

# THELMA MAXINE SPEAR

LIEUTENANT JUNIOR GRADE  
U.S. NAVY

WORLD WAR II  
1919 - 2015

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Thelma Spear in her Navy nurse uniform.

*All photographs in this biography courtesy of James Spear Jr., except where otherwise noted. Mr. Spear has since generously donated digital copies of these photographs to the West Virginia and Regional History Center, WVU Libraries*

**On November 12, 1919, Thelma Maxine Tucker** was born in Meadowbrook, Harrison County, West Virginia, to parents Delbert and Lessie Green Tucker. Thelma, born in the family's rural home, was the second youngest of her nine siblings. When she was young, her father Delbert worked at the Grasselli Company, which operated a chemical plant in the county seat of Clarksburg. Grasselli's, headquartered in Cleveland, had been producing sulfuric acid in partnership with the DuPont Company since the 19th century. The family's home was on company land near a community called "Little Italy," a reference to the Italian families that lived nearby—Grasselli was itself an Italian name.

Growing up on the outskirts of Clarksburg, Thelma was immersed in the oft-referenced American cultural "melting pot." Immigrant labor rose dramatically in West Virginia during the first two decades of the 20th century with the mining, glass, and timber industries relying extensively on employment of these new arrivals. Clarksburg and other West Virginia cities, such as Fairmont, developed notable Italian immigrant communities around this time. In 1904, Grasselli had also opened a zinc spelter plant nearby, which soon employed hundreds of Asturian immigrants from Spain.

By the time Thelma was born, Clarksburg was also home to a thriving African American community—in part the result of the first "Great Migration" of Blacks moving out of the South to escape Jim Crow oppression and find new

opportunities. Thelma would probably have encountered a wide variety of cultures in her elementary school years, though Black children would have been required to attend their own segregated school.

By 1930, however, the Tucker family had moved to Grafton in neighboring Taylor County, where Delbert worked as a laborer in the Hazel-Atlas Glass factory (he would continue that work through 1950). Glass production was something of a West Virginia specialty in this era, ranging from sheet window glass to bottles and artisan products. Hazel-Atlas produced canning jars in Grafton. The family lived on West Boyd Street during most of Thelma's youth, within a few blocks of downtown businesses on Main Street. She attended Grafton High School in the mid-1930s, also a relatively short walk across a bridge over the Tygart River.

It wasn't easy caring for a large family during these years of the Great Depression. Thelma's older sister Lalah also took work as a ware packer, contributing wages to the family's upkeep. In later years, Thelma recounted to her own children how her brother carried milk on foot for miles, from the local dairy farm to the distributor. Thelma herself spent much of her time working in the family garden. Many families worked to reduce the cost of food by growing what they could.

Thelma graduated from high school in 1938 with her lifelong passion already determined: she wanted to be a nurse. Unfortunately, she was unable to afford the required training at a nursing school, and government-subsidized programs that would spring up later to meet demand for World War II were not yet in existence. In an immense stroke of fortune, however, Thelma's best friend had moved to Parkersburg, about an hour's ride west on the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad (B&O), to attend St. Joseph's School of Nursing. She expressed distress over Thelma's situation to the head of the nursing program, and the supervisor encouraged Thelma to attend. She just needed to pack a suitcase—Thelma's tuition would be waived.

Young Thelma leapt at the opportunity and graduated from St. Joseph's nursing program in 1941. She joined the state's small but growing list of registered nurses, having obtained especially high scores in obstetrics and public health. Thelma returned home and quickly found work in local hospitals in Grafton and Fairmont.

Just as the Great Depression had dictated the circumstances of her childhood, the world was shifting under Thelma's feet again. Though the fires of another world war had been building to a fever pitch since Hitler's 1939 invasion of Poland, the United States had thus far maintained a nominal neutrality. American troops were not being sent overseas to fight. All that changed the year Thelma obtained her nursing credentials, when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941.

No one with a passion for nursing like Thelma could stay away from the struggle for long. Military nursing was also quickly becoming an attractive prospect: To keep up with recruiting quotas, the various branches were increasing nurse compensation to compete with a nationwide surge in wartime job opportunities for women. In 1942, nurse pay was increased along with formal recognition of military ranks in the Army Nurse Corps (ANC) and Navy Nurse Corps (NNC). More concessions would be granted later, in 1944.

