



Ernestine Hess Davey of Ansted (Fayette County) aboard the USS *Refuge* during World War II. Courtesy of the family.

# Ernestine Hess Davey

## An Unsung Hometown Hero

By Sara Bragg Aikin

As a child, I grew up in a neighborhood known simply as *The Hill* in the small town of Ansted (Fayette County). A particular treat was spending time at the Hess farm next door. Herbert and Nellie Hess had acres of hayfields and gardens, along with cows, ducks, pigs, chickens, horses, and other critters. My friends and I often were hired to help with feeding and harvesting, although payment seldom was with money. Instead, we were paid with homemade ice cream from fresh milk or slices of sweet watermelons that Herbert often grew.

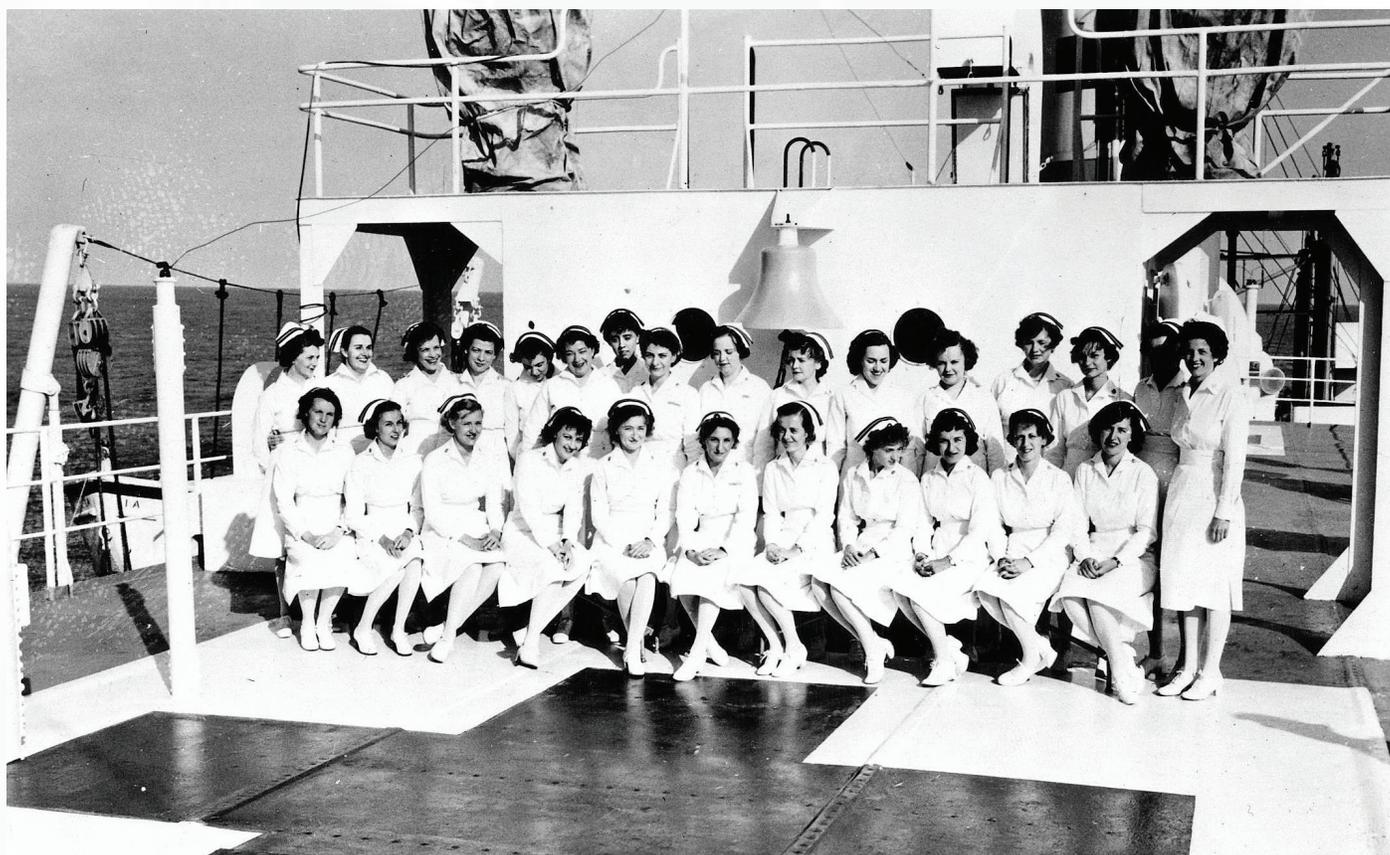
A special treat for me after a hot summer's day of helping was to relax in the cool of the old farmhouse's living room. In those un-air-conditioned days, I tried to position myself in front of the oscillating tabletop fan, which allowed an unobstructed view of pictures that seemed to cover every available surface. An upright piano in the corner was adorned with photos of the Hess children—Ernestine, Bud, Bob, Rose, Anne, and Denny. All were grown and gone from home by the time I became a *Hill kid*, but I knew them through the stories of their shared childhoods with my own brothers and sisters.

