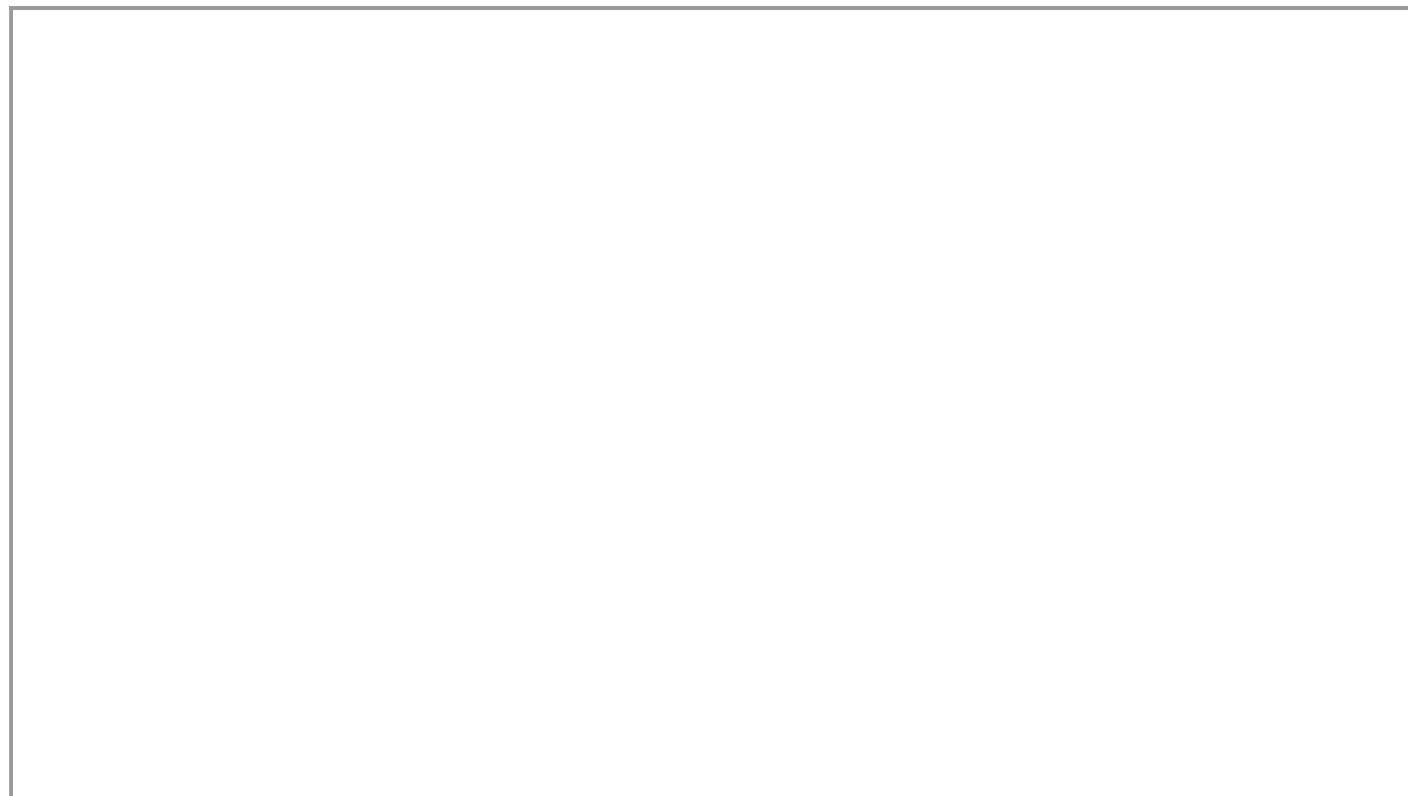


A WWII nurse who became a nun is honored on Veterans Day

November 11, 2019 8:32 PM

Ashley Murray / Pittsburgh Post-Gazette



Before the politicians arrived, before residence hall volunteers passed around the red, white and blue Jell-O parfaits, and before dozens of nuns filled the convent meeting room with verses of “America the Beautiful,” Sister Melanie Kambic looked around and saw “a lot of to do about nothing.”