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not



ABOVE: Thelma (far left) and nurses-in-training in Charleston, South Carolina, enjoying Christmas dinner together in 1943.

BOTTOM LEFT: Thelma (far left) and other nurses arrive in San Francisco from Charleston.

BOTTOM RIGHT: Thelma's uniform.



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# THELMA MAXINE SPEAR



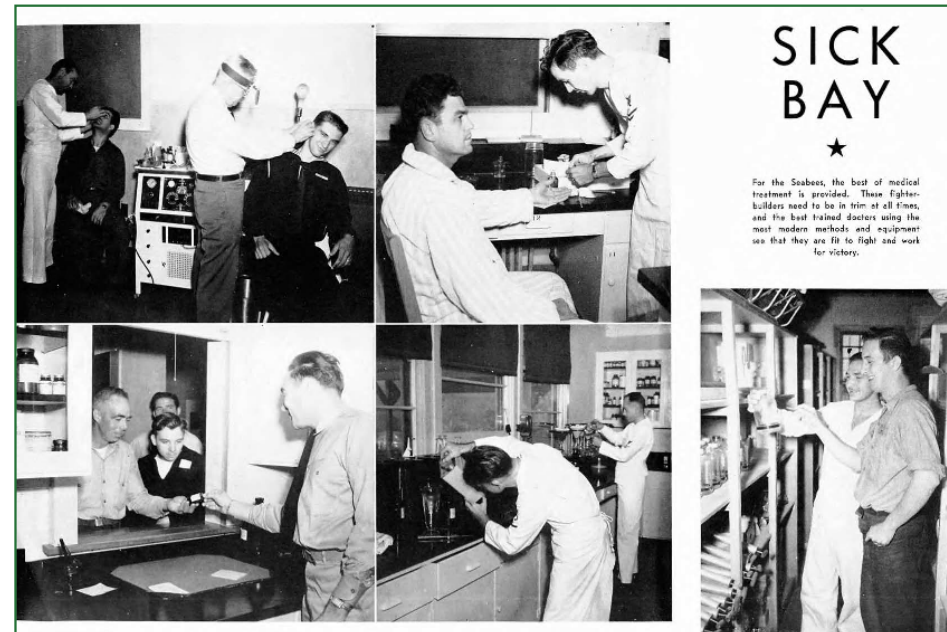
Seabees expanding the massive Camp Parks complex. NHC

readily apparent why Thelma elected to join the Navy Nurse Corps over its U.S. Army counterpart. Pay levels between the branches appear to have been comparable (about \$90 a month for enlisted nurses). Perhaps Thelma associated higher prestige with the NNC, since it was older and more established, even if it was smaller than the ANC. Perhaps its smaller size felt more exclusive—11,000 Navy nurses served during World War II, compared to 59,000 Army nurses. Or perhaps the sea had romantic appeal for a young woman raised in a landlocked state.

Whatever the reasons, Thelma enlisted in the U.S. Navy on July 6, 1943, at the age of 24. She was soon on her way to Charleston, South Carolina, for training. That city had long been a major navy port and was accompanied by a naval hospital rapidly expanding to meet the needs of the war. Arriving when she did, Thelma would have stayed in a brand-new barracks completed earlier that year for the nurses. She celebrated Christmas with her new comrades-in-arms.

After training, she was deployed to Camp Parks in Dublin, Alameda County, California, beginning in 1944. The sprawling complex of Parks was an annex to the massive Shoemaker base, one of the largest navy training and personnel distribution centers on the West Coast. Located just inland from the San Francisco Bay on the broad, flat floor of the Amador Valley, Shoemaker and Parks could quickly move personnel to and from huge naval complexes in Oakland, Vallejo, Mare Island, Treasure Island, Richmond, Port Chicago, and elsewhere around the Bay. The gargantuan facility grew so large that it acquired the nickname “Fleet City” (complete with a baseball team called the Fleet City Bluejackets).

