

Elizabeth Lucille Kirk

U.S. Navy, Lieutenant Junior Grade

1927 - 2008

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Elizabeth “Betty” Lucille Kirk was born March 15, 1927, to a blue-collar family in Larksville, Luzerne County, Pennsylvania.

Her father, Frank Albert Kotch, a Polish second-generation immigrant from Russia, worked a variety of jobs throughout Luzerne County in the coal industry. The Borough of Larksville gained prominence during the late-19th and early-20th centuries as an active anthracite coal mining community. A large portion of the community’s labor force were European immigrants, much like Betty’s grandparents who immigrated to the United States at the turn of the 19th century from Russia and Austria-Hungary.

In her later teen years, Betty’s family relocated to Norristown, Pennsylvania. Her father traded the mines for trolley lines, working for the Schuylkill Valley Lines as a mechanic. Betty’s mother, Julia Roman Tkach, who came from an Austrian family, worked as a millhand as a young adult before marriage. Once her children were old enough, Julia worked as an attendant at a state hospital. Betty’s younger brother, Frank Albert Kotch Jr., was born in 1928. Betty and her family were of Roman Catholic faith and attended St. Patrick’s Catholic Church in Norristown.

Betty graduated from Norristown Area High School in 1944. A well-rounded and involved student, Betty belonged to multiple clubs and organizations, and participated in many extracurricular activities. Not only was Betty on the class congress and a student council member, but she was also her homeroom’s secretary and treasurer. In addition to her leadership skills, Betty also played hockey, was a reporter for Norristown High’s student newspaper, the *Hi-Eye*, and a member of the color team.



Elizabeth “Betty” Kotch’s 1944 senior portrait in the Norristown Area High School yearbook.

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Norristown High's "Hi-Eye" student newspaper staff in 1944. Betty (marked in center) was also involved with student government and Victory Corps.

Like many secondary schools in the United States during the mid-century, Norristown High had a Victory Corps program of which Betty was also a member. The National High School Victory Corps Program was a nationwide initiative introduced in 1942 by the United States Office of Education in conjunction with the United States Departments of War, Navy, and Civil Engineering to prepare secondary school students for military service and participation

in the war effort. A patriotic fervor emerged following Pearl Harbor, resulting in hundreds of Victory Corps programs throughout the United States. Although the Victory Corps never achieved the recruiting potential the federal government and the military had hoped for, approximately 52 percent of high schools in the United States voluntarily participated in the program. Like Betty, many female students were encouraged to become nurses to help alleviate the nursing shortage during the Second World War.

Shortly after her senior year, Betty answered the country's call for nurses and joined the United States Cadet Nurse Corps in September of 1944. Signed into law in 1943, the United States Cadet Nurse Corps sought to fast-track young women through nursing school with a condensed curriculum that shaved six months off the typical course of study and was obligated to provide clinical training in medicine, surgery, pediatrics, and obstetrics. While she was a nursing student, Betty trained at Abington Memorial Hospital, a teaching hospital in neighboring Montgomery County, Pennsylvania. Betty finished nursing school in September of 1947 and began working as a nurse at Norristown's Sacred Heart Hospital. By 1949, she was an ensign with the U.S. Navy. Although Betty's motivations for joining the Navy cannot be known for certain, she marked three places of information when she filled out her Cadet Nurse Corps card in fall of 1944, crossing off the options for school counselor, student nurse, and poster. Although World War II had ended two years before Betty graduated from nursing school, nursing may have still appeared to be a fulfilling and dutiful career opportunity.

Having attended a high school with a Victory Corps program, and due to the political climes of the time, it was likely that nursing was a common career choice for the young women around Betty who were also entering adulthood in the mid-1940s. Moreover, advertisements for the Cadet Nurse Corps were prolific, appearing in everything from daily local newspapers to large production magazines such as *Life*. For women like Betty from working class families advertisements that offered an opportunity to "serve your country in the 'war job with a future'" and "free training... with pay" probably were appealing, promising secure career paths. For someone like Betty who was involved in multiple patriotic extracurriculars, nursing may have appeared to be a perfect fit.

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Betty also shared the ubiquitous experience of having family members who were involved in the military. While her younger brother came of age after World War II, he enlisted in the United States Air Force in 1948 and served for four years during the Korean War.

In 1950, Betty was stationed in Portsmouth, Virginia, and likely served at Portsmouth Naval Hospital. On October 7, 1950, Betty married Alfred H. Kirk in Hempstead, New York. Originally from Huntingdon, Pennsylvania, and a veteran of World War II, Alfred had reenlisted during the Korean War and was stationed at Mitchel Air Force Base in Nassau County, New York, at the time of their marriage. He worked in communications. Shortly after they married, the newlyweds were separated by nearly 8,000 miles due to their military careers with Alfred remaining in New York and Betty shipping off to the South Pacific.

Betty was stationed with Naval Mobile Construction Battalion 10 in Guam. Naval Mobile Construction Battalions are more commonly referred to as the “Seabees,” a nickname derived from the initial letters from “construction battalion.” Adhering to their motto “we build, we fight,” the Seabees are tasked with a wide range of construction projects to support operating forces, including roads, bridges, bunkers, airfields, and bases. The Seabees also provide support for disaster recovery efforts and civic action projects. During the Korean War, Navy nurses served at the Naval Hospital at Yokosuka, Japan, and onboard naval hospital ships like the USS *Haven*, USS *Consolation*, and the USS *Repose*. Prior to 1954, the island nation of Guam lacked a formal naval hospital, so Betty may have served aboard a hospital ship or, more likely, in a Quonset hut hospital.

During the recapturing of Guam as part of the Mariana and Palau Island Campaign during World War II, the United States military conducted widespread bombing of buildings on the island. When the smoke cleared, many structures were missing, and even more were cleared away later by Seabees to build harbors and airfields. In their place, the Navy erected temporary prefabricated buildings, the Quonset huts, out of corrugated tin sheeting. Low in cost and easy to put up and

take down, the Quonset hut was favored by the Navy, and overtime, became used for non-military functions such as home, schools, and hospitals. While stationed in Guam, Betty presumably lived and worked in these huts, moving about her life and tending to patients in the 16-by-36-foot tin half-cylinder structure that was the Quonset hut.



Seabees construct a concrete pad for structures on Guam, 1945. Note the Quonset hut in background. NH 89049

By September of 1951, Betty had returned stateside, and was promoted to Lieutenant Junior Grade. That same month, Alfred was stationed at an Air Force Base in Colorado and the couple relocated together. On March 9, 1953,

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Betty gave birth to her and Alfred's first child, a boy named Mark Alfred Kirk, in Colorado Springs, Colorado. The following year, on October 23, 1954, Betty had their second child, Regina A. Kirk. At the time of Regina's birth, Alfred had been stationed in England. Soon after, the family moved to Frankfurt, Germany, likely to Rhein-Main Air Base, following Alfred's Air Force career.

In 1960, Alfred attended a college course at the Pentagon in Washington, D.C. Upon his completion of the course in February of 1961, Alfred was to be stationed overseas again for three years, after which he could retire. In 1963, Betty had their third and last child, Timothy A. Kirk.

Over the years, Alfred climbed the ranks in the Air Force with Betty at his side; he eventually earned the title of Major. It is not known whether or not Betty continued working as a nurse throughout the years, but it is likely that she forwent her own career to care for her family and manage the obligations of being a military wife. Sometime in the 1960s, the family moved again to Herndon, Virginia, near Arlington. In 1969 and 1970, Alfred received awards for his work as a communications specialist for the Defense Communications Agency and for ten years of federal service.

Following in his parents' footsteps, firstborn Mark enlisted in the military, joining the U.S. Navy and serving from 1981 to 1993. Betty and Alfred retired to Round Hill, Loudoun County, Virginia. In December 1997 Betty and Alfred divorced. In her final years, Betty relocated to live near her daughter and her family in Franklin, Pendleton County, West Virginia. She resided in Franklin until her passing on February 21, 2008. Betty was laid to rest at the West Virginia National Cemetery in Pruntytown.



The hospital ship USS Repose (AH-16) returns to San Diego from the Korean theater of war in 1952. NARA 80-G-439770

An unidentified Navy nurse aboard USS Haven (AH-12) in 1952. Several Navy ships served as floating hospitals for Korean War casualties. NH 97169



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Resting Place

West Virginia National Cemetery
42 Veterans Memorial Lane, Grafton, WV 26354
(304) 265-2044

Section: C3
Site: 208

Date of Interment: August 13, 2009

About the West Virginia National Cemeteries Project

The West Virginia National Cemeteries Project is a program of the West Virginia Humanities Council, funded in part by the Veterans Legacy Program of the Department of Veteran Affairs and initiated in 2021. All biographies produced as part of this program are composed by West Virginia high school students, who conduct original research on veterans interred at the Grafton National Cemetery or the West Virginia National Cemetery, both of which are located in or near Grafton, Taylor County, West Virginia.

As home to one of the nation's earliest National Cemeteries, the community of Grafton has longstanding traditions of honoring America's veterans, including the longest continuously celebrated Memorial Day parade in the United States. The Grafton National Cemetery, located in the heart of the city and founded in 1867, is typically the endpoint of each year's parade. When the Grafton National Cemetery began to run short of space during the 1960s, the West Virginia National Cemetery was dedicated in 1987, just a few miles outside of Grafton in the community of Pruntytown. The same National Cemetery Administration staff cares for both facilities.

The West Virginia Humanities Council is proud to thank the following organizations for their participation in the West Virginia National Cemeteries Project: West Virginia Archives and History, the West Virginia University history department, Taylor County Historical and Genealogical Society, Taylor County Public Library, and Grafton High School.

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