

# Aboard the U.S.S. Comfort, 1945

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Lt. Doris Gardner

For the duration of World War II, Doris Gardner performed the duties of a Lieutenant (2nd & 1st) in the ARMY Nurse Corps. While in high school Doris had decided to become an airline stewardess, to travel the world. In those days a flight attendant needed nurse's training, so off she went. By the time she graduated, war was on the horizon. Doris got her wish to travel the world, but not on an airplane.

Onboard the newly commissioned U.S.S. Comfort, in the Bay of Okinawa, Doris Gardner and Mary Rodden, best friends from small towns in Wisconsin, would sneak out on to the forbidden upper deck to watch the war.

Beyond the low lying hills the battle was raging. Fierce thunder and blood-red flashes filled 360 degrees of the sky twenty-four hours a day. All around them in the waters of the Bay of Okinawa the battle was in its fore-stages. Whole ships sunk on either side of the new, bright-white hospital ship. The vessel rocked violently, threatening to spill them overboard as whole ships went down on both sides of them.



A break onboard the U.S.S. Comfort  
Lt. Gardner center.

"There would be a ship there to starboard. Then it wouldn't be there. The same would happen on the port side. Gone. A deafening explosion. Water shooting so very high into the air. It took only an instant for the ship to sink below the water and be lost. We didn't see how there could be any survivors."

Hidden on the off-limits deck, Doris and Mary would look out on the war. As far as the eye could see lines of ambulances stretched from the horizon, filled with dead and dying "boys" as they called them for, to those 22-year-olds, that's what far too many of them were.

Having survived torpedos, bombings and battle, no one expected at this stage that the red cross along her side, amidships, was about to become a target.

Now out to sea, an hour behind continued the largest sea-land-air battle in history and the last battle of World War II, the battle of Okinawa. In three months, the bombs at Hiroshima and Nagasaki would rain down their terror and the war with Japan would be over.

Lt. Gardner was on duty late in the evening on an aft ward caring for those coming from and heading into the nearby surgery in the center of the ship. At 8:30 she began preparing medications for those in her care. By 8:45 she finished filling a syringe with painkiller and placed it on a tray. She opened the medicine cabinet to put the vial back. Before the door was closed, an explosion ignited behind the wall. The 92 pound, 5'0" nurse was picked up straight into the air by the concussion and thrown eight feet backward, slamming full body into the bulkhead.

From the faraway hilltop behind which the battle raged, the line of red-crossed trucks queued their way to reach the gangway of the Comfort, each truck filled with the prostrate.

Medics were busy at the gangway hauling onboard stretchers and those who could no longer walk on their own. As the ambulance drove away another took its place instantly, endlessly, until the ship was full to capacity, though the line of ambulances from the gangway to the far-away hill never diminished. When she drew in her gangways and left for hospitals in the South Pacific at Guam, Australia, New Guinea, Hawaii, she left the line of trucks behind.

*You met a man in those days, shook his hand and looked him in the eye, but only for a moment. It was always in the back of your head that he could be gone in an instant.*

Chaplain, Father Weilandt, had been the talk of the ship. The kindest man many had ever known, he had a special nature, leaving the relatively care-free, mid-sate California mission (where his grave is still marked) and volunteering to work in the war.

Talk had gone around the ship of recommending the man for sainthood once the ship was stateside. He worked some magical power of love among the wounded and those who cared for them.

But of lasting friendship Mom has said, "You met a man in those days, shook his

Among the nurse, doctor and military crew friends that Lt. Gardner had made onboard, the

into the bulkhead.

She was made deaf for twenty-four hours and suffered permanent inner ear and spinal damage. The medicine cabinet and the wall to which it was attached were gone. All she could see through the smoke was a tangled mass of ruin as she peeled herself from the wall to help those who must have been much more hurt.

A kamikaze pilot had aimed his plane for the lighted ship and struck right through to the core of the hospital's duties, the surgery. Surgeons, nurses, and wounded were killed instantly. The heart of the ship stopped beating and went dark. Thus crippled, it ground to a halt in the embattled bay.



**U.S.S. Comfort**  
The kamikaze aimed for the red cross amidship.

Father Weilandt had just left the surgery, having ministered to all as he could, wounded and staff. As he walked the deck he made his "Office of the Day," prayers for strength. He paced from fore to aft, one end to the other. As he neared the middle of the ship, the suicide plane drove home, striking the Comfort amidship, the most vulnerable spot to sink the vessel. The plane aimed for the largest red cross.

One would have hoped that Father would have been knocked into the water with a chance of being rescued, but Weilandt's fate was far more cruel. The plane drove deep into the ship, creating a red-hot, burning hole of twisted metal and smoke in its wake. A large fire broke out, seen

hand and looked him in the eye, but only for a moment. It was always in the back of your head that he could be gone in an instant."

"You loved your girlfriends. You knew all would be safe onboard. A hospital ship, at least, is a safe haven."

It was not.

On the night of 28 April 1945, the ship drew up its gangways with a full complement of wounded and dying. The surgery was, as it had been for days, working hard at the business of lopping off in amputation; sewing on in rescue; extracting bullets, shrapnel and embedded earth; attempting to relieve the sustained torture of severe burns.

The ship "set sail" and began to exit the bay.

