Angel of Mercy

Evacuating Wounded Marines from Iwo Jima

By Steven D. McCloud

Ensign Jane Kendeigh draped the yellow "Mae West" life vest over her head, clipped the straps around her, placed her ball cap back where she wanted it, then took a seat along the bulkhead of the Douglas R4D Skytrain … the Navy version of the C-47. Despite the butterflies in her stomach, she was ready to meet the day for which she had trained for months.

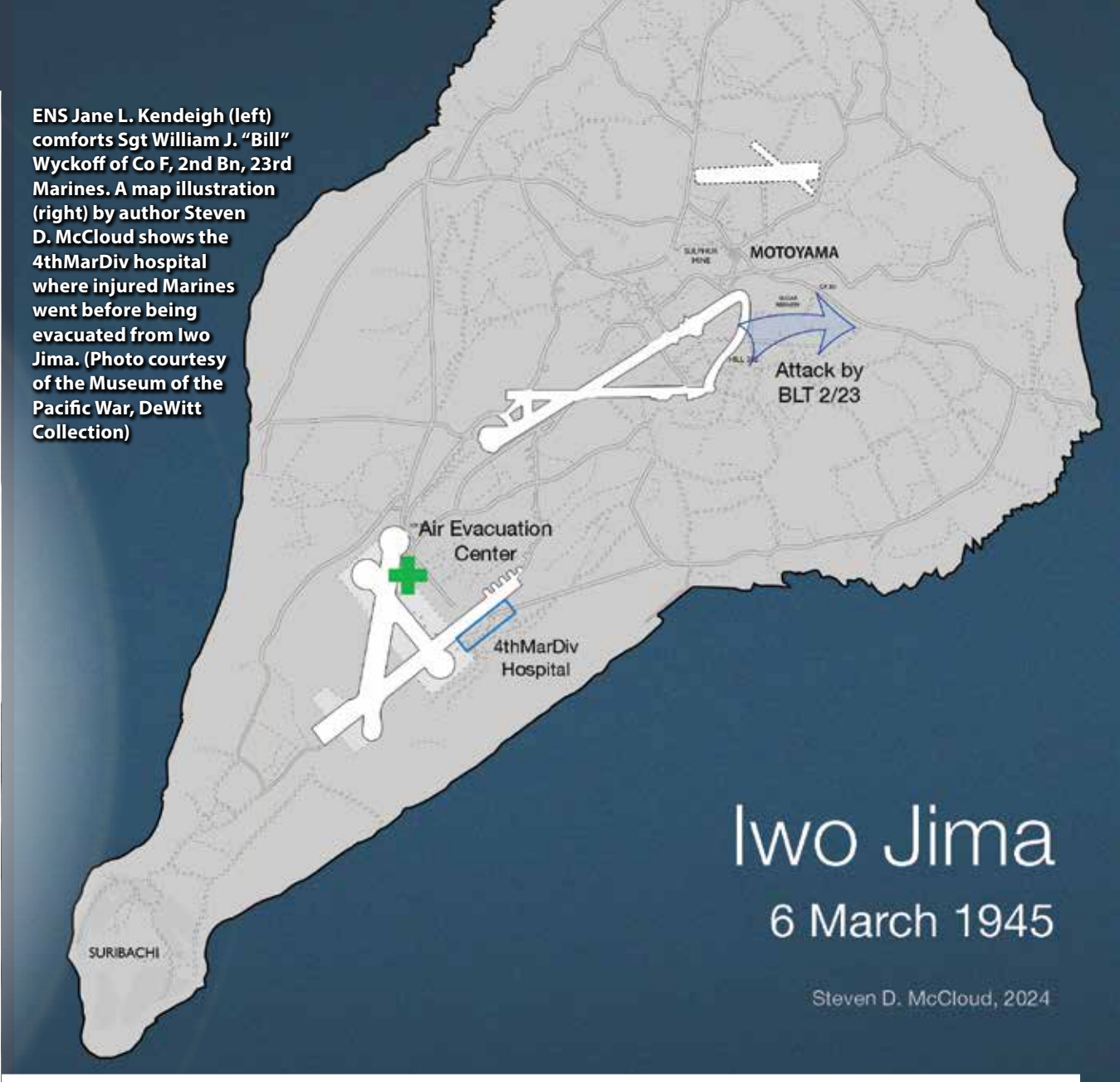
For only the second time, she was dressed in a shiny, nylon flight suit, brand new brown leather boots with not a single crease, ball cap, and a snappy new khaki flight jacket, all of which she'd been issued the day she flew out from Honolulu. In a few hours, the 22-year-old Navy flight nurse would be on Iwo Jima.

