

Lillian Kinkela Keil

1916–2005



WHY SHE MADE HISTORY Lillian Kinkela Keil was a flight nurse during World War II and the Korean War. She helped save thousands of lives and became one of the most decorated woman veterans in United States history.



As you read the biography below, think about the importance of flight nurses throughout history. What role did they play in World War II and the Korean War?



World War II Veterans Committee

The Korean War erupted during the summer of 1950, less than five years after the end of World War II. Thousands of U.S. military personnel were sent to Korea to help stop the spread of communism. Among those sent into active duty were the flight nurses of the Army Air Corps. These women evacuated soldiers from battlefields and accompanied them to military hospitals. They saved thousands of lives and are now recognized as heroes of the war.

Lillian Mary Kinkela was born in Arcata, California, in 1916. Kinkela's father abandoned the family when she was very young. She and her mother moved to the convent where her mother worked as a cleaning lady, while her brothers grew up elsewhere.

After her high school graduation, Kinkela completed a nursing program in San Francisco. Then she went to work as a flight attendant for United Airlines. At that time, all flight attendants were required to be nurses. After a passenger asked Kinkela why she was working on a commercial plane when she could be serving her country as a nurse, she enlisted in the military.

During World War II, Kinkela flew 250 air evacuation missions and 25 transatlantic flights. She helped evacuate many wounded soldiers from the front lines on D-Day in Normandy. She also helped deliver crucial supplies such as gasoline, ammunition, and weapons to General George Patton's army in France.

Following the war, she went back to work as a flight attendant for United. But she returned to active duty when the Korean War began in 1950. She was one of only 30 flight nurses who served during the war, and she participated in 175 missions. In Korea she helped care for marines who had been trapped and severely wounded in the Chosin Reservoir.

The Cold War Begins

Biography

After the Korean War, Kinkela met Walter Keil, a former naval intelligence officer. The couple married, and Lillian was honorably discharged in 1955 when she became pregnant. She had two daughters and continued working as a nurse in hospital emergency rooms.

During her military career, Lillian Kinkela Keil helped an estimated 10,000 soldiers and received 19 medals. She died in 2005 at the age of 88.

WHAT DID YOU LEARN?

1. **Recall** Why did Lillian Kinkela Keil become a flight nurse?

2. **Summarize** What role did Lillian Kinkela Keil play in World War II and the Korean War?

ACTIVITY

The word *hero* often brings to mind the image of a decorated war hero. But a hero can also be an everyday person who shows courage. Think of someone you think is a hero, and write a short paragraph about him or her. Why is this person a hero? And how might this person influence future generations?