On the northern end of Shoemaker, Camp Parks sprouted from the Amador Valley’s “vast muddy expanse” into “a vital unit in the Navy’s Seabee program.” The Seabees, who acquired their name from their basic unit of organization, the



Scenes from Camp Parks sick bay. NHC

Naval Construction Battalions, or NCBs, were the construction arm of the U.S. Navy. Their primary theater of war was in the Pacific where the U.S. Navy was most active during World War II, and where the necessity of “island hopping” required the building of bases and dock facilities from scratch across vast ocean distances. “We Build, We Fight” was the official motto of the “Can Do” Seabee battalions. In 1944, Thelma was jumping headfirst into a bustling world that she had scarcely dreamed of a few years prior. The 1945 Camp Parks cruise book describes the facility:

**The physical properties of the camp have grown from the original four buildings to a size comparable with a modern small city. Nearly sixty barracks and more than 1,000 Quonset huts house the enlisted personnel. A large group of administration buildings command the parade grounds while sprawled over the rolling acres are a dispensary with hospital facilities, recreation centers, picture shows, bowling alleys, swimming pools, chapels, libraries, officers’ quarters, classrooms, a hostess house for enlisted men and their guests, refrigeration plants, bakeries, warehouses, and the like. The outdoor facilities include a rifle range, a Commando course, and grounds for baseball, football, and other games. Hard-surfaced roads interlace the camp from end to end and bus service is provided thereon to facilitate movements within the camp.**

The Navy referred to Parks as a “construction battalion replacement depot.” After completing a tour in the Pacific, NCBs rotated back to Camp Parks to receive rest, medical treatment, and reassignment. Camp Parks could accommodate up to 20,000 personnel at a time and saw over 90,000 men walk through its gates during the war.

The Camp Parks medical department during Thelma’s tenure consisted of about 150 officers, nurses, and enlisted men. Surgeons and dentists were part of the officer corps, whereas pharmacist mate and hospital apprentice ratings dominated the enlisted ranks. Only 13 nurses are pictured in the Camp Parks yearbook—Thelma was one of 12 ensigns working under the chief



Navy nurses at Camp Parks enjoy a fishing trip with other Seabees, undated. Thelma is third from left.

nurse, who held the rank of lieutenant junior grade.

Sickness, injury, and war wounds accompany fighting forces wherever they go. The competent care given by nurses like Thelma Tucker was essential to the war effort, moving men back into the fight as quickly as possible. Not every Seabee was able to rejoin their unit—many were wounded and medically discharged. Thelma later described how difficult it was to work with burn victims who came to Camp Parks for treatment. She and her fellow nurses were frustrated that they could do nothing to assuage internal bacterial infections, especially with patients such as these.

However, Thelma and other nurses were soon able to utilize what she described as a “wonder drug.” Penicillin, invented in 1928, only became widely available in the United States during World War II, when mass production enabled universal distribution. Having historically lost more men to infections than combat, the United States government prioritized the production of penicillin. Thelma later told her son that penicillin was “miraculous.” Nurses rejoiced that they were finally able to combat the infections that often claimed servicemen’s lives, even as exterior wounds were on the mend.

While at Camp Parks, Thelma helped treat a young Seabee with a case of pneumonia. He had just returned from the bitterly cold Aleutian Islands off the coast of Alaska and was placed in Camp Parks for convalescence. Painter Second Class (Ptr2c)

# THELMA MAXINE SPEAR

James Spear and Thelma Tucker began dating shortly after meeting, enjoying a momentous evening at the famed Copacabana Club at Fisherman's Wharf in San Francisco. More dates followed. James was born in Westmoreland, Pennsylvania, in 1913, not far from northern West Virginia where Thelma grew up. As a Seabee painter, James applied paints and varnishes to ships, laid flooring, helped maintain fire extinguishers and breathing apparatuses, and served in damage control parties.

Thelma remained at Camp Parks for nearly a year after the war ended, treating Seabees awaiting discharge and a ticket home as they returned from Japan and islands scattered across the Pacific. Thelma was discharged from service on April 11, 1946, having advanced in rank to lieutenant junior grade. She and James were married on October 11, 1946, in Grafton, West Virginia. They would go on to have four children, James Jr., John, Carol, and Jo Claire.