In the cockpit, Lieutenant John N. Burns, USN, and his copilot were going through their preflight checks, and flight engineer William Amundsen was checking his charts. LT Burns had named his new airplane, "Back Bay Special," a nod to his Boston, Mass., roots. Next to Kendeigh sat the corpsman for the flight, Chief Pharmacist Mate Silas V. Sturtevant.

The two were squadron mates, members of the new Evacuation Squadron (VE) 2 formed three months earlier, on Dec. 12, 1944. Twenty-four-year-old Sturtevant had enlisted in 1939, and had operated with Marine units, including the Iceland expedition in 1941. In late 1943, he moved to Rescue Squadron (VH) 2, then joined VE-2 the day it was formed.

Kendeigh, one of the squadron's initial 12 flight nurses, had completed nursing training at St. Luke's Hospital in Cleveland,

ENS Jane L. Kendeigh (left) comforts Sgt William J. "Bill" Wyckoff of Co F, 2nd Bn, 23rd Marines. A map illustration (right) by author Steven D. McCloud shows the 4thMarDiv hospital where injured Marines went before being evacuated from Iwo Jima. (Photo courtesy of the Museum of the Pacific War, DeWitt Collection)



Ohio, in June 1943, before entering the eight weeks of specialized flight nurse training. Though the squadron and its planes moved to Guam in mid-January, she had picked up her flight gear and made the 20-hour flight across the international date line on Feb. 20-21.

At Guam, the squadron's 12 R4Ds had been grounded at Agana airfield since Feb. 19, the day the Marines landed on Iwo Jima. They were standing by for word that an airfield on the island was available for them to begin aerial evacuations. They had waited two weeks for that word. Everyone had read the reports coming from Iwo Jima and knew casualties were exceptionally heavy. The regional commander reported 6,876 hospital beds on Saipan and Tinian were ready for patients from Iwo, and troop ships and two hospital ships had been filling them with casualties.

The squadron's advance team had finally been cleared to fly up on March 3 to begin establishing an evacuation center. But the airfield was still taking enemy fire and two more days passed before ENS Kendeigh and "Doc" Sturtevant got the word to be ready to fly on March 6. Theirs was to be the squadron's second departure that morning, at 2:30 a.m. The first was scheduled to depart at 2 a.m., with chief flight nurse Lieutenant Junior Grade Emily Purvis aboard.

Then onto the airplane climbed a U.S. Navy lieutenant with a photographer's case. Introducing himself as Gill DeWitt, he explained that he was a member of Captain Edward Steichen's team of photographers, and was to have been LTJG Purvis' airplane, to document the journey of the first flight nurse to land in a combat zone. He explained that he had arrived 10 minutes early for the flight, only to find that Purvis' plane had already departed. To make the best of it, he would ride along with Kendeigh and Sturtevant and document that flight instead.

After fitting himself with a Mae West, DeWitt got his camera and flash out and snapped a photo of the two-person medical team sitting together, then got ready for takeoff.

Sunrise was an hour away on Iwo Jima as Sergeant Bill Wyckoff and his fellow Marines of "Fox" Company, 2nd Battalion, 23rd Marines (BLT 2/23), lumbered 2,200 yards back up to the front in the darkness. Combat efficiency of the Marine landing force was estimated at 45%, and they had been given a day to rest and reorganize. Now they were going back on the attack. BLT 2/23 was to relieve 3/24 as the left flank

for the 4th Marine Division and was to make the division's main effort for the day. In position by 6 a.m., they broke out K-rations and watched daylight slowly reveal the desolate gray moonscape around them.

Nearly two hours later, at 7:50 a.m., a distant thunder of artillery rolled across the airfield behind them, followed by a rumble of impact far to their left. For 31 minutes, every battalion of artillery on the island pounded the zone ahead of the 5thMarDiv. Then there was quiet. Twenty-four minutes later, the thunder returned. This time, however, the impact was dead ahead of Wyckoff and the others, and it was unlike anything they had seen or felt before.

"On March 6, we decided a coordinated attack by the whole Corps might break through," wrote Lieutenant General Holland M. Smith in "Coral and Brass," a book he co-authored with Percy Finch. "To prepare for the attack we employed artillery on a scale exceeding any previous effort. We laid down a devastating barrage, using all Corps and divisional artillery and heavy guns from supporting warships."

COURTESY OF STEVEN D. MCCLOUD

NCOs of Co F, 2nd Bn, 3rd Marines, 4thMarDiv, at Camp Maui before shipping off to Iwo Jima. Sgt Bill Wyckoff is in the front row, second from the right.

