

Colonel Althea B. Williams' stories are represented in Museum's collections with letters, documents, photographs, and personal belongings. Colonel Williams distinguished herself during 28 years of military service in the Army Nurse Corps, a career that took her all over the world. Given the broad scope of her story, Althea's collection would have fit into the mission of several different institutions. We are so honored that her family chose the Fort Collins Museum of Discovery as the right place to curate her story.



Colonel Althea B. Williams

Althea was born on July 2, 1920 in Platteville, Colorado to Ed and Grace Williams. She had 4 siblings: brothers Eugene, Murl, and James, and sister Theda. In 1932 her family moved into Fort Collins from their ranch in Buckeye due to hardships brought about by the Great Depression, and Althea began attending Fort Collins schools.

Althea Edna Williams
Born on July 27, 1920



Althea from Ancient Greek Althaía
"healer" from althainein, "to cure"

One of Althea's childhood activities was playing softball with the "Washington Maids" – a team sponsored by the State Dry goods Store. Apparently, local folks were hungry for a diversion and a good time during the lean years of the Depression; in a 1994 interview, Althea recalled:

"We had lots of fun because I played softball and we had like 6,000 people out watching the women play in the softball team!"



In high school, Althea was active in clubs: The National Forensic League, Student Council, Knights and Pages, and as you can see here, as a “Girl Speaker” taking 2nd place in the state debate tournament and moving onto the national tournament. She also participated in a variety of sports: cheerleading, basketball, hockey, baseball, volleyball, and bounce ball.

Althea graduated from Fort Collins High School in 1938.



Next Althea attended Beth-el College of Nursing (part of the University of Colorado) in Colorado Springs, graduating in September 1941 with a certificate in Nursing. She soon found nursing work at the Larimer County Hospital.



Graduated from Beth-el College of Nursing 1941

Althea heard the news of the World War II attack on Pearl Harbor as she was working the nightshift at the hospital and was compelled to enlist in the US Army as a nurse. She trained at duty stations in Colorado, Utah, and the Mojave Desert, California.

WEAKER SEX? ARMY'S NURSES DISPROVE SAYING

By EDITH GAYLORD

WASHINGTON, July 3, 1942.—The "weaker sex?" Listen to Maj. Ned Forrest, training director of Army nurses in desert maneuvers under simulated battle conditions.

A nurse established a speed record for crawling over a barbed-wire course under fire.

Nurses were so proficient at gas mask drill some were assigned to teach the men.

Admired generals and abashed soldiers on desert maneuvers discovered that the Army nurses could do the rank and file in combat training. Major Forrest asserted at a press conference shared with Maj. Ross Mabey, director of nurses in the South Pacific theater who told how they keep right on taking it overseas.

Nurses under Major Forrest are the first to undergo the five-month desert training, including one month of the "infiltration course" devised to simulate the hazards and hardships of actual warfare.

Crawling under machine gun fire leveled at 36 inches above the ground and scrambling through barbed wire and over obstacles takes a hardy man, yet—

"A nurse holds the speed record for all those on desert maneuvers," Major Forrest declared.

"Seventy-five yards in 7 minutes and you know they have to push themselves along the ground with their helmet and toes."

"Some of the generals were very surprised and said they couldn't understand it."

With helmet, gas mask and fatigues, the nurses did 20-mile hikes in temperature above 120 degrees.

Maj. Mabey, who served 18 months in Australia before taking charge in New Caledonia, New

Date of birth July 27, 1920

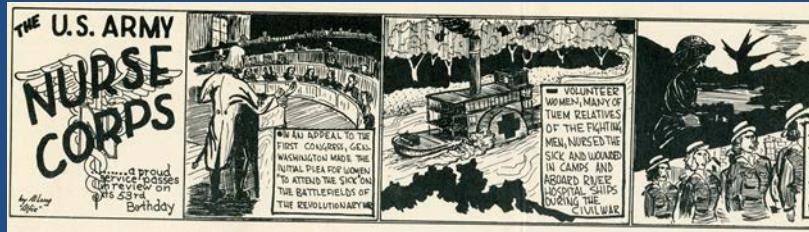
Color eyes Brown Color hair Brown

Weight 135 lbs. Height 5 ft. 7 in.

2nd Lt
A E WILLIAMS
ANC N-733 194

Date issued OCT 30 1942

GPO 16-20852-1



After her training Althea and her unit, the 92nd Evac, were deployed to the South Pacific. She served as a nurse in the Philippines, Australia, and New Guinea, but spent the majority of her World War II deployment on the tiny East Indies Island of Baik. Interviewed later in life Althea recalled that the medical staff there spent most of their time caring for patients suffering from malaria, dengue fever, and scrub typhus. It is fascinating to understand that at this time, while penicillin was still in development, basic nursing care was nearly the only effective treatment to offer these patients. Typhus sufferers would develop fevers of 108 degrees, and the nurses would spend all day giving alcohol baths to reduce these temperatures.



Active Duty in the South Pacific, World War II

In 1945 Althea was anticipating a move to Japan but, with the dropping of the atomic bombs her unit was sent back to the United States instead. Upon her return to Fort Collins Althea temporarily left the military service to continue her education. She attended Colorado A&M –today’s CSU, and earned 2 degrees: one in Home Economics in 1948, and one in Occupational Therapy, which she completed in 1949.



