



CAPT ANN AGNES BERNATITUS – a Lithuanian origin U.S. Navy legend of WWII

SHE BECAME THE 1ST MEMBER OF THE U. S. ARMED FORCES AND THE 1ST WOMAN TO RECEIVE THE LEGION OF MERIT. A. A. BERNATITUS RECEIVED THE AWARD FOR HER SERVICE DURING THE DEFENSE OF THE PHILIPPINES DURING THE WORLD WAR II. SHE WAS ALSO THE 1ST RECIPIENT OF THE LEGION OF MERIT AUTHORIZED TO WEAR A COMBAT "V" WITH THE MEDAL.

A SIMPLE GIRL FROM IMMIGRANTS' FAMILY

The Americans born before and who took part in World War II have been described as our nation's finest generation. These heroes grew up expecting to live traditional lives where they worked for a living and raised families before retiring in old age. Ann Agnes Bernatitus a young girl growing up in Exeter, Pennsylvania, surely expected to live such a simple and mundane life. Time would soon reveal that fate had reserved a more purpose for the lives of Ann and her generation.

Ann had been born on January 21, 1912, to Lithuanian American immigrants that had settled in Exeter, Pennsylvania. Her parents, Alexander Bernatitus and Margaret Adamits, had been born in the Suvalki region of Czarist Russian occupied Lithuania. Like hundreds of thousands, Lithuanians they chose to leave their loved ones and migrate to America seeking better lives for themselves and their children. Alexander was a skilled craftsman not only earned a successful livelihood, but even built the family home during the early part of the century.

Ann received her early education though the Exeter public school system where she graduated from high school in 1928. Ann has always had an interest in caring for others and always wanted to be a nurse. She once commented besides there was nothing else for girls to do in those days, but to teach or nurse. Though her widowed mother could not afford to send her

to college, Ann worked briefly after high school and managed to get into nursing school. In 1931, Ann entered nurses' training at the Wyoming Valley Homeopathic Hospital in Wilkes Barre, Pennsylvania. Graduating in 1934, in the middle of the Depression, there were few opportunities for employment in the area. While taking a post graduate operating room technique course at the Pennsylvania Graduate Hospital in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, she managed to secure a position on the hospital's nursing staff from February to May 1935, followed by similar position at the New Rochelle Hospital, New Rochelle, New York and Nanticoke State Hospital, Nanticoke, Pennsylvania.

THE FATAL DESTINATION — PHILIPPINES

After being commissioned, Ann served briefly at the Naval Hospitals at Chelsea, Massachusetts and Annapolis, Maryland until before being assigned to the U.S. Naval Hospital, Canacao, Philippine Islands. She left the United States by naval transport from Norfolk, Virginia, via the Panama Canal, and made a brief stop to drop some U.S. Marines off at Midway Island.

In July 1940, Ann arrived in Canacao, Philippines and was immediately impressed by the easy life style enjoyed by the American personnel station there. She was one of twelve nurses assigned to the Naval Hospital where the work was easy and there was plenty of time to enjoy golf, bicycling, swimming and the officer club.



THE LEGION OF MERIT

The Legion of Merit is a military award of the United States Armed Forces that is given for exceptionally meritorious conduct in the performance of outstanding services and achievements. The Legion of Merit is seventh in the order of precedence of all U.S. military awards. The decoration is issued to members of the eight uniformed services of the United States as well as to military and political figures of foreign governments.

In October 1942, Brazilian Army Brigadier General Amaro Soares Bittencourt became the first person awarded the Legion of Merit (Commander) and a week later, Lieutenant, junior grade Ann A. Bernatitus, a U.S. Navy Nurse Corps officer, became the first member of the United States Armed Forces and the first woman to receive the Legion of Merit.

From 1942 to 1944, the Legion of Merit was awarded for a fairly wide range of achievements. This was because it was, until the establishment of the Bronze Star Medal in 1944, the only decoration below the Silver Star, which could be awarded for combat valor, as well as being the only decoration lower than the Distinguished Service Medal, which could be awarded for meritorious noncombat service.

After World War II, the Legion of Merit was awarded almost exclusively to senior officers in the rank of lieutenant colonel.



Canacas, Philippine Islands. U.S. Navy nurses. Front Row; T. Metcalf, Ruth Anthony, Katherine Yarnell, Martha Smith. Back: A. Bernatitus, Peggy Nash, Jamie Taylor, Goldie O'Haver, Dorothy Still, Taken between 01/03/1940 and 10/10/1941.



Bernatitus was the only naval nurse assigned to the region during the bombing of Bataan. She treated Filipino and American soldiers during the height of the action. She worked tirelessly even during the bombing of the American field hospitals in the area.

Manila was only a ferry boat ride away where one could get anything found in the U.S. was available at a reasonable cost. In the Philippines as the rest of the world, this pleasant era would come to a quick end.

