How the United States Cadet Nurse Corps (USCNC) WWII meets the criteria for veteran status

***Friends of the United States Cadet Nurse Corps World War II***

1. Deep in World War II, it became apparent that the number of nurses needed for the success of the war effort was greater than the supply.
2. In answering the country’s call, nearly 60,000 experienced nurses voluntarily enlisted in the Army and Navy, creating such a shortage of trained nurses that there were not enough to keep hospitals open.
3. Nurses were critical to the military effort not only abroad but also in the homeland where they were needed to care for sick and injured soldiers and civilians working in war manufacturing plants.
4. Learning from World War I that lack of access to skilled nursing care greatly contributed to war fatalities, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt signed into law the Bolton Act of 1943 which created the 1st all-female and integrated United States Cadet Nurse Corps (USCNC).
5. As a result of a very successful recruitment campaign costing $3 million (15 million in today’s dollars) 180,000 candidates, as young as 17 years, enlisted in the USCNC thus avoiding the need for a draft.
6. Out of 180,000 candidates, more than 124,000 were able to successfully complete the rigorous training and service.
7. The USCNC was not a typical 36-month nursing education program. The Cadet Nurses received intensive and accelerated training for the first 24 months and in the last 6 months of active service, they pledged to serve their country in military, government and civilian hospitals for “the duration of the present war”.
8. The USCNC followed military guidelines including proper wearing of uniforms and insignia including disciplinary actions. For example, although the white nursing uniforms were unique to the training hospital facility, it was mandated that they be clearly marked with an official USCNC patch.
9. They held the ranks of Pre-Cadet, Junior Cadet and Senior Cadet with stipends of $15, $20 and $30 per month respectively.
10. The Corps worked under the direction of the United States Public Health Service which, was militarized in WWII (as it was in both WWI and the Korean War) further confirming eligibility for veteran status.
11. In the rank of Senior Cadet, the young women received orders and travel vouchers and were deployed for active service in military, government or civilian hospitals for a period of 6 months.
12. Those working in veteran’s hospitals lived in military housing and underwent weekly inspections by their supervising commanding officers.
13. The Senior Cadet Nurses were assigned leadership positions and those in veteran’s hospitals supervised military personnel such as army medics.
14. At the height of the war, the Cadet Nurses were able to keep hospitals open as they were responsible for 80% of the nursing staff.
15. The Corps existed solely as a wartime asset. Two months after the surrender of Japan, the USCNC had completed its war mission and the program stopped admissions.
16. However, Cadet Nurses who were already enlisted continued to meet their obligations and provided nursing care until the service was disbanded in December 1948.
17. This allowed for Army and Navy nurses to be relieved of their duty and discharged home along with the soldiers as heroes with honors and parades.
18. After completing their service pledge of 30 months, the women of UNCNC were sent home and forgotten.
19. After 75 years, it is time to properly acknowledge the contributions of the United States Cadet Nurse Corps and to recognize their importance in United States history for their significant role in the success of WWII.
20. It was during WW II when women were first given full military status with the establishment of the Women’s Army Corps (WAC) by Congress in 1943.
21. WW II was the time when women served in large numbers, responding to an all-out mobilization because of a desperate need for personnel. Acceptance of these women was not always given willingly, both in Congress and within the military itself.
22. Army nurses received little training to prepare them for wartime nursing. The training programs were designed only to prepare nurses for clinical or functional assignments and not to provide military training. No women of that era had the same boot camp training as the men. The mission of the nurses was to reduce the fatalities of soldiers not to be soldiers. It was not until July 1944, that they received full commissions and military status.
23. In January 1945, Surgeon General Thomas Parran, Jr. testified to the House Committee on Military Affairs and said “We cannot measure what the loss to the country would have been if civilian nursing service had collapsed, any more than we could measure the cost of failure at the Normandy beachheads”.
24. The 124,000 Nurse Cadets were the youngest, largest and only uniformed all women service in WWII that has not been given veteran status.
25. The women of the United States Cadet Nurse Corps deserve the honor of veteran status and meet the full intent of the meaning of “veteran” as applied to female service in a militarized government service in 1943-1948.
26. The USCNC has been overlooked in history books including Brokaw’s “Greatest Generation” and the PBS series the “Forties Decade” and is excluded from veteran’s organizations. They were even passed over for a postage stamp in 1997 stating that they “didn’t have historical significance”.
27. HR1168 and other versions of the bill have been brought before Congress since 1995.
28. The Department of Defense review board turned down their request for veteran status in 1979 and again in 1993 stating that “cadet nurses were student trainees not subject to military regulations or discipline and that they could quit at any time, for any reason.”
29. However, there is precedent for this. The Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASP) was a civilian women pilot’s organization, whose members were United States federal civil service employees. The WASP and its members had no military standing. They had no military uniforms like the USCNC. In 1977, for their World War II service, the members were granted veteran status. In 2017, the World War II Merchant Mariners Service Act was passed granting veteran status to a group of Merchant Mariners who met certain criteria. This 2017 bill serves as the model for a new bill to provide veteran status to the US Cadet Nurse Corps being introduced into the U. S. Senate soon.
30. Cadet Nurse Elizabeth Yeznach testified before Congress in 2009. She was married to a male Aviation Cadet. He was still in training when the war ended. Although he never completed his training nor went abroad, he received full veteran’s benefits. She recently stated, “We were nice girls who were exploited because we were women and denied receiving what the men got. My highest hope is Elizabeth Warren. She knows women, and this is a women’s issue.”
31. Shirley Riley, RN and daughter of Cadet Nurse Doris Kent said that she believes that if the cadet nurses were men, they would have received recognition for their service long ago…“I truly believe it’s sexism,”
32. US Rep Joe Courtney (CT) said, “As far as I’m concerned – particularly given the nature of its creation in the middle of WWII – it really shouldn’t be that hard for people to see this was definitely an integral part of the war effort. Because there’s such a small population of nurses [a few thousand at most] and it clearly states there are no retroactive benefits people would be entitled to, the cost to the VA is minuscule, so it really shouldn’t run into those kinds of issues. From a partisan standpoint, there’s no rhyme or reason”.
33. In commenting on the lack of any movement on the latest U.S. Cadet Nurse Corps Equity Act, Massachusetts State Senate minority leader Bruce Tarr, also stated “To me, that is just unjust,”
34. CT State Sen Cathy Osten, who sits on the Veterans Affairs Committee, called the oversight an “injustice”. She said “To me, it’s that important and that simple. We always talk about what we want to do for them and this is one of those things we should not only want to do but should do, because it’s the right thing.”
35. What is most important to the members of the USCNC is that they not be forgotten and that they be recognized for their patriotic service to their country with a plaque and an American flag at their gravesite.
36. The USCNC was a very successful program that could be a model on how to address our country’s current and future critical nursing shortage. The Bureau of Labor Statistics predicts a 19% increase in demand for nurses by 2022.

 Dr. Barbara Poremba 12/01/18 bporemba@salemstate.edu