"That was the durndest barrage that I ever saw," explained Fox Co's Gunnery Sergeant Harold J. Douglas, "That was as bad as a Japanese barrage except it wasn't landing amongst us. Those big guns just shook the island when they fired that preliminary fire. It was devastating. It was just terrifying listening to that stuff."

After 21 minutes, the crushing explosions ahead of the Marines had ceased. Bill Wyckoff and the other Marines glared at the rocks ahead and wondered how anyone could be left alive. Then they were horrified by a sudden loud shriek from behind them. Rocket trucks that had slipped in behind them unleashed their own barrage, then hurriedly left the scene. Seconds later, Japanese mortars rained down on the area just left vacant. It was the final element of preparatory fire.

ENS Kendeigh peered with fascination through the airplane's small window at the inferno below and the haunting appearance of the island itself. After a short stop at Saipan, their plane arrived at Iwo Jima just as the bombardment began. LT Burns had been told he would have to circle the island until it ended. Now some 90 minutes later, he received instructions to land. Kendeigh again peered out the window as they passed by Mount Suribachi.

It was time for the Marines to jump off in the attack. Wyckoff stood up and said, "Let's go." Immediately an apparent grenade blast knocked him down.

"I saw the blast and heard a … yell," Wyckoff later recalled. "I was unconscious for I don't know how long, but when I regained consciousness, I was suffocating and couldn't breathe. I said, 'My God, help me,' and 'Mom, help me.' It seemed like an eternity before my right lung started working and I could breathe. One couldn't imagine the pain—it was unbelievable. All I could taste was blood and gunpowder. Then I felt someone dragging me back to the lines."

Corporal Leroy Surface pulled Wyckoff to the corpsman, PhM Owen H. Bahnken, who bandaged his eyes, then pulled a skivvy shirt from a nearby pack and stuffed it in the hole in his chest. Stretcher bearers got Wyckoff back to the battalion aid station where Dr. Glen Rice and his team did hasty work to stabilize him. "They pulled some of the shrapnel out of my eyes, then they bandaged me, and brought me back in a jeep."

Fox Co's Sergeant Tom Gavaghan later recalled his dismay when he saw a Marine being carried through the command post, mouthing to one of the carriers, "Who?" and being told it was Wyckoff.

Wyckoff was evacuated to the division hospital, further bandaged, assessed, and promptly driven across the airfield to the air evacuation center. After being screened once more to be sure he could survive the flight, he was carried out to an aircraft named "Back Bay Special," flown by LT John N. Burns.

Kendeigh and DeWitt had been directed straight to the evacuation tent. "Once in the tent, we asked about the first plane carrying LT Purvis and learned they had become lost and were due in very soon," said DeWitt. "Strangely enough, ours was the first plane—and Jane Kendeigh the first nurse—to land on Iwo Jima."

"The field hospital was right there on the airfield," Kendeigh later recalled, "and we had a doctor who gave me the details and how badly they were hurt, and what to try to do for them. And we loaded and we got off just as soon as we could."

While the flight team received medical reports on their evacuees, the stretcher patients were being carried out to the plane, joining ambulatory patients, including young men tagged with combat fatigue. The squadron's ground team also off-loaded the 28 stretchers and stack of some 48 wool blankets brought to Iwo to replace those being flown off with casualties. Each casualty required two or three blankets so supplies on the island quickly ran short. A case of whole blood had also been flown up as resupply for the whole blood bank and its two 150-square foot reefers located near the aerial evacuation tent. By the time the operation ended, the squadron flew in 960 pints of whole blood from Guam.

Several photographers were on the scene when ENS Kendeigh returned to the aircraft to tend to her patients, including 3rdMarDiv photographer T.G. Burgess.

Bill Wyckoff lay half-conscious on the stretcher. "I was blind for about six months, I guess. I had a collapsed left lung, a broken shoulder, and a couple of broken bones in the back of the neck. The nerve was completely severed in the shoulder, for the left arm."

Wyckoff was puzzled to hear a young woman's voice, but even

Right: After aiding in the effort to evacuate the wounded from Iwo Jima, Navy nurse ENS Jane Kendeigh traveled with her patients to the fleet hospital in Marianas.

Below: ENS Kendeigh answers questions about her work as a nurse on Iwo Jima at a press conference in Honolulu circa 1945. (Photo courtesy of National Archives)

COURTESY OF NATIONAL ARCHIVES

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Sgt Bill Wyckoff is visible in the background as he's carried on a stretcher past a group of Marines.

more astonished to feel the comforting touch of her hand. Photographer Dewitt was where he needed to be to capture the moment... of the young flight nurse comforting a Marine she did not know on the most nightmarish place anyone had imagined.

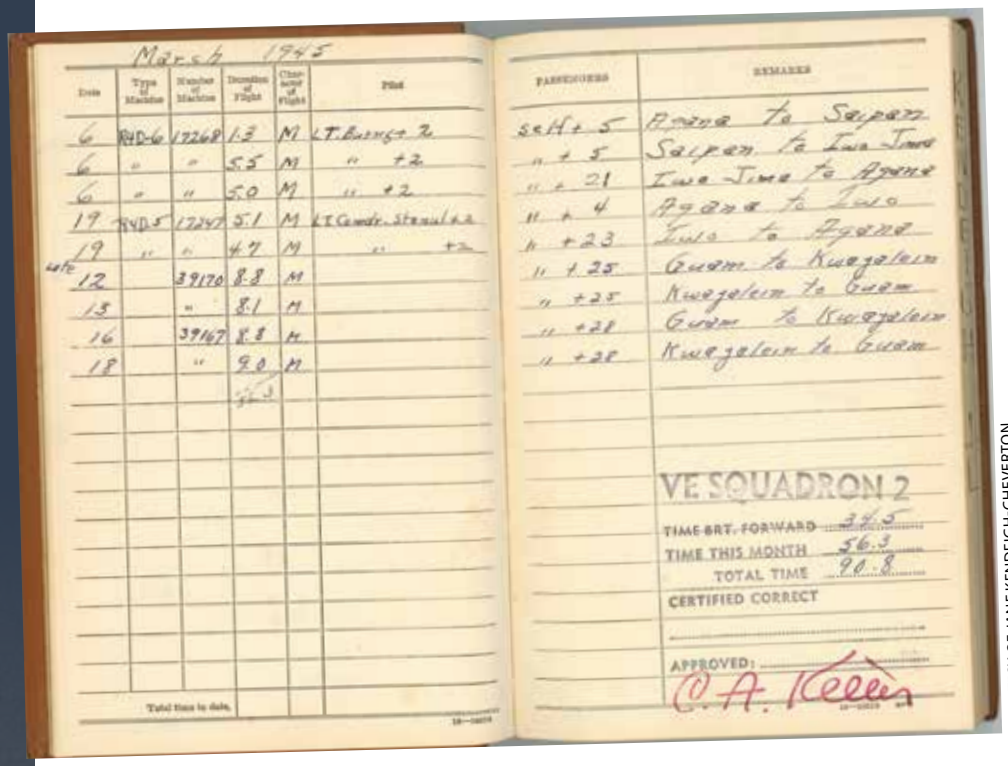
"I just couldn't get over the fact of how badly they were injured," Kendeigh recalled. "And I kept thinking this could be my brother. I had a brother about the same age. And I just wished someone would take care him like I was trying to take care of the wounded Marines. The extent of their injuries were just … I couldn't get over it."

DeWitt snapped a photo of ENS Kendeigh leaning in low over Wyckoff to comfort him. Three days later, the ACME Telephoto service on Guam transmitted DeWitt's photograph of Kendeigh and Wyckoff back to the United States as a Navy radio photo. It was reproduced not merely in her hometown, but across the country ... it was even published in the September 1945 issue of *National Geographic*.

The squadron wanted its planes to be off the ground in about a half-hour, but both Kendeigh and DeWitt remembered this evolution taking about an hour. There was no need to taxi. LT Burns merely opened up the throttle and rumbled downwind in a cloud of dust and climbed out slowly for the five-hour flight to Guam. Behind him, corpsmen were loading the next plane with casualties.

In fact, by the time Burns was in the air, there were likely seven other squadron planes and crews on the ground, waiting their turn. The number of flights made each day was determined by request from the island the previous day. Records indicate that the squadron scheduled them to arrive 30 minutes apart, to avoid overwhelming the evacuation team on Iwo, or the receiving team of screeners, ambulances and hospitals back on Guam. If Kendeigh's flight was scheduled as the second arrival, the additional 90-minute delay and an hour on the ground would have stacked up the following five flights behind her and Purvis.