Though there had been talk about war in Europe for some time, Ann was surprised to take a 6 o'clock telephone call from a boyfriend advising that war had been declared. It was only then that they learned of the December 7th 1941 attack on Pearl Harbor. Work immediately commenced with the sandbag being placed around the hospital because the foundation of the three story building was no real strong. When the war was declared an American who could not be moved was sent to her hospital and the Filipinos sent home.

A few days later Ann recall coming off duty early one morning and hearing sirens going off and planes bombing nearby Nichols Field. With this attack, Ann was assigned to assist in the evacuation their patients to Sternberg Hospital in Manila. On December 10, Ann watched the Japanese bombing of the Cavite Navy Yard by some 125 planes from the nurses' quarters. The wounded were immediately brought to the hospital where Ann took part in providing needed medical assistance. first aid. As Japanese invasion forces began their invasion, American wounded continued to be brought to the hospital. As the number of wounded continue to rise a temporary hospital was ordered to be established at Balintawok just outside Manila. Half of the Navy medical personnel were sent

to this facility and the remaining personnel divided into teams for assignments to various locations. Ann was assigned to a surgical team sent to such a facility at the Santa Scholastica School where she worked long hours caring for the wounded.

On December 22, General Douglas MacArthur came to the conclusion that Manila could not be held and declared it an open city. All American military personnel were order to fall back to Bataan and Ann's surgical unit withdrew with the retreating Army convoy. Due to the hectic conditions, units were mixed up and Ann became the only naval nurse in her group. Ann served at Camp Limay on December 24th and remained there until January 23, 1942, assisting in operations and the treatment of all type of casualties under the most extreme of conditions.

THE BATTLE OF BATAAN

On January 23, 1942, her unit was order removed to Little Baguio farther down the peninsula was the Japanese forces continued their advance. On March 3, her hospital was bombed, even though the warehouse on the beach had a big red cross. The work day drew progressive longer with every operating table being filled constantly. During an interview, Ann stated "They would come in from the field all dirty. You did what you could there were lice; I kept my hair covered all the time. He did a lot of leg amputations because we had a lot of gas gangrene out there. I remember one patient

we were operating on. Dr. Smith didn't want to sew him back up. He had died. I remember telling him that I didn't want him to do that if anything happened to me. He said, 'I'll sew him up just to shut you up.' We were washing the dirty dressings that they used during an operation. We would wash them out and refold and sterilized them and use them again ..."

"It was terrible. By that time, they had stopped advancing for a while. Things were kind of quiet at the front lines. But we were getting a lot of patients with malaria, dysentery, all that. We ran out of beds. You'd go to bed at night and when you awoke the next morning you'd get out there and there would be all these two or three-decker bunks made of wood and patients in them. There wasn't much surgery going on, but the nurses taking care of the sick were very busy."

On April 7th, the hospital was bombed for the second time and when their front line collapsed was moved aboard the hospital ship Relief to the Island fortress at Corregidor. Ann recalled that she had been less scared at Bataan for on Corregidor the whole place shook when bombed by the Japanese. On Corregidor the hospital was set up in the Malinta tunnel under a rock mountain like formation which also contained General MacArthur and Wainwright headquarters. Upon arriving at Corregidor, Ann came down with dysentery and her operation work became limited. The bombing of the Island was terrific and the casualties continued to rise.

THE GREAT ESCAPE WITH SUBMARINE

As conditions worsened, it was decided that an attempt would be made to evacuate some key personnel and the nurses were added to this selection. This decision was made by President Roosevelt himself when he ordered General MacArthur to leave the Philippines to continue to struggle for its eventual liberation. Ann has no idea of how she and the other nurses were selected, but somehow they were added to this list of key personnel. She recalls being ordered with other to meet in front of Wainwright's headquarters where someone began reading out names. As your name was called, General Wainwright shook your hand and wished you Godspeed. He told the departing 'Tell them how it is out here.' and then drove off. Those selected were then taken out of the tunnel down in pitch dark to the dock where they boarded small boats and were taken to an awaiting submarines.

Their travel was slow with all effort being taken to conceal their movement. Ann later learned that Corregidor had fallen during their escape and that the Japanese forces were everywhere. The sight of two dark shapes in the water was a welcomed sight to all. All boarded the submarines quickly with little or no noise. On May 3rd, Ann embarked on a 17 day voyage aboard the U.S.S. Spearfish (SS-190) through Japanese filled waters to Fremantle, Australia. After a brief stay

