



Canadian Nurses in Military Service 1895 – Present



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Acknowledgement

Women have cared for wounded soldiers throughout Canada's wartime history. "Nursing Sisters" carried out official duties with the military during the North West Rebellion, the South African War, the First and Second World Wars, the Korean War, and the Afghanistan Conflict.



Figure 1: Canadian nurses in military service 1885 – present (L-R) Northwest Rebellion, South African (Boer) War, World War One, World War Two, Decades of Change and Afghanistan

We would like to acknowledge the contribution of all nurses who have and continue to care for Canadian troops both at home and overseas, particularly the following whose leadership was instrumental in evolving the Canada's military nursing service:

- Matron Georgina Fane Pope
- Matron Margaret Clothilde MacDonald
- Colonel Elizabeth Lawrie Smellie
- Emma Florence Pense
- Lieutenant Colonel Hallie Sloan

North West Campaign 1885 – 1889

In 1885, Canadian nurses were requested by the military to provide professional nursing care to the sick and wounded in the North West Campaign.



Figure 2: Frontline medical care during North West Campaign

At first, the nursing needs identified were for home duties such as making bandages and preparing medical and food supplies. Members of societies, such as the Red Cross, were advised to volunteer as nurses should the need arise. It soon became apparent that more direct participation by nurses was needed if the military was to provide effective medical field treatment.

A total of five nurses, under the direction of Nurse Kate Millar from the Winnipeg General Hospital arrived in Moose Jaw and took over the acute care

of the wounded. A week later, Reverend Mother Hanna Grier Coome and three other sisters from the Sisterhood of St John the Devine in Toronto arrived in Saskatoon where they established a convalescent hospital for the recovering wounded.

Although their tour of duty lasted only four to six weeks, these women played a vital role in providing treatment and care that lead to a speeder and more recovery



Figure 3: Medical staff outside Moose Jaw field hospital during North West Campaign. Pictured are both lay nurses and religious sisters, the latter were mainly engaged in the provision of convalescent care

South African War (Second Boer War) 1889 – 1902

Following the formation of the Canadian Army Medical Department in June of 1899, four nurses accompanied Canada's first contingent to South Africa. For five months after their arrival, with Georgina Pope as senior sister, the group served at British hospitals just north of Cape Town.

In 1902 Pope returned to South Africa a second time as senior sister in charge of a second group of eight nurses, four of whom had served in the first episode of the war, this time as full members of the new Canadian military nursing service with the honorary rank, pay and allowances of an army lieutenant. Along with the usual battlefield-inflicted injuries, the ravages of disease compounded the horrors of war. The hot climate and a lack of sanitary facilities or adequate antiseptic conditions led to outbreaks of disease and infection.

Before the war was over on May 31, 1902, eight Canadian Nursing Sisters and more than 7,000 Canadian soldiers had volunteered for service in South Africa.



Figure 4: Nursing Sister Georgina Pope in South Africa circa 1899. Pope later was instrumental in the creation of the Canadian Army Medical Corps nursing service. Source: TBC



Figure 5: Miss Minnie Affleck, Nursing Sister, 1st Canadian Contingent, South African War, 1899-1902. Source: Library and Archives Canada

First World War 1914 – 1918

More than 3,