Planners anticipated evacuating about 350 casualties per week. But in reality, the squadron averaged about half that number each day, due to the high casualty rate and the shortage of available shipping. On March 6, they evacuated 171 Marines


March 1945

Date	Type of Machine	Number of Machine	Duration of Flight	Character of Flight	Pilot	Passengers	Remarks
6	R4D-6	17268	1.3	M	LT. Burns + 2	SCH + 5	Agana to Saipan
6	"	"	5.5	M	" +2	" + 5	Saipan to Iwo Jima
6	"	"	5.0	M	" +2	" + 21	Iwo Jima to Agana
19	R4D-5	17247	5.1	M	Lt Comdr. Stranahan	" + 4	Agana to Iwo
19	"	"	4.7	M	" +2	" +23	Iwo to Agana
12		39170	8.8	M		" +25	Guam to Kwajalein
13		"	8.1	M		" +25	Kwajalein to Guam
16		39167	8.8	M		" +28	Guam to Kwajalein
18		"	9.0	M		" +28	Kwajalein to Guam
			56.3				

Total time to date

VE SQUADRON 2

TIME BRT. FORWARD 34.5
TIME THIS MONTH 56.3
TOTAL TIME 90.8
CERTIFIED CORRECT

APPROVED: C. A. Keller

COURTESY OF JANE KENDEIGH-CHEVERTON

ENS Jane Kendeigh's flight log shows all the evacuation flights she completed during the war. In March of 1945, she made nine trips between Agana, Saipan, Iwo Jima, Guam and Kwajalein.

and Sailors. That number would reach 225 two days later, and 248 on March 11. Ultimately, the squadron would make 125 flights to Iwo Jima and evacuate 2,393 casualties. And though two planes were hit during take-off, no one was wounded.

Five hours later, Lieutenant Burns taxied Back Bay Special to the air evacuation center at Agana's airfield, where ambulances were lined up, as were several photographers. While ground crews carefully off-loaded patients, ENS Kendeigh turned over her patients and their records to the flight surgeon.

Wyckoff was transferred to the new Fleet Hospital No. 111, there on Guam. After a short stay, he would be flown back to the States, ultimately to the naval hospital in St. Albans, N.Y., where he would spend two and a half years recovering. Wyckoff was finally released and discharged after the war was over.

As for Kendeigh, her 15-hour day was over. She headed straight back to her hut to get some sleep. Her flight log shows that six days would pass before she flew again, and not to Iwo Jima. She made two nine-hour flights to Kwajalein on March 12 and March 16, escorting patients on their journey back to Pearl Harbor. And after a nine-hour return flight on the 18th, she returned to Iwo Jima only once more, on March 19.

On March 21, VRE-1 was commissioned and on March 26—the last day of the Iwo Jima operation—it absorbed crews and planes of VE-1 and VE-2, then VE-3 on March 27. Both VE-1 and VE-3 were on the West Coast training in R5Ds.

ENS Jane Kendeigh was the first flight nurse to land on Okinawa and, ultimately, made six evacuation runs there through June of 1945. She crossed the Pacific between Honolulu and Guam eight times and made two other runs between Guam and Kwajalein.

By the time of her last logged flight in February of 1946, Kendeigh had become something of a wartime celebrity. But now with the war over, she returned home. She married Bob Cheverton, one of the pilots with whom she'd flown, and started a family, having never met any of the young men she had cared for on those flights … until 41 years later.

In February 1986, Kendeigh accepted the invitation to attend an Iwo Jima reunion in San Diego. Unbeknownst to her, so did Wyckoff. On stage at a reunion event, a Navy nurse and some Marines from Camp Pendleton reenacted the famous scene under the spotlight.

Then the house lights went up, and the master of ceremonies announced to everyone that their Angel of Mercy was there with them that night. He called Jane forward to the cheers of all the Marines in the room.

"Then they turned all the house lights on," recalled Wyckoff in 1995, "and the MC said, 'Jane, have you ever met any of your Marines?' She said, 'No I haven't.'"

Then Eddie Davis, who had been Fox Co's superb runner during the war, hustled out on stage with a message. After pretending to read the message, the host then introduced Wyckoff. Forty-one years after DeWitt snapped that famous photograph on Iwo Jima, the two were reunited there on stage.

"All you could hear were sighs all over the place," said Wyckoff. "It was very emotional. She was quite a gal."

COURTESY OF JANE KENDEIGH-CHEVERTON

In 1986, Wyckoff and Kendeigh reunited at an Iwo Jima reunion in San Diego, Calif.

Author's bio: Steven D. McCloud, is a leadership consultant and tour director, founder of Trident Leadership.com and author of "Black Dragon: The Experience of a Marine Rifle Company in the Central Pacific." He also conducts PMEs and battlefield staff rides for corporate and government agencies.

He plans to lead a group back to the Pacific in June 2024 for the 80th anniversary commemoration of the Saipan-Tinian operations.