



# Isabel

Years of Service 1942 - 1944  
Cochiti, New Mexico



VA Sierra Nevada Health Care System





## MY LIFE MY STORY



# Isabel



## United States Army Nurse Corps

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I joined the Army because they didn't wear black stockings, and the Navy nurses did. Everybody laughed and teased me about the stockings. I liked the pretty white caps, dresses, stockings, and shoes. My cape was navy with a red lining.

I was born in New Mexico in March 1918. I am a full-blooded Pueblo Indian. My dad was a farmer. He farmed corn, wheat, vegetables and fruits. He had some cattle, too. My mom went to school in her early years. Later, she worked in the health clinic at the day school there in the pueblo. Day school went from 1<sup>st</sup> grade to 5<sup>th</sup> grade. I have two brothers and three sisters.



When I was young, both grandmas were sick. We helped mother take care of them. My mother's mother put nursing in my mind. I was fixing her bed, fixing her pillow and stuff like that. She said, "You will make a good little nurse." That did it. It kept in my mind, you know. I said, "Maybe, maybe I will."

All those years when I was so young, and this idea kept in my head. I finished high school, and I thought about it again. Grandma put that in my head, that I would make a good little nurse, and that's what happened.

My teacher was asking each one of us what we were going to do when we finished high school. I said, "My grandma said, 'what a good little nurse I would make.'" So, that's when my plan was made.

I went to day school there in the pueblo up to fourth grade. This one teacher impressed me so much. He was a really good teacher. He said if he could do it, I could do it. That's how he would put it.



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Then, I went to a Catholic boarding school in Santa Fe called Saint Catherine's Indian School. When I was in day school, we spoke Indian and Spanish. There in Cochiti, we had Spanish speaking people living in the pueblo.

We learned to speak Spanish because we played and did everything together. Just before I finished my day school, teachers started having classes to learn English words and how to use them when speaking English. At Saint Catherine's, we spoke Indian, Spanish, and English.

After I graduated from high school, I worked at the Indian hospital till August. Then, I registered at St. Vincent's Hospital in Santa Fe, New Mexico and Saint Joseph's Hospital in Albuquerque, New Mexico. That's where they were training nurses. It took me three years to get my diploma. I took the state boards and became an RN.

I did some private nursing. Shortly after that, I went to work at Saint Mary's Hospital in Gallup, New Mexico. Later, I went to the Navajo Agency Hospital on the Navajo reservation to do nursing.

My two brothers went in the Army. There was a nurse that knew my brothers. She was in the Army also. She would tell me a lot of things about the Army. I decided, I'm going to go to the Army and become a nurse.

In 1942, I decided to join the service, the Army Nurse Corps. I went to Fort Bliss in El Paso, Texas to the station hospital. I was a second lieutenant. There were four wards. We worked hard, like no one's business. Four wards full of those poor guys. I did everything, everything. I got the guys out of surgery and then, I did everything: IVs, bandaging, shots.



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I also taught some of the young enlisted men to be medics. They had to learn how to take care of the wounded in the field because after their training, they were sent overseas. They did a good job. They were good boys, very dependable.



Clark Gable would come to Fort Bliss to visit the guys. He would also visit with the nurses. One day, we were sitting, drinking our cokes, and he was smoking. I said, "How come you haven't asked us to smoke a little bit?" So, he taught me to smoke. I started to smoke for a little while. Oh God, my parents, my parents, oh my goodness, it was a sin.

He was a good teacher and a good dancer too. Oh, he was yummy. We danced with most of those movie stars. They would have parties for the troops, and we were all invited. That's how we got to dance with the stars. We would get all excited and oh, look at the new dresses. We had to get nice dresses, but once in a while, we wore our uniforms. We were so proud to dance with all the guys.

The one I had a hard time dancing with was John Wayne. He was so big and tall, but I danced with him. I had a nice time. He was a very nice man so nice to the nurses. It was exciting talking about dancing with the stars. We were so proud. I didn't have a favorite. They were all so nice; I couldn't pick just one. I love to dance.



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There was a time when I had to take one trip overseas to France to pick up casualties. First, we flew to New York and did some training. We were shown what to do, what to say and what not to say. We had to take Italian and German language to understand them and them to understand us. They didn't speak English. That was hard.

