

The Nurse Honor Guard

Category: Bravery

written by Marilyn Barton | March 7, 2025

Recently, I attended a funeral gathering for my long-time friend, Flo, who'd been an RN for over four decades. She'd been a loving wife, mother and grandmother. But I also remember several pivotal times in her life that Flo had shown courage and faced physical and emotional risks.

Early in her career, she worked with wounded veterans on the Spinal Cord Unit at the VA Hospital. Many had severe injuries and became residents. As nurse manager, Flo did whatever it took to take great care of them. When the cook was out sick, it was Flo who stepped up and cooked breakfast.

Other times, her job required critical thinking and bravery. Many of the veterans on the unit suffered from undiagnosed, and therefore untreated, PTSD. Nurses could be cursed out, spit on, hit or shoved. Some vets would cash their disability checks, wheel themselves to the local bar and come back roaring drunk, creating even more challenges for the nurses and for Flo, the nurse manager.

While at the VA Hospital, Flo met and fell in love with Eddie, another nurse. It took guts for her to marry an African-American in the early 1970s. Racial tensions were high at that time, and our state had only recently legalized interracial marriage. For her protection, Eddie would instruct Flo to get down on the floor of the car when they drove into a gas station.

Flo's father objected to the marriage and forbade the family from ever speaking to her. Only years later, after her father's death, was she reunited with her family.

The military pays tribute to veterans at their funerals, and I've always hoped the nursing profession would have something similar to a 21-gun salute. In 2003, the Kansas State Nurses Association created a brief program to acknowledge both a nurse's service and way of life. Several hundred chapters of the Nurse Honor Guard exist today.

At Flo's funeral, four volunteers of the Nurse Honor Guard came dressed in traditional RN caps, navy capes lined in red, and white uniforms to stand vigil on either side of Flo's urn. One nurse then held a lit Nightingale lamp while another said "A Nurse's Prayer." A third nurse laid a white rose next to the urn, and they all recited the "Nightingale Tribute." There was not a dry eye around when they officially released Flo from duty.

I'll miss my friend forever but found comfort in the touching [Nurse Honor Guard ceremony](#) that showed respect for Flo's dedication to her career, family and friends.

*Marilyn Barton
Hampton, Virginia*