

Taps and tears



PHOTOS SPECIAL TO THE BLADE/RICH CRAWFORD

The horse-drawn caisson, escort platoon, and military band prepare to move through the gate into Arlington National Cemetery.

Outdoors editor's mother laid to rest with honors at Arlington National Cemetery

By **MATT MARKEY**
BLADE OUTDOORS EDITOR

ARLINGTON, Va. — Even the droplets of sweat tracing down the brow of each member of the honor guard seem to follow a strict cadence. When the U.S. military buries a soldier, the precision is stunning and the display of respect without equal.

At Arlington National Cemetery, they do this 25 to 30 times every day. In the rain, in the snow, or the blistering humidity, they honor their fallen with a saturation of dignity.

One year ago, it was 95 degrees on Memorial Day weekend when we put First Lt. Helen Louise Markey to rest at that hallowed site.

This wasn't someone who was part of the attack at Iwo Jima, or took a grenade to save a squad in Afghanistan. She never shouldered a rifle, raised a bayonet, or opened the bomb bay doors. Her service to this country was administered with tourniquets, transfusions, medicines, and compassion, but that mattered not.

On a make-you-melt kind of late May day, her escort platoon was locked in that posture that seems cut from steel. They stood rigid well before the Catholic memorial service for my mother concluded inside the chapel at Fort Myer, just beyond the gate to the cemetery.

In those crisp, dark, dress uniforms, snapped in perfect lines, there was a collection of young soldiers whose parents likely were not yet born when this Army nurse served, more than 65 years earlier. But they were there, with a colors team and a horse-drawn caisson, affording a woman who had passed away just a few months shy of her 90th birthday the same reverence you would expect to see for a fallen general or a battlefield hero.

As the procession threaded its way across the rolling expanse of 624 acres, just across the Potomac River from Washington, laborers, landscapers, military members, and civilians visiting gravesites all stopped. They turned and faced the caisson, hand over heart or right arm locked in a rigid salute.

All for a soldier they never knew. A native of Moundsville, W.Va., she enlisted in the Army at the start of World War II, not long out of nursing school, and was eventually sent to England aboard a hospital ship.

Stationed first near Norwich, where the German bombings forced most into the shelters nearly every night, she was part of a large group of Army nurses transferred south early in 1944, where things took on an even more ominous tone. The nurses were schooled in what to do if they were captured by the Nazis.

She had told us that when they heard the constant drone of planes going overhead one night, they knew

it had to be D-Day. The next morning, the Army nurses piled into trucks and headed for an undisclosed location, very near the English Channel coast, where they set up a tent hospital.

Right away, the injured started coming in — American, British, and Canadian soldiers, and even German prisoners — all still in battle uniforms, many horribly wounded. She had recounted many years ago how most were treated and sent to a hospital in the interior of England, but some had died in her arms.

When the war ended, this nurse-soldier's service was complete. She was part of that "Greatest Generation," which seemed like a clever alliterative tag when it first surfaced, but has since become a perfect label, and a reminder of our shortcomings.

As the caisson carrying her remains approached the Marshall Shelter at Arlington, the family formed a pretty sloppy formation by military standards, but we were all there — all 14 of her children, with their wives, husbands, and her grandchildren.

"Taps" was performed flawlessly and produced waves of chills, even on a sweltering day. The 21-gun salute then echoed across the grounds.

The Army gave my dad his final salute 15 years earlier, as he had served in World War II as well. Good fortune had him stationed in Greenland, far removed from the nightly bombardment and any live fire. When he started telling stories of his Army days, it was our duty to respectfully intercede and tell everyone that while dad was in the Army, mom was in the war.

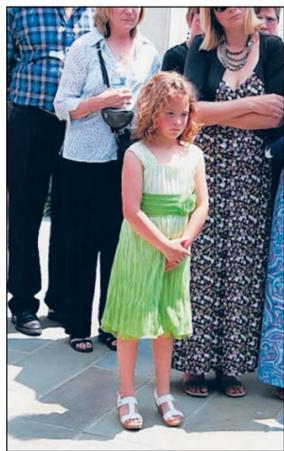
And it was her commitment to serving her country that brought her to the decision that this would be her resting place. Her father had served in World War I, her two brothers in World War II, but she would represent the Matthews clan at Arlington.

After the honor guard folded the flag that had been draped over the ceremonial casket and presented it to the family, a representative of the Department of Defense relayed the President's gratitude for my mom's service. The military escort snapped to attention and saluted First Lt. Helen Matthews Markey a final time.

Her cremated remains, tucked inside a decorative wooden jewelry box that had been hers since childhood, were placed in the Arlington Columbarium, near Patton Drive.

She was my mom a lot longer than she was in the Army, but they will watch over her now. Here, at Arlington National Cemetery, she's one of the more than 330,000 they guard, each one of them a hero, and each with their own story.

Out of respect, visitors stopped and faced the caisson as it moved through the grounds.



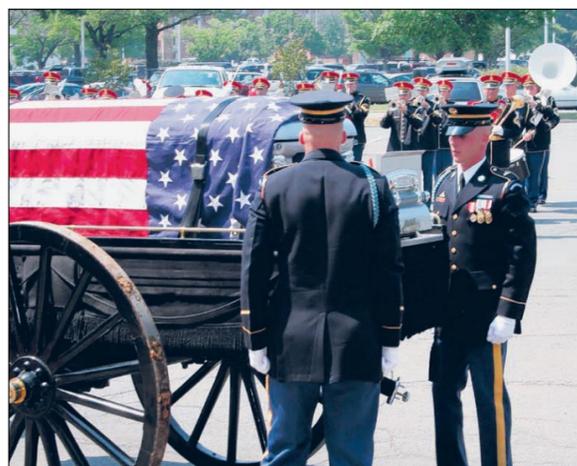
Emma Crawford, great-granddaughter of First Lt. Helen Markey.



The Rev. John Baptist Gabriel, an Army captain, presents the ceremonial flag to the family.



Matt Markey carries his mother's ashes in an ornate-wooden jewelry box she had owned since childhood.



The honor guard follows a strict ritual steeped in respect.



The ceremonial flag is held over the remains while final prayers are offered at the Marshall Shelter at Arlington.



The 21-gun salute is part of the burial ceremony at Arlington.



The final resting place.



The stone marker.

Contact Blade outdoors editor Matt Markey at: mmarkey@theblade.com or 419-724-6068.