Seventy-seven women saved thousands of lives under enemy fire, survived three years as prisoners of war, and came home to a country that forgot their names.

They were called the Angels of Bataan—but history treated them like ghosts.

In December 1941, when Japan attacked the Philippines just hours after Pearl Harbor, 66 Army nurses and 11 Navy nurses found themselves on the front lines of World War II. They weren't supposed to be there. Military doctrine didn't envision women in combat zones. But war doesn't wait for doctrine to catch up.

Within weeks, Manila fell. The nurses evacuated to the Bataan Peninsula, where they set up field hospitals in the jungle—open-air wards with no walls, no protection, just mosquito nets and determination. Japanese bombers flew overhead daily. Artillery shells screamed through the trees. And still, the wounded kept coming.

Thousands of them.

The nurses worked 20-hour shifts in suffocating heat, performing surgeries under jungle canopies, treating soldiers for combat wounds, malaria, dysentery, and tropical diseases they'd never encountered in their training. Medical supplies dwindled. They sterilized bandages by boiling them. They rationed morphine until there was none left. They held dying men's hands when there was nothing else they could do.

One nurse later recalled: "We stopped thinking about comfort, about fear, about ourselves. There was always another soldier who needed us more than we needed sleep."

By April 1942, Bataan was collapsing. The nurses were evacuated to Corregidor, a fortified island in Manila Bay that was being bombed into rubble. They moved their hospital deep underground into the Malinta Tunnel—a dark, stifling labyrinth where they treated the wounded by flashlight while the island shook from constant bombardment above.

The air inside was thick and suffocating. Dust from explosions filtered down constantly. They could hear the war happening overhead, feel the concussive force of bombs landing closer and closer. On May 6, 1942, Corregidor fell.

The nurses were taken prisoner by Japanese forces. Seventy-seven women suddenly became prisoners of war—the largest group of American military women ever captured by an enemy.

They were transported back to Manila and imprisoned in various camps before being consolidated at Santo Tomas Internment Camp, a civilian prison that held over 3,000 POWs. The Navy nurses were later moved to Los Baños camp in May 1943.

Inside the camps, conditions were brutal. The Japanese provided starvation rations—as little as 700 calories per day, roughly a third of what an active adult needs. Prisoners grew gaunt and weak. Diseases spread rapidly: beriberi from vitamin deficiencies, dysentery from contaminated water, malaria from mosquitoes.

The nurses lost an average of 30% of their body weight. Their hair fell out. Their teeth loosened. Their bodies consumed themselves to survive.

But they never stopped being nurses.

Under the leadership of Captain Maude Davison for the Army nurses and Lieutenant Josie Nesbit for the Navy group, they maintained a disciplined medical unit inside the camps. They treated fellow POWs and civilian internees for the ravages of starvation and disease. They saved lives with almost no equipment, no medicine, and barely enough strength to stand.

When a prisoner developed beriberi and couldn't walk, the nurses fashioned crutches from bamboo. When someone contracted dysentery and faced deadly dehydration, they traded precious food rations for clean water. When fellow prisoners lost hope, the nurses reminded them that survival itself was an act of resistance.

One of the imprisoned nurses, Lieutenant Juanita Redmond, later wrote: "We were so hungry we dreamed about food constantly. But we never dreamed about leaving our patients."

For nearly three years, the Angels of Bataan endured. They watched fellow prisoners die from starvation and disease. They wondered if liberation would ever come. They struggled against despair with the same determination they'd shown in the jungle hospitals of Bataan.

And then, finally, American forces returned.

On February 3, 1945, the 1st Cavalry Division smashed through Japanese lines during the Battle of Manila and liberated Santo Tomas camp. The Army nurses stumbled into freedom, skeletal and weak but alive. All 66 of them had survived.

Three weeks later, on February 23, 1945, American paratroopers and Filipino guerrillas conducted a daring raid on Los Baños camp, rescuing over 2,000 prisoners including the 11 Navy nurses. It was one of the most successful rescue operations of the war.

All 77 nurses came home alive—a miraculous outcome given the conditions they'd endured.

They returned to a nation grateful for victory but largely uninterested in the specific stories of women's wartime service. Male soldiers received ticker-tape parades and front-page coverage. The nurses received quiet commendations and an expectation that they would return to normal life without complaint.

Most did. They went back to nursing, got married, raised families. They rarely spoke about what they'd experienced, even to their own children. Post-traumatic stress wasn't a recognized condition then, especially not for women. You were simply expected to move on.

For decades, the Angels of Bataan remained largely forgotten. History books focused on male soldiers, male generals, male heroics. The women who had performed surgery under fire, survived years of starvation, and maintained their humanity under impossible conditions were relegated to footnotes—if they were mentioned at all.

It wasn't until the 1980s and 1990s, when historians and journalists began seeking out surviving nurses to document their stories, that the full scope of their courage began to emerge. By then, many had already passed away, their stories lost forever.

The last surviving Angel of Bataan, Lourdes "Lulu" Arizala, died in 2015 at age 91. With her passing, a direct link to one of the most remarkable stories of World War II disappeared.

But their legacy deserves to live on.

The Angels of Bataan proved that courage doesn't require a weapon. That heroism can look like continuing to care for others when you're barely surviving yourself. That strength isn't about physical power—it's about refusing to abandon your principles even when abandoning them would be easier.

Seventy-seven women faced impossible circumstances and all 77 survived. They saved thousands of lives while risking and nearly losing their own. They endured three years of captivity, starvation, and disease without breaking.

And then history almost forgot them completely.

Their story is a reminder that the most important acts of courage are often the quietest, and that the heroes we choose to remember say as much about us as they do about them. The Angels of Bataan deserved better than footnotes. They deserved to be remembered with the same reverence as any soldier who fought in World War II.

They were 77 women who refused to stop healing, even in hell.