We flew at night, so they told us it was France. It was dark, so I don't know for sure. We had to get there and get back, lickety-split. We were busy giving IVs, medications and bandaging. They would say, "Tiny, get over here." My nickname was Tiny. In boot camp, I was pulled aside a couple of times a day to drink milkshakes.

It was hard to give the IVs and medications on the plane. Working on those poor guys, well, most of them were in bad shape. Sometimes it would make you cry. They were in so much pain. I did a lot of hand holding, very much so. Some of those hands were heavy, but I did it, regardless of how big or heavy they were. Those poor guys, I felt so sorry for them. How much more could we do for them? We just couldn't do enough. They were in so much pain. We tried hard to comfort them.



People just don't know what those guys went through. You'd have tears in your eyes seeing them suffer.

These flights went back and forth, but I only did one trip. I flew back to Fort Bliss and worked in the hospital. We brought back some of the casualties to Fort Bliss.

I married Ernest. He was a pharmacist in the Army. I met him when I was working at the Navajo Agency Hospital.



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He was a baker at that time. He was a very good baker. He went to Denver to do his pharmacy schooling and to get his license. We kept in contact by writing each other. We saw each other once or twice a year. We were married in July 1943.

I was relieved from active duty 11 OCT 1944 due to a Physical Disability, Temporarily. I was pregnant. At that time, I was the only woman and the only woman officer serving from the pueblo.

My husband stayed in the Army Air Corps and retired from the Air Force in 1965. He was a pharmacist. We started at Kirtland Air Force Base and then, we went to Hickam Air Force Base, Hawaii. Later, we transferred to Hancock Air Force Base in Syracuse, New York and finally, we went to Selfridge Air Force Base in Michigan.



He had a friend here in Reno, so we came to Reno and bought a house in Sparks. We have stayed here and made this our home. After forty-one years of marriage, we got a divorce; but we ended up back together. That's it.

We have five children, three girls and two boys. I have three grandchildren and one great-grandchild. My family is just great. I'm so proud of them.



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When we moved to Reno, I worked at Saint Mary's Hospital. I worked in the surgery and orthopedic department. One year, I was just the IV nurse. I was pretty good at hitting the veins. I worked there about three years, I guess. Then, I was a mother at home, and I did some private nursing. I still had three kids at home. Two were off at college.

The age difference between my kids happened because I contracted polio in 1950. My husband and I were told no more kids. We waited.

I was also very busy working at my church, Immaculate Conception Catholic Church here in Sparks. We were raising money to build the new church. There were three of us nurses helping raise the money.

At night, we got together at the hall to make tamales. We were cracker jack; we'd make them pretty fast. I haven't made any since the church got built. I'd had enough of that. Oh, golly, I tell ya. We did that for three or four years.

I lost my sight in my left eye in the 1970's. I could do more if I could see. One of the worst things that happen as you get older is that things get taken away from you. I used to sew the kid's clothes and costumes. I was a good seamstress.



In 1985, I joined the American Legion, Dat So La Lee Post 12. I enjoyed the meetings and dinners. I liked helping wherever I could. I am a lifetime member.

*Editor's note: Dat So La Lee Post 12 was originally chartered as an all-women's Post and actively supported Americanism and Child Welfare programs.*



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*In 2008, after attempts to revitalize Post 12 as an all-women's Post and after concurrence to the few remaining women members, Dat So La Lee Post 12 was revitalized as a "co-ed" Post.*

In the late 1990's, my daughter, Nadine, lived in Singapore. I went to visit. We went to Cambodia, Thailand, and Australia. I also went to Rome to see Pope John Paul XXIII with my daughters, Nadine and Selene. At age seventy-five, I went on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land with a church group.

I don't nurse anymore, I'm too old for that now. I might still be able to stick a vein though. I'm 100 years old. Isn't that nice. I surprised myself. I never realized I would be this old, really. I'm so proud. I'm still on foot, walking and dancing. I had my fun. I did mostly anything and everything. I try to be a positive person.

My faith is very important to me. I pray all the time. When I'm not doing anything, I'll sit there and pray. People sometimes wonder why I'm so quiet, why I don't say anything—I'm praying.

I like the VA, they are very good to me. I hope they know this. People are so nice and kind. Thank you, for all you do.

