

# Elsie Ruth Russett

U.S. Army, Captain

1921 - 2019

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Elsie Ruth Russett was born August 20, 1921, in Brandonville, Preston County, West Virginia. She lived on a 365-acre farm with both of her parents and four siblings. They grew oats, corn, wheat, winter wheat, and buckwheat, and raised cows, pigs, chickens, and horses. Her parents were Marshall Gay Guseman and Euruth Anna Guseman. She had three sisters and one brother: Dorothy, Betty Lucille, Virginia Alice, and Charles Dale. She walked three-quarters of a mile every weekday to Bruceton High School, which she described as a one-room school.

After graduating high school in 1940, she enrolled in nurses' training in Morgantown at the city hospital and graduated as a registered nurse in 1943. Few professional roles were available to women outside the home in the 1940s, and Elsie was inspired to pursue nursing by her aunt, who also worked professionally in the field.

Going through nursing school was a tough but rewarding experience. Elsie lived with fellow nurses on the third floor of the Morgantown hospital until renovations forced them out, at which time she moved with other nursing students into the home of the hospital's owner, supervised by a "house mother." In addition to her courses, Elsie worked at a hospital in Morgantown from seven in the morning to seven at night, breaking in the afternoon for classes.

Eventually, Elsie decided to go home to her family and ended up living with her cousin to care for a sick baby. She became a private nurse for some time until she went over to Student Health and took another job at the hospital. At this point in her life many of her friends began to join different branches of the military, hoping



**Bruceton School, Preston County, in 1889. Though Elsie attended half a century later, she still described it as a one-room schoolhouse. WVU Libraries**



**Young Elsie on horseback. Ancestry.com**

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to broaden their horizons and see more of the world. Elsie followed suit.

In 1951, Elsie officially joined the Army Nurse Corps. She flew from Morgantown to San Antonio, Texas, where she received her basic training at Fort Sam Houston's Army Medical Center. In basic training she learned formation marching, and became accustomed to the methodologies of military hospitals. Given the opportunity to choose her assignment, she opted for the most elite posting available: Walter Reed Naval Hospital in Maryland. Walter Reed is still considered the preeminent military hospital in the United States. Tens of thousands of active-duty and retired soldiers have been treated on its campus.

During the Korean War, Elsie barracked in Delano Hall and worked in the amputee ward. Later she moved to the recovery ward where she treated patients coming directly from surgical operations, and treated emergency patients on occasion. At the time it was common for nurses to step out of their normal training and perform other procedures. Elsie could recall doing her first transfusion, which the doctor usually performs.

It was in the dining room of Delano Hall where Elsie discovered that there was a need for nurses in Austria. American forces had been posted in Europe in large numbers since the end of World War II, when the so-called "Iron Curtain" fell between the communist countries of eastern Europe and the democratic west. Since she had yet to "see the world" outside the United States, Elsie leapt at the opportunity.

But not all went according to plan. Though the young nurse boarded a ship in New York and crossed the Atlantic without incident, upon arrival in Italy the American chief nurse of an Italian hospital came aboard and announced Elsie would be staying in the area to fill the much-needed role of an operating nurse. Austria was off the table for now.

For the next three years, she was stuck at her unplanned Italian billet. Since many locals at the time



**Elsie Russett in her Korean War-era Army Nurse Corps uniform. [Ancestry.com](https://www.ancestry.com)**



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were fluent in English, Elsie did not master much of the Italian language. Nevertheless, she learned enough to go shopping and eventually bought an Opel automobile with postal money orders. She did visit some of the wider world she had yearned to see when a group of nurses organized a tour to France, Germany, and other western European countries.



**A birds-eye view of barracks at Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri, where Elsie met her husband Alan Russett. *State Historical Society of Missouri***

After her three-year enlistment ended, Elsie returned to the United States undecided on whether to continue with the Army. After some consideration and a job offer from a close friend, she decided to reenlist until eligible for pension. She went to Fort Leonard Wood in southcentral Missouri. At Leonard she worked in the medical ward until 1957 when they sent her to the recovery ward where she met her future husband, a corpsman also assigned to the ward. Alan LeRoy Russett from Frankville, Iowa, proposed that same year, and Elsie's military plans changed.

Elsie and Alan were married May 20, 1957, in Morgantown, West Virginia, where she had first trained as a nurse.

After six years in the Army, Elsie retired with the rank of captain—only 10 years after women had been granted the right to hold regular rank in the U.S. military with the Army-Navy Nurses Act of 1947. She later described her time in the Army as “a happy experience.”

When Alan—to whom she would remain married for the next 59 years—decided to finish his studies to become a pharmacist, it became apparent that Elsie would need to find a job. She applied to the Veterans Administration (VA), but they refused to hire her because she was pregnant with the couple's first son. Eventually, the Russetts settled in Anamosa, Iowa, where Alan was the pharmacy manager at Kouba Pharmacy and later at Anamosa Superdrug. One of many jobs held by Elsie was that of school nurse at Anamosa Senior High School and Strawberry Hill Elementary for a combined 16 years, which allowed her to work while her sons were at school and return home at the same time so she could see them every day.

Elsie was very active in the lives of her sons, James and Daniel. When the two boys joined the Cub Scouts, she served as Pack 67's assistant den mother. Her care for children extended beyond her own family and the schools where she served as nurse. She was also secretary of Anamosa's Cornelian Club, which hosted study sessions, programs on current events, and summer reading programs for children. In the community at large she was a member of the Daughters of the American Revolution—often running programs and hosting meetings in the Russett family home—and

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president of her church women's group. She is remembered as an artist, seamstress, gardener, and a great cook. Some of her recipes were featured in *The Anamosa Journal* newspaper and in community cookbooks.

Elsie's connection to her former military life was expressed through her membership in Fairbank American Legion, Fort Duffy Post 553. And though she passed away at the age of 97 in Oelwein, Iowa, July 29, 2019, she is interred not far from Morgantown—where her journey to military service began— at the West Virginia National Cemetery in Pruntytown.



**Elsie and Alan proudly display their Army uniform jackets in 2017. *The Courier* (Cedar Falls, IA) newspaper**

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## Resting Place

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

Section: C3  
Site: 235

Date of Interment: October 7, 2019

## 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.

**Please refer comments or questions to the West Virginia Humanities Council**  
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