During those cooling-off periods, I often lost track of time gazing at the picture displays. One, in particular, never failed to spark my imagination. Ernestine, the oldest Hess daughter, was posed in a crisp, white nurse's uniform and standing on the walkway of a ship. World War II had ended a few years before I made my debut, and stories from those days

were fresh in my young mind. I imagined Ernestine as one of the heroines who fought to save the world. Later research proved the truthfulness of my fantasies.

Before graduating high school, Ernestine had assisted in the care of an elderly neighbor, whose son was a doctor. Her dedication to helping others apparently was fueled by that early encounter. After high school, she completed nursing school at St. Francis Hospital in Charleston and worked as a nurse at that facility for more than a year. Her patriotism surfaced during the height of World War II, and she joined the U.S. Navy on December 1, 1942. Her brother Bud had set the tradition for military service, and Ernestine and her brother Bob followed his lead.

After several stateside posts, Ernestine was assigned to the USS *Refuge*, a hospital ship that accompanied the country's fleet into battles against both the Japanese and German armies. The ship sailed 80,000 miles and served in the European, American, and Asiatic-Pacific theaters. From Okinawa to Operation Torch to Normandy, the *Refuge* followed U.S. warships. Unlike battleships, the hospital ship was required to be lit at all times, making it a conspicuous nighttime target for submarines. Despite the constant threat, Ernestine and other medical personnel risked their lives to care for wounded soldiers. While the term *basket cases* later evolved into a disparaging term for people with mental and other health issues, it was used historically in reference to patients who had lost limbs



In this photo of WAVES aboard the *Refuge*, Ernestine is seated fourth from the left. Courtesy of the family.

and had to be placed in carriers (baskets) before loading. The *Refuge* took in these cases and, too often, served as transport for American heroes who didn't survive.

On June 6, 1944, the Allied forces attacked German troops entrenched on the coast of Normandy, France, in the largest seaborne invasion in history. Once again, the *Refuge* was on site in the victory that became the turning point for World War II in Europe. Ernestine's maiden name caused confusion among the wounded Nazi prisoners of war who were being transported along with Americans. Seeing *Hess* (a traditional German surname) on her nametag led many to believe she'd be more sympathetic to their military cause. Her unwavering patriotism quickly dashed those misconceptions, yet, forever dedicated to saving lives, she treated them with the same care as all her patients.

Other unique experiences awaited this young woman from Ansted. During

her hospital ship's stopover in Rome, Ernestine, the ship's chaplain, and four other nurses were included in a meeting with the Pope. Questioned about the impact of her faith, she admitted that she wasn't Catholic and that attending the meeting was the only way she could get liberty (a pass in Navy vernacular)!

Her commendations attest to Ernestine's dedication and bravery: the European-African-Middle Eastern Campaign Medal with Bronze Battle Star, the World War II Victory Medal, the Philippine Liberation Ribbon, and several others. When her Navy service ended in 1946, she worked briefly as a model in New York City and traveled the country as a private-duty nurse before her unfailing patriotism prompted her to reenlist in the Navy in 1949. At a posting in Jacksonville, Florida, Ernestine met Lt. Junior Grade Frank Davey, and they married in 1950. (Ernestine's rank was higher than her



Ansted's veterans memorial park on Route 60 honors Ernestine Hess Davey and other veterans from the town. Photo by Sara Bragg Aikin.

husband's, and she never let him forget it.) Ernestine continued her service until the couple learned they were expecting their first child, Francine. Ernestine was discharged with honors in 1951. She and Frank soon added sons Mike and Pat to the family as Ernestine embraced her role as a military wife with the same passion and zeal that had been apparent in her active duty.

Postings across the United States and in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, eventually led the family to live in Pensacola, Florida, where they remained after Frank's 28-year Navy career ended. The tradition of military service continued through their son Mike (Air Force) and grandsons Charlie Neal (Navy) and Aaron Davey (Army National Guard). Two of Ernestine's five grandchildren served in the military, and three others became nurses—a testament to their grandmother's shining example.

During the pandemic that has hit the world, many are being recognized for their sacrifices to help others, and medical personnel once again are on the front lines. A commemorative brick in Ansted's impressive memorial to hometown military veterans simply notes, "Lt NC Ernestine Hess Davey, U.S. Navy." But the unofficial Navy motto—*non sibi, sed patriae* (not self, but country)—illustrates the unwavering patriotism that her passing in January 2021 at age 99 can never dim. Ernestine's devotion and service to our country should serve as an inspiration and a goal, not only for her West Virginia hometown neighbors and friends but for every proud American. 🍁

SARA BRAGG AIKIN's love of words was fostered by a family of readers and through her career of more than 35 years at an education research-and-development corporation in Charleston. Now retired, Sara relishes the time she can spend sharing her perspectives on life, faith, and her beloved Mountain State. This is her first contribution to GOLDENSEAL.