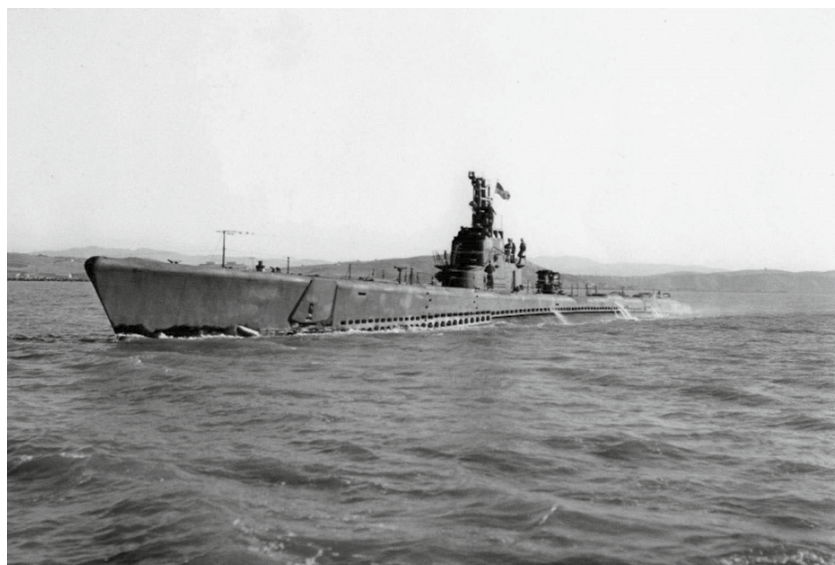
in Fremantle, Ann was send home flying to Melbourne and aboard the U.S.S. West Point to New York via the Panama Canal.

Ann World War II service did not end here. She went on to serve at the Naval Hospitals in Bethesda, Maryland and New Orleans, Louisiana and as the chief nurse aboard the Hospital Ship Solace during the Okinawa landings. The ships assignments took her to Saipan, Tinian, and Manchuria, China caring for our wounded and liberated prisoners of war.

I doubt if anyone reading this article is not proud to read about this heroic Lithuanian American and her contribution to our World War II war efforts. A grateful nation was also just as proud of Ann. Due to a quirk in military regulations, Ann could not be given an existing decoration for service in Manila, Bataan, and Corregidor. At that time, the United States did not have a military decoration for military service for a non combat member. To correct this situation, the U.S. Congress created the Legion of Merit on July 20, 1942, to award individuals who have distinguished themselves by exceptionally meritorious conduct in the performance of outstanding service. The first individual to be awarded the Legion of Merit was Lieutenant Ann Agnes Bernatitus, Naval Nurse for her service on Corregidor. ■

By Henry L. Gaidis/ Bridges

Photo credits: U.S. Navy



A. A. Bernatitus was the last naval nurse rescued from the Philippines by submarine by the U.S.S. submarine Spearfish (SS-190). She arrived in Australia by it and later learned that Corregidor had fallen during their escape and that the Japanese forces were everywhere. Photo credit: U.S. Navy, 30 September 1944.

HER LEGION OF MERIT CITATION

The President of the United States of America takes pleasure in presenting the Legion of Merit with Combat "V" to

Lieutenant, Junior Grade Ann Agnes Bernatitus

United States Navy



**Ann Agnes Bernatitus
Receiving the Congressional
Legion of Merit Medal.**

For exceptionally meritorious conduct in the performance of outstanding services to the Government of the United States as a member of Surgical Unit No. 5 during the Japanese attack on the Philippines, December 1941 through April 1942. Nurse Bernatitus maintained her position in the front lines of the Manila-Bataan area rendering efficient and devoted service during the prolonged siege. Miss Bernatitus was regularly attached to the Naval Hospital, Canacao, Philippine Islands having reported for duty there on 20 July 1941. Shortly after hostilities commenced in December 1941 the Naval Hospital Staff and patients were moved to a new establishment in Manila. On 24 December 1941, when Manila was being evacuated Miss Bernatitus accompanied by two Navy Medical Officers proceeded to the Army Hospital at Limay, Bataan. The remainder of the hospital staff stayed in Manila and were taken prisoners. On 25 January 1942, Miss Bernatitus was transferred to Army Field Hospital No. 1 at Little Baguio, Bataan and remained there on active duty until that hospital was destroyed by enemy bombing on 7 April. When Bataan fell Miss Bernatitus was transferred to Corregidor. During her stay in Bataan she worked directly under Lieutenant Commander C. M. Smith (MC), USN, who is now a prisoner of war. The conditions under which the nurses lived and worked lacked everything in the way of comfort. They were constantly exposed to enemy bombing attacks and experienced several as well as the endemic jungle diseases of that area. Miss Bernatitus suffered from both dysentery and beriberi during her tour of duty in Bataan. In spite of all difficulties Miss Bernatitus performed her duty in an exemplary manner with courage and good spirit. She was officially transferred from Corregidor three days before the surrender of that fortress. (Lieutenant, Junior Grade, Bernatitus is authorized to wear the Combat "V".)

The President of the United States of America Franklin D. Roosevelt
October 1942