

North County news



Memorabilia of Catherine Hammett Norris, a WAC nurse during World War II, who was among the first five residents to move into Charlotte Hall Veterans Home on Jan. 29, 1985, the day the facility opened. Staff photo by JESSE YEATMAN

WWII nurse among first residents of veterans home

■ Norris pioneered roles, opportunities for women

By JESSE YEATMAN
Staff writer

Catherine Hammett Norris, a nurse who served during World War II, was one of the original five residents who moved into Charlotte Hall Veterans Home on the day it opened 34 years ago.

Norris, who died in 1991, became a role model of sorts for some of her relatives and helped make sure the state's first veterans home was accessible to women veterans as well as spouses of male veterans.

"She was a wonderful person," said Jay Guy, a nephew of Norris, said.

"She was a very independent woman. She had an air about her of authority," said Guy, a former St. Mary's County commissioner who now lives in Florida.

Even so, "She had a rough life ... She had a lot of tragedy in her life," Guy said.

Norris' first daughter died at age 1. Her second daughter, Helen Cecilia Wheeler, lived a fruitful life.



lived a fruitful life.

Norris' father, Richard Hammett, was a sheriff of St. Mary's County, as was her brother, Howard Hammett.

Norris, whose parents had owned a farm in what was called Pearson, where Patuxent River Naval Air Station is now, eventually moved to the California and became a licensed practical nurse with the Women's Army Corps, treating soldiers wounded during World War II.

After the war, she stayed and worked on the West Coast through the 1950s. Guy said his aunt often wrote him letters during her time living in California.

She moved back to St. Mary's County in the 1960s. After a second divorce, she eventually married her childhood sweetheart, Joseph Brennan Norris.

"I thought it was so cool. What a love story," Millie Huseman, a niece of Norris, said.

The love story was short lived, however. Norris' husband was hit by a car in 1984 and killed as he walked home from Mass at St. Aloysius Church in downtown Leonardtown.

"Back in those days, for the women, it was different," Huseman said. After her husband died, the widow needed a place to live, Huseman said. Norris applied to move into the brand new veterans home and was accepted.

"Our circumstances in life always take us to the place where the next door opens. That was her next door," Guy said.

Norris was the fifth person to move into the Charlotte Hall Veterans Home on Jan. 29, 1985, the day the facility opened.

Guy recalled visiting his aunt at the veterans home, and said she was always proud and happy to live there.

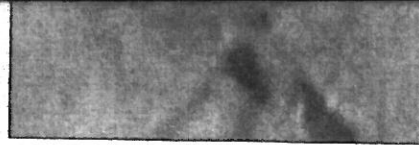
"She had the needle in her hands, just clipping along," he said of her propensity for knitting.

Norris lived in the area of the veterans home called the domiciliary, now referred to as assisted living, for more than four years. She moved into the facility's comprehensive care unit in November 1989, and died two years later at age 90.

"She advocated for other women to come here," Huseman said of her aunt. "She loved it here."

Huseman of Abell seven years ago took a job at the veterans home as a case manager. She now works in the building's business office.

"I think it's really great that we can offer



Submitted photo

Catherine Hammett Norris, pictured in 1940s as a WAC nurse during World War II, was among the first five to move into the veterans home.

Early residents

The first five Charlotte Hall Veterans Home residents listed in a log book on Jan. 29, 1985, the day the facility opened:

1. Herbert Edward Cashmore
2. Hyman Friedman
3. Floyd Wesley Bowley
4. Jessie Davis Gannon
5. Catherine Hammett Norris

this place for men and women to reside, and offer them great care," Huseman said.

The first year the veterans home opened about 60 veterans moved into the facility, including about a half-dozen women. Today more than 400 men and women call the place home.

Sharon Mattia was one of the first two original employees before the home even opened. She worked her way up the ladder, she said, and is now the director of the veterans home program.

"We had a waiting list, ready for them to come in," she said of people who signed up to live at the new facility.

She recalled Jessie Gannon, another female veteran who moved in on the first day. Gannon, who came from Edgewater, was active in that area's American Legion post.

Mattia also remembers Norris, noting that she always kept her room decorated and "cozy. She was just the sweetest lady," Mattia said.

The veterans home campus was originally home to the Charlotte Hall School, which closed in 1976 after 202 years due to financial troubles. The state government purchased the 126-acre property a year later and began planning for the state's first and only veterans home.

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