“I’m grateful for all the attention I’m getting, but I think there’s a lot of veterans around who could also be enjoying this,” she said. “I’m not sure why they picked me.”

But the nearly 100 family, friends and peers who on Monday honored the 98-year-old United States Army Nurse Corps veteran remained steadfast in their accolades. Gathered in a meeting room at the Sisters of Divine Providence convent, they described her storied life and career as “selfless” and “nuclear powered.”

The nun, who has belonged to the McCandless-based religious order for 65 years and is the oldest sister at the convent, served during World War II and went on to practice and teach nursing throughout the Pittsburgh region as well as in Baltimore and the Caribbean.

“This is unique because we have a member of the religious community who is also a veteran,” said Joanne Andiorio, an administrator at the North Hills convent.

The humble Sister Kambic grew tearful when U.S. Rep. Conor Lamb, D-Mt. Lebanon, presented her with a flag that flew over the U.S. Capitol.

“These are important. They only fly over [the Capitol] when we are in session,” Mr. Lamb said. “... So these ones we take down to give to constituents are a very special thing.”

Mr. Lamb’s wife, Hayley Haldeman, is Sister Kambic’s great-niece.

State Rep. Sara Innamorato, D-Allegheny, presented Sister Kambic with a citation from the State House of Representatives.

Ms. Innamorato said she was “taken aback” by the sister’s story.

“We’re thankful for her service to our community, especially to those who are most vulnerable,” she said.

While growing up as one of six children of Slovenian immigrant parents in Rankin, Sister Kambic knew she had two interests: helping people and religion.

“Even when I was little, I wanted to be a helper,” she said.

Sister Kambic graduated from Braddock Hospital School of Nursing in 1944 and then joined the ranks of Americans serving during World War II.

At the tail end of the war and for three years afterward, Sister Kambic worked in an Army hospital in Richmond, Va.

“Part of her job was to basically triage these soldiers who were returning all torn apart,” said her nephew Dan Kambic, 60, of Regent Square. Talking to his aunt is “like talking to history,” he said.

Sister Kambic said she can’t remember much because “after 98 years of being fed information, [my brain] is very full.” However, she does recall bits and pieces of working in an Army hospital ward with 30 patients and, at times, scarce resources.

“I carried a tray of cough medicine, and I said ‘Here, give this to anybody who’s coughing,’” she said.

She also remembers working hard to convince an injured soldier to let her help him, as well as the time she was summoned to a soldier’s bedside, only to find that he had died already.

But her work in the Army Nurse Corps was just the beginning.

After the war, she attended Duquesne University for nursing and then earned advanced degrees from the University of Maryland and University of Pittsburgh.

She taught nursing at Allegheny General Hospital from 1952 to 1954. That’s when she joined the Sisters of Divine Providence.

“I joined this army after I left our Army,” she said.

As a religious sister, she supervised the pediatric and surgical units at the former Divine Providence Hospital in Pittsburgh. She continued to teach nursing at the former Braddock General Hospital, the former South Side Hospital in Pittsburgh, at Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore, and at the Catholic University School of Nursing in Ponce, Puerto Rico.

She worked as a nurse practitioner at Latrobe Area Hospital and at UPMC Mercy in Pittsburgh, and even had a short stint teaching elementary school in Beaver.

After she retired in 1994, she joined the “peanut butter and jelly brigade,” making sandwiches for the homeless as part of the Pittsburgh Mercy Operation Safety Net program.

She still collects clothes and appliances for a church in West Virginia, according to her family.

“You have given us a live one,” Ms. Andiorio said to Sister Kambic’s small army of nieces and nephews who attended the ceremony. “Her years have not slowed her down in any way.”

“She credits herself with ending the war,” Ms. Andiorio continued to the jovial crowd. “I asked her ‘What do you mean?’ She said ‘I entered the service, and the war ended three weeks later.’”

Had she gone to Europe, her “tenacity” might have just ended the war, Ms. Andiorio joked.

“Many of us have surrendered to her daily,” Ms. Andiorio said.

Ashley Murray: 412-263-1750, amurray@post-gazette.com or @Ashley__Murray