A Handsome Woman

My Aunt Alice was what they sometimes used to call a “handsome” woman. I had never heard that expression applied to a female before her, but it was true in every sense of the word. Not a classic beauty, but a classy gal. When I think of her now, I think of her throaty voice, passion for turquoise jewelry from her beloved New Mexico and her role as reigning matriarch of our family.

What few of us knew about her until fairly recently; however, is that she was also a war hero with a sense of humor.

Aunt Alice was serving as a first lieutenant in the Army Nurse Corps in North Africa in 1943. She was scheduled to travel with General Mark Clark’s troops in the invasion of Italy, but at the last minute, Clark decided to put the nurses onboard a British ship, marked with a large red cross to indicate it served as a floating hospital. Clark assumed the nurses would be safer there.

Instead, as the ship pulled into Naples harbor, it was bombed. Evacuation began immediately, but some of the wounded were too ill to be moved in the lifeboats, so the ship’s commander asked for three medical personnel to volunteer to stay on board in the hopes that another hospital ship could reach them in time to help the most critical cases.

Aunt Alice stepped forward without hesitation.

As they waited for rescue with flames eating away at the ship, Aunt Alice described how a British sailor offered them each a cup of tea.

Her favorite part of the story was the sailor’s warning, “Be careful Mum, you don’t want to get burned... the tea is quite hot.”

At that point in the story, she always burst out laughing. Of course, Aunt Alice did survive and so did those wounded troops. She went on to earn her Victory Medal and came home to raise a family.

Now, when I think about what Aunt Alice did that day, I have to wonder if I could ever be that brave or that nonchalant about my accomplishments. I’m also reminded of one of the other definitions of handsome – a word that can also mean “to give freely.”

My aunt clearly knew both how to give of herself and how to savor life’s moments. We should all be so handsome.