The postwar decade was busy and mobile for the new Spear family. They lived in Allegheny County, Pennsylvania, while both Thelma and James took advantage of the GI Bill to attend the University of Pittsburgh. Thelma graduated with a B.S. in Nursing, worked as a graduate nurse, and gave birth to their first child during this time. After two years the Spears moved to Georgia, where James completed a Masters at Alabama Polytechnic Institute (now Auburn University), followed by a M.S. in Business Administration from Valdosta State College. Thelma worked in student and public health in Georgia while her husband attended school and briefly took work as professor of business administration at Valdosta.

The family lived briefly in Minnesota before James took a job at Penn State University in 1960. Thelma stepped away from her career to raise the children during this stint in New Castle, Pennsylvania. She was an active and supportive mother, taking her children to and from appointments and attending their extracurricular activities and sporting events.

After three years at Penn State, James was hired to lead the Business Administration department at Alderson-Broadus College in Philippi, West Virginia. Once the Spears moved to Philippi, only a short distance from Thelma's hometown of Grafton, she returned to work and committed her life to public health. She became a nursing supervisor at Broadus Hospital in the obstetrics ward. Thelma's daughter Carol volunteered as a candy striper in the hospital alongside her mother.

It was while working at Broadus Hospital and living in Philippi that Thelma began to explore additional ways to help her community. She saw that existing systems of medical outreach and care were inefficient. Thelma established and became the supervisor of the Public Home Health Department that served Braxton, Barbour, Tucker, and Upshur counties, providing health care to members of the community most in need, including the homebound and elderly. She devoted the rest of her professional life to caring for these vulnerable members of her community. Thelma's family speculates that she remembered her own nursing education as a gift from the state, and "paid it forward" throughout her life.

James was inspired by his wife's charitable work and her passion for nursing. Using his public administration education and political savvy, James supported Thelma's programs by taking positions on the Barbour County Planning Commission and the Barbour County Development Authority. He secured sizeable grants, including \$544,000 for the Chandler Wing at Broadus Hospital; \$889,000 toward Myers Hall of Science and Nursing at Alderson Broadus; \$88,000 for the creation of the Barbour County Home Health Agency; and \$990,000 for the Barbour County Home Health Agency's new building, among others. Governor Arch Moore attended the opening of one of Thelma's crowning achievements, the Barbour County Home Health Agency.

Thelma was also a charter member of the Women in Military Service at Arlington National Cemetery. She donated time and support to the Girl Scouts, Lions Club, and numerous civic organizations. Barbour County and its citizens held a banquet for the Spears in the mid-1980s, honoring them for their years of charitable service to the community. Thelma Spear's humble beginnings as a nurse—kickstarted by an act of charity by St. Joseph's Hospital five decades earlier—had blossomed into a life of enormous impact.

Thelma and James retired in the mid-1980's and moved to Spring Hill, Florida, to be closer to their children and grandchildren. In Florida, the Spears enjoyed retired life. The pair purchased a boat and fished together.

Thelma gardened, taking special care of irises that had been passed down from her mother. Thelma's children still have irises born from those bulbs. The flowers have been with the family for a century or more. The couple did not entirely give up their community activism and became involved with the Lions Club in Florida.

James passed away in 1993 and was interred in Florida National Cemetery, but Thelma enjoyed another two decades with her family. After a lifetime of community service and instilling in her children the responsibility for Americans to "get involved," Thelma passed away on January 2, 2015, at the age of 95. She was interred in the West Virginia National Cemetery in Pruntytown, mere miles from her hometown of Grafton.



ABOVE: Jim Spear and Thelma on an early date in California.  
BELOW: Thelma in dress whites.



**SOURCES** FULL BIBLIOGRAPHY TO BE INCLUDED IN FINAL VERSION

# SOURCES

## ABOUT THE PROJECT

Full bibliographies will be included in the final draft of each biography, available later in the summer of 2024.

**The West Virginia National Cemeteries Project** is a program of the West Virginia Humanities Council, funded in part by the Veterans Legacy Grant Program of the U.S. 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 Grafton, Taylor County, West Virginia.

As home to one of the nation's first National Cemeteries—founded shortly after the Civil War—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. Since 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.

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, Grafton High School, and University High School.

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