Having completed her degrees, Althea rejoined the Army and was stationed at Fitzsimmons in Aurora. Due to her performance in the war, Althea had been temporarily promoted to the rank of 1st lieutenant in 1945; in 1948 she was permanently bestowed this rank.

The Korean War (June 25, 1950- July 27 1953) saw Althea stationed in Osaka, Japan. During this period, she typed long newsy letters and seemed to have mailed out several copies of each, adding handwritten notes to each individual.

Her letter of June 1, 1952 seems to convey what a typical day was like in her unit:

"Well my dears I have not done anything of interest. Haven't even seen any good movies lately. I sleep, eat, work, and think of home. We have no way of knowing when we'll be getting home. The Korean situation is as unsettled as ever. So I guess you can all expect me home when you see me. Such is life for a Army Nurse. Lots of love, Althea."



The last conflict of Althea's active service was the Vietnam War (Nov. 1, 1955 – April 30, 1975). She arrived in Vietnam as a Colonel in 1968 and was promoted to the role of Chief Nurse. She was responsible for the well-being of the medical staff as well as for an average of 3,500 patients each day. In interviews later in life, Althea praised the medical advancements developed in war time –such as rapid responses for major injuries. She recalled that in some cases there were only 6 minutes between a soldier's getting wounded in battle and the delivery of medical treatment.



ALL RIGHT YOU KIDS, YOU
KNOW THAT I'M GOING BACK
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PX, AND I JUST HAVE ONE
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SAY...



Althea's final station was with the 6th recruiting district in San Francisco at the Presidio, where she was Chief Nurse until her retirement in 1970. Upon her retirement, Colonel Williams was one of the highest-ranking women in the Army. She was honored with a military parade at the Presidio, where her virtues were extolled:

"Rarely in these troubled times do we find a woman of such outstanding ability, love of service to mankind and devotion to God and country as is exemplified in the ideals, life and service of that noble American gentlewoman, Colonel Althea E. Williams."



In the last of several scrapbooks her mother made for her documenting her career, there is a page covered in “happy retirement” cards –most of which are actually the very same card, illustrated with a cozy scene of a soft chair by a fireplace, tea and book close at hand. This scene doesn’t seem to reflect Althea’s retirement years, which were spent caring for her mother, and fulfilling volunteer service for the Visiting Nurse Association, the Larimar County Chapter of the Red Cross, and the Emergency Preparedness Committee of the District Nurses Association.

Woman veteran stands tall
Nurse recalls war years
By Maggie Boyd
Florida Press Times

Before the Vietnam Women's Memorial Service in Laurelwood Country on Saturdays her work will have been noted by one distinguished Colorado woman veteran.

"The work and women who went to Vietnam have a right to be appreciated for what they did," says Althea Williams, Col. Ret., of the Army Nurse Corps, veteran of three wars and chief nurse of the 44th Medical Brigade and the 115 Army Vietnam.

"You can tell we had the best people who have to carry out the best," she says.

Standing just 5 feet tall, Williams projects a powerful reach high. The bulk of covered her we left her although she retired more than 20 years ago. She is proud of her work in Vietnam. When she arrived in 1968, there were 14 Army hospitals. When she left a year later there were 54. She supervised such of those about 1000 of the 44th Medical Brigade and the 115 Army Vietnam.

At each hospital she spoke to nurses privately and responded to their concerns about equipment, housing assigned to Vietnam, which she was there.

She was responsible for the well being of 60 patients and several staff in Army hospitals. Some of the hospitals were small and crowded.

"The nurses put on their jackets and put the patients under the back. There was one hospital that we had a better of second," Williams says. "That was at My Tho."

"I have 13 scars on The Wall the Vietnam War Memorial in Washington, D.C. Only eight are women, and only one died in battle for. Most of the rest, she says, did in small accidents.

Her son also had to serving hospital in fighting changed patient needs. Her son died in the war in receipt of the Legion of Merit Medal.

In Vietnam she had responsibility for an average 3,000 patients a day. Under her command, the 44th Medical Brigade achieved the lowest hospital admission rate, the lowest mortality rate of wounded reaching hospital, the lowest average stay in hospital and the highest rate of return to duty of any war America had ever fought.

Williams says that in many cases there were only six minutes between a soldier's wounding in battle and medical treatment.

"Nurses received better emergency and trauma care in Vietnam than you would get me here on U.S.," she says.

Most of the money sent for the Vietnam Women's Memorial, according to Williams, came from people—men and women, the emphasis—who served in Vietnam.

The memorial will open the emergency and Vietnam Day, Nov. 11, when it will be ceremoniously dedicated near the Wall in Washington, D.C.

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This retired colonel tiny, feminine

KEEP calm for Althea Williams, a retired Army nurse colonel, who is tiny, feminine and very busy. She is the only woman in the world to have served in three wars. She is also the only woman to have been awarded the Legion of Merit Medal.

Williams, 78, is a retired Army nurse colonel who served in Vietnam, Korea and World War II. She is the only woman in the world to have served in three wars. She is also the only woman to have been awarded the Legion of Merit Medal.

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Mementos from many lands

Col. Althea Williams of 412 South ...

Althea was inducted into the Colorado Nurses Association Hall of Fame in 2004. She died in 2018, less than a month shy of her 98th birthday. We are grateful to have her example of strength through compassion as one of our Fort Collins stories.



Learn more about local history by visiting the Archive at Fort Collins Museum of Discovery, visiting the Poudre River Public Library District, and by checking us out online at the Fort Collins History Connection.