The Comfort, an

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obviously new ship as observed by any who saw her--brightly painted and lit up at night in the prescribed manor "like a Christmas tree"-- was no stranger to being the target of combat.

In the battle of San Bernardino Straits, the Comfort had been caught between two forces firing on each other and was strafed by Japanese fighter planes. This danger was another reason being on-deck was off-limits during the war. Luckily, in that instance, the ship bore

in the distance by observers. The deck below Father Weilandt's feet buckled under him and gave way. He lost his footing and fell into the burning hole. When it was safe enough to retrieve him, 90 degree burns covered 95% of his body.

And yet he lived.

Finding himself now a patient on the ship, a victim of war, in appalling pain and suffering, Father Weilandt's "special way" was not lost. Astonishingly, it increased.

Weilandt lived for two weeks, mummified in bandages wherein only a small slit at his mouth revealed the man beneath. He had been blinded and the wrappings around his head made no attempt at eyes.

Without complaint, asking after others, wanting to help, Father whispered with all of his strength, "Forgive."

The surviving nurses took their turns at making him as

**The loss of six ARMY nurses onboard the Comfort is recorded as the deadliest attack in history on American women in uniform.**

comfortable as possible. They knelt at his bedside in prayer, "Please, God, relieve this man's extreme agony," which agony became their own.

Soon any movement was too painful for Father, even to shake his head "no" when asked by the surviving nurses if they could do anything for him. Within a few days Weilandt found it too painful to speak.

The ship was able to travel directly on its

no casualties of its own, but it was becoming clearer, hospital ships were no longer protected by international law. The whispering onboard was that it was just a matter of time before the ship, too, would be hit and likely left to sink as other ships had gone down around them.

One morning months earlier, when Doris went on duty as the *Comfort* left the Leyte campaign in the Philippines with wounded, she was told by the ship's navigator a Japanese torpedo had narrowly missed the ship during the night. Had it struck they surely would have sunk.

The U.S.S. *Comfort* was becoming more vulnerable. Would they remain lit as prescribed by hospital ship behavior in international rules of war, or would they go dark and hide?

Nightly they withdrew from the beaches at Okinawa, remaining alight far out in the bay so as neither to risk themselves near battle, nor to endanger other ships by bathing them with their candlepower.

The coming and going proved to be too much for the ship and the *Comfort* stayed in harbor overnight, their lights out. The ship's surgery, ablaze twenty-four hours a day with ongoing shifts of nurses and surgeons, was protected deep inside the interior of the ship. Its lights did not jeopardize the safety of the ship.

The floating hospital, now loaded with the compromised, made their way out of harm's way. As they set out to sea, they passed the ships at harbor that were darkened for protection. Within half-an-hour they lit up to "full brilliance," the *Comfort's* six large red crosses broadcasting "safe harbor" as it left behind the darkened bay awash with death and machines of war.

The snip was able to travel, imply, on its own steam. In convoy, with a full house of wounded and less than half the staff, the hospital ship made its way to Guam for what repair could be done at the limited base. It was there the lost nurses, doctors and navy staff, 28 in all, were buried.



**Guam**  
*Burying the dead.*

From Guam the ship took over a week to crawl to Hawaii. There, two weeks after the incident, Father Weilandt was relieved, finally, of his miserable condition.

The loss of six ARMY nurses onboard the *Comfort* is recorded as the deadliest attack in history on American women in uniform.

There are more stories Mom tells, those of men driven mad by war, suspended in a large cage in the hull of a ship, the only access a narrow gangway. Accompanied by two armed guards in front and back, the nurse carried her prepared medicine tray along the plank. A lurch of the ship and a fall would bring death. From outside the bars, while guards beat the other men off, twenty-two-year-old Lt. Gardner tended the sick.

The nightmare of the helpless, disordered minds of tortured men reaching out to her through the bars haunts her dreams these sixty years later, as does the nightmare of those "boys" who jumped overboard to their suicides.

The ship enjoyed a tranquil journey on the water, though inside her the medical crew was running full steam to treat and relieve the most wounded of the battle. Under a full moon the hospital ship moved gracefully, its crew and cargo glad to be leaving the tragic battle. They were headed to the land-hospital on Guam. An observer later wrote the ship was "lit up like a great city with a Red Cross in large letters" at its center.

Today Mom tells everyone, "War is Hell. I've been there. I know. War is not ever, is never the answer. Never."

*War is Hell. I've been there. I know. War is not ever, is never the answer. Never.*

### 2nd column



**Surviving nurses view kamikaze engine on deck.**  
*Lt.s Gardner and Rodden second and first from right.*

A photographer had requested a photo of the kamikaze engine with nurses. Doris had been on duty for 16 hours.

Gardner's hearing had not yet been restored and she was still dazed from being throw by the blast. She had been busy working with the wounded when a corpsman signalled for her to go up on deck and have her picture taken. She refused and was ordered.

The photographer asked them to smile, then asked for a somber picture, but Gardner had not heard the latter instruction.

They were all glad to be dismissed and to return to those in need.

[Dorrie Howard.info](#)

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#### Links:

[Okinawa: Okinawa: The Last Battle | Battle of Okinawa](#)

[USS Comfort: Wikipedia](#)

I'll be updating Mom's site with lots more photos, newspaper clippings, her memoirs and video.

If you want to watch the site unfold this winter, we'll send you a note when we do some updating:

Your name:

Your E-mail address: