Mary Amelia Vodopic, Lt Col, USAF BSC
Sponsor Profile:

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August 24, 1922 – October 8, 2022

Written by Ruby Bukovac Hardy, Mary’s sister, and alumni from the Occupational Therapy Department at Western Michigan University

Mary A. Vodopic was born on August 22, 1922, in Johnston City, Illinois, to Croatian immigrant parents. At the age of five, Mary’s father, a coal miner, died of the Black Lung Disease he contracted while working in the coal mine. Her mother later married John Bukovac, also a Croatian immigrant and coal miner. Ten years later, our parents moved the family to a small fruit farming community in Paw Paw in southwestern Michigan. Mary graduated from Paw Paw High School in 1939, after which she went to Temple University to work with a cousin in their student dining room. During this time, she noticed posters asking young people to join the Navy, so she decided to join. However, being underage, she had to receive our mother’s permission to join the military. Mother was reluctant (at first) to give permission but then realized it would be a wonderful experience for Mary as well as an income for her. Mary joined the Navy in March of 1943, and after basic training in New York, she received orders for Schofield Barracks (outside of Pearl Harbor), where she spent 2 years and 9 months. The war ended, and Mary received an honorable discharge from the Navy.

Shortly after returning home to Paw Paw, she enrolled at Western College (later known as Western Michigan University in Kalamazoo [WMU], Michigan) to study occupational therapy. Mary graduated from Western College (and occupational therapy) in 1947. She at once joined the Women Medical Specialist Corps of the Army and had numerous assignments throughout the United States. On the establishment of the United States Air Force, Mary and eight other Army occupational therapists were selected to transfer to the Air Force to set up occupational therapy departments in their medical centers and hospitals (see Figure 1). Mary’s last duty assignment in the Air Force was as Associate Chief Biomedical Science Corps for Occupational Therapists, Office of the USAF Surgeon General and Chief, Occupational Therapist at Wilford Hall Medical Center, Lackland AFB, Texas, San Antonio, TX. After 30 years of service, Mary retired in San Antonio, TX, where she had many close friends and enjoyed retired life attending the theater and dining out with her friends. She was a very caring, loving, giving, and social person who enjoyed her life. During her retirement, she took care of our widowed mother for several years.
During my years at Western College, Mary visited and recruited occupational therapy students into the Air Force Program, two of whom were my classmates: Donna Oldenburg Walters and Pat Gorham. This program allowed a student to join the Air Force at the rank of a 2nd Lieutenant in their senior year. They would receive base pay, and on completing their academic year and passing the National Registration Board, were to report to their first active-duty assignment.

Mary and I were one of many sister teams that studied occupational therapy and graduated from Western College (WMU). One such sister team was the Rooney girls from Kalamazoo. Mary Rooney had joined the Navy after graduating from WMU, and her sister, Pat, joined the Air Force several years after graduation. Pat was my sister’s classmate while they were both at WMU.

Mary Amelia Vodopic passed away peacefully on Saturday, October 8, 2022, at the impressive age of 100, at the Health Care Center, Army Residence Community in San Antonio, TX. Ironically, this was the same year WMU celebrated its 100th anniversary. Faculty from WMU’s occupational therapy department visited Mary earlier that year as the AOTA conference was held in San Antonio. (See Figures 1, 2, and 3.)

Military honors took place at the memorial service to honor Mary’s many years of service dedicated to the United States Navy, Army, and Air Force. Memorial contributions may be made to the Mary A. Vodopic and Ruby Bukovac Hardy Endowed Scholarship in Occupational Therapy at Western Michigan University. If anyone so wishes to contribute to the scholarship, the link is: https://secure.wmualumni.org/s/give?funds=EVOD.

Figure 1.
Mary transferred from the Army to the Air Force to set up occupational therapy departments in their medical centers and hospitals.

Figure 2.
Mary on her 100th Birthday.
Figure 3.
Mary visiting with WMU Occupational Therapy Department Chair and OJOT Managing Editor, Nancy Hock.

Figure 4.
Mary visiting with WMU Occupational Therapy Professor, Debra Lindstrom.

Figure 5.
Mary pictured (left to right) with her brother, Martin, niece, Janice Bukovac Phelps, and sister, Ruby Bukovac Hardy.

Figure 6.
A photo of Mary's parents' wedding celebration (John, Mary and Sadie Bukovac, and wedding party behind).