

A TFRW HEROINE: Marie Speer, founder Gold Star Wives
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Gone were the dreams for so many of us back in the World War II years....dreams shattered by the dreaded telegram from the War Department "We regret to inform you that your husband. . ." There was no chaplain or casualty assistance officer to break the news; just a Western Union messenger with a telegram. My husband, Eddie Jordan, a New York City native who had never held a gun in his life and whose idea of "roughing it" was a Sunday afternoon stroll in Central Park, had been drafted in January 1944, went to Alabama for basic training, and by summer was marching through France as a replacement in the 29th Infantry Division, which had sustained heavy casualties on D-Day.

After intense combat in Belgium and Holland, Eddie was killed by mortar fire in Alsdorf, Germany on November 25, 1944, just two weeks after our son, little Eddie, had his first birthday party, dressed in his soldier suit. Then came the visits, phone calls, Masses in his memory; so many loving gestures by family and friends. His picture and story appeared in a New York City newspaper. I received a phone call from a lady who had been in one of my classes at New York University who told me that her husband had been killed, also in Germany. Then other women who lost their husbands called. The term "support group" did not exist at that time, but thinking back, that is what was developing.

Four of us met in my apartment on April 5, 1945, and we decided to reach out to others who might like to join us in forming an organization. We jotted down some "purposes" and decided upon an emblem for a letterhead announcing a general meeting in late May. Our purposes and our logo, a gold star with a purple heart bar across the star, are still in use, the same as on that day in April 1945, although our name has changed. We used "World War II" in our name back then. never thinking that there would be other wars to come. Wasn't that the war to end all wars? It was not many years until we realized we were too optimistic, and we changed our name to Gold Star Wives of America, Inc., to include widows (or widowers) of any member of the military who died while serving in any armed conflict, in peacetime, or who died as a result of military service..

On April 12, 1945, just one week after our first get-together, President Franklin D. Roosevelt died. As Commander-in-Chief of the Army and Navy, his widow, Eleanor, was eligible for membership in our organization. Although her principal residence was still in Hyde Park, she kept an apartment in New York City, so we telephoned her and asked if she would like to join. In the months that followed she attended several meetings at the Governor Clinton Hotel and was helpful in obtaining speakers on housing, child care, employment, and other issues important to young widows struggling to live, and raise children, on the small pittance they received from the Government. .She invited some of our officers to Hyde Park several times during the summer for lunch and "think sessions" to arrange our programs, and entertained a busload of our members, with their children, at a picnic at her grandchildren's playground. But perhaps her greatest "boost" was a few articles she wrote in her MY DAY column, which appeared in papers all over the country. We soon heard from groups of widows from as far away as San Francisco, Minneapolis, Boston, Miami, and smaller cities in between, who were starting similar groups.

By December 1945, we felt we were definitely here to stay and we filed incorporation papers in the State of New York, with Eleanor Roosevelt, of course, as one of our fifteen original incorporators. We were later granted a Federal Charter by the United States Congress, Public Law 497.

A few of us made trips to Washington, D.C. to see if we could entice the federal government to be a little more helpful to the survivors of deceased servicemen. While the people in D.C. were polite and encouraging, it didn't take long to get the message that to actually accomplish something would take many, many trips to Washington, and careful diligence to make certain that our needs were listened to, and acted upon. And so, I and little Eddie moved to Washington to be "on the job" every day. There was one congressman in his first term in office who took a particular interest in our group as well as in benefits for veterans. That young congressman was Olin Teague of College Station, Texas, a much-decorated veteran who would later become chairman of the House Veterans Affairs Committee.

Today Gold Star Wives of America, Inc., has an office in Washington with an experienced, capable person in charge, plus an active volunteer Government Relations Committee. The number of members in the organization fluctuates, as World War II widows die, and widows of more recent conflicts take their place on the membership roles, but there are constantly over 10,000 members at any one time. World War II veterans are dying at the rate of 1500 a day, so it can be assumed that the widows of those who died as a result of service in World War II are dying at about the same rate.

To make sure that every member's wishes are heard, the country is divided into eight regions. Each region holds a conference in the spring, and the resolutions brought up at these conferences are sent forward to the national convention held each year in mid-July in various parts of the country. Texas is part of the South Central Region, and the conference this year will be held in April in El Paso, with the national convention in Omaha.

Members are encouraged to participate in community service projects, volunteer in veterans hospitals, participate in memorial services, and help to make, in any way possible, a better life for survivors of those who gave their lives in military service – ever mindful of one of their “purposes” recited at their meetings – *To safeguard and transmit to posterity the principles of justice, freedom, and democracy for which members of our armed services fought and died.*