

Presentation of the United States Air Medal

Mrs Margaret Sutherland (nee Curgenvén) Section Officer - RAAF Nursing Service

G Robinson

Mrs Margaret Sutherland (nee Curgenvén), Section Officer N222846, served as a Nursing Officer in the RAAF Nursing Service from 1965–1968. During her short service career, and following initial training to equip her for her RAAF nursing duties and performing Aeromedical Evacuations (AME), she was posted to 4 RAAF Hospital, Butterworth, Malaysia, in 1966. The Vietnam War was in its early stages and Australia had only increased its commitment to a Battalion Group late in 1965. The US military had considerably larger numbers and were already sustaining many battle casualties requiring evacuation to larger health facilities outside Vietnam.

4 RAAF Hospital was the designated transit medical facility for Australian battle and non-battle casualties being evacuated from Vietnam to Australia, and Margaret recalls being part of the AME team that repatriated those soldiers injured during the Battle of Long Tan (18 August 1966). While posted to 4 RAAF Hospital, Margaret was also assigned to the USAF 902nd AME SQN, part of the US Pacific Air Forces (PACAF) for the period 12 January to 12 March 1967. Nurses selected for secondment would go on to perform AME duties on board the USAF DC6 that flew up and down the length of Vietnam collecting US casualties (mostly combat) for repatriation to Clark Air Base in the Philippines, where she was stationed during her secondment. On other occasions, casualties would also be flown to Thailand, Korea, Formosa and the Ryuka Islands. According to her AME log, Margaret flew 146.3 hours during her short 60-day secondment.

The Air Medal was established on 11 May 1942 by an Executive Order of the then US President, Franklin D. Roosevelt. It was to be awarded to anyone who distinguished themselves by meritorious achievement while serving with the US Armed Forces in aerial flight. USAF nurses performing AME duties in Vietnam were awarded the medal following 20 combat missions. However, the RAAF nurses seconded to the 902nd were unable to receive the



medal as Margaret recalls in the following text, a transcription of an article that appeared in the TPI News Winter 2021.

‘Section Officer (S/O) Margaret Curgenvén joined the RAAF in May 1965. She was posted to No 4 RAAF Hospital, Butterworth, Malaysia from RAAF Richmond New South Wales during the later phase of ‘Konfrontasi’ in 1966 and had experience within the RAAF AME system – Vietnam/Australia.

In January 1967, S/O Curgenvén was the 4th RAAF nurse to be selected from Butterworth to fly AME missions with the USAF 902nd AME SQN. This was part of the PACAF (Pacific Air Command Air Force) into Vietnam and throughout the American Bases in South-East Asia.

The USAF Bases at Clark Field, Philippines was enormous, operating 24/7 and Margaret was now 1st Lt Curgenvén. After being orientated into the 902nd AME SQN and system, she was required to complete weapons training with the M16 Armalite rifle and the 38 S&W revolver. (These weapons were not used by the Australian Defence Forces at the time).

Due to the short nature of the RAAF secondment, the experiences were quite harrowing and intense.

From the adrenaline rush of the excitement of the unknown to other times overwhelming to surreal moments with the wounded and seeing mortar fire and contact with the C118. Yet at times there were light-lighted moments – always experiencing support and friendship within the crew members of the 902nd.

All flights were a challenge; from the nursing challenges in-flight without the support of Medical Officers and the flying conditions in the DC6 (C118). The aircraft were constantly breaking down or malfunctioning, especially the pressurisation system, and at times coming under fire from the Viet Cong. The young Marines at Da Nang seemed to suffer the heaviest casualties; their diagnosis had to be blacked out from the flight manifest before leaving Vietnam. Everything seemed to be non-stop battle casualties.

In 1967 S/O Curgenvin witnessed her USAF AME colleagues receiving their US Air Medal after completing the required 20 Combat Support Missions in Vietnam. As the Chief Nurse, Major Jean Corrigan (USAF) pinned the Air Medal onto the USAF Flight Nurse uniforms, she turned to Margaret, who was taking photos of the small ceremony, and told her she would like to have awarded Margaret the US Air Medal for her then 20 combat missions in Vietnam but was sorry she could not as the Australian Government would not allow it.

Margaret went on to complete 40 combat support missions during her 60 day secondment with the 902nd during the USAF 'Rolling Thunder' bombing period in Vietnam. S/O Curgenvin official flight missions were recorded on the American Defense Force documents, Dept of the Air Force, 902nd Aeromedical Evacuation Squadron PACAF, OPA San Francisco 96274.

Margaret Curgenvin served her country, the RAAF, USAF (PACAF) with honour and integrity. Now she finally has acknowledgment from the USAF (PACAF) upon receipt of the US Air Medal.' (Tilley, p. 7)

For her service with the USAF 902nd AME SQN, the Commander US PACAF approved and awarded Margaret the US Air Medal on 25 March 2020. The medal was to be presented by Lieutenant Colonel A. Cunnar USAF, Air Attaché; however, due to COVID-19 restrictions, he and other dignitaries were unable to attend the small ceremony finally arranged for 12 July 2021. GPCAPT G. Robinson, NSC represented the Chief of Air Force and was supported by GPCAPT G. Carroll, CSC from the Albury Wodonga Air Force Association.



During the period of the Vietnam War, 106 RAAFNS Nurses flew on AME operations and between 1966–1971, 30 were seconded to the USAF 902nd and 903rd AME SQNs to perform AME duties similar to Margaret. Two other nurses known to the author are Section Officer Patricia Furbank and Flight Officer Patricia Dudley. These AME missions were flown under hazardous combat circumstances and Margaret recalled receiving fire from the Viet Cong on a number of occasions. The most harrowing was a mortar attack on Saigon airfield while waiting for repairs to the aircraft along with 58 patients and other nurses. Nevertheless, she recalled fondly the comradery established with her fellow USAF nurses and the appreciation of the very young and frightened US servicemen, many who had received horrendous battle injuries. Sentiments many current and ex-serving RAAF nurses would appreciate.

Written by GPCAPT G. Robinson, NSC

*Corresponding author: Geoff Robinson,
secretariat@amma.asn.au*

Authors: Geoff Robinson¹,

Author Affiliations:

1 AMMA President

Reference

Tilley, G (2021) The US Air Medal an Australian Defence Force first. TPI News. Winter 2021;29(2):7