson's disease August 7, 2004. She was buried in her hometown of Windsor, her country's flag draped over her coffin, with the insignia of the U.S. Army Nurse Corps, a final reminder of a quiet

patriot who seemed an ordinary woman of her time but, like so many of her generation, was quite extraordinary. ☞

Janet Pittard is a freelance writer living in Raleigh. Her brother, David Chiswell, assisted with the research for this story. Margaret King was Janet's godmother and a longtime friend of her mother, Polly Witherspoon Chiswell.

A CHEF'S SECRET RECIPE

A desire, a dream, a vision...
Life on the coast

For Libba Molsinger, leaving behind the city and her career as a chef for the seclusion of Oak Island was a dream come true. Today, Oak Island, with its beautiful 14-mile long beach, remains an easy-going cottage community. Finding your perfect spot on this quiet island is easy with Libba's secret recipe.

Libba knows the ingredients that go into a successful search for that dream place along the sunny, south-facing Brunswick coast. She helps you feel like a "local" while you settle into your own Oak Island retreat. Your favorite dish tastes even better as it's served with your newfound island flair.



Ask Libba to help you cook up a place at the beach!

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