

2020 Veterans Day Essay Contest
Middle School Winner: Niamh Moreno

Why Luta Mae McGrath, “The First Lady of Ordnance,” Inspires Me



Luta Mae McGrath (1907-2016)



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When I think about service to my country, a veteran who inspires me is Luta Mae Cornelius McGrath who was known as “The First Lady of Ordnance.” Luta Mae McGrath joined the United States Army in 1943 to fight in World War II and she served for 17 years until she retired as a lieutenant colonel (LTC). When she died at her home in Virginia in 2016, she was 108 years old and one of the oldest female survivors of World War II and the Cold War. LTC McGrath was honored by the Commonwealth of Virginia in 2015, and to me her story is the perfect example of public service and courage and what women can accomplish.

LTC McGrath was born in Beattyville, Kentucky on November 21, 1907. Her father died when she was five years old, leaving her mother poor and raising three children. LTC McGrath lived in Beattyville for most of her childhood. She was a young woman when World War II began, and she enlisted in the Woman’s Army Auxiliary Corps in 1943.

In the Army, LTC McGrath was assigned to the Ordnance Corps which is the department that supports the development of weapons. She was first stationed in Texas, and in interviews stated that while she was usually treated with respect by the male soldiers some of them resented women taking their jobs. She worked in



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Texas for four years where she helped the Army produce the weapons that were used to fight in World War II.

In 1947, LTC McGrath was sent to Germany. She helped to coordinate the Berlin Airlift, which was a plan to help the section of Berlin that American troops occupied and that the Soviet Union blockaded. The Berlin Airlift was a complicated mission between the United States Army and United Kingdom Air Force to bring food, medicine, and other supplies to the troops and people in West Berlin. It allowed the Allied troops to remain in West Berlin even though they were outnumbered by Communist forces.

In Berlin, LTC McGrath met her husband, Thomas McGrath, who was also a United States Army officer. They were married in 1950 at Aberdeen Proving Ground in Maryland.

LTC McGrath had many other assignments in the Ordnance Corps and retired after 17 years as a lieutenant colonel which was the highest rank ever achieved by a woman at that time. She and her husband retired to Annandale, Virginia where they lived the rest of their lives. The two never had children, but LTC McGrath was very active in her community and in supporting the military. She worked for the Woman in Community Service group and the Army Ordnance community gave her the

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nickname “The First Lady of Ordnance.” LTC McGrath was also very religious and attended mass every day at Queen of Apostles Church in Alexandria.

I cannot imagine how frightening it must have been for LTC McGrath to join the Army at a time when the entire world was at war and very few women were able to join the military. Her service in Texas helped to develop the tanks and missiles that helped the United States win the war. Her service in Germany helped to fight the Soviet Union and prevent another war. She stayed in the Army for many years and proved her commitment to her country and fellow Americans.

Both my parents served in the United States Army in Iraq, and my mother together with veterans like LTC McGrath helped make it possible for women today to serve. LTC McGrath showed leadership and bravery, and her long life is one to be very proud of. I wish I could have interviewed LTC McGrath for this essay to learn more about her experience in the Army, but I visited her at Arlington National Cemetery, and left a flag at her grave to show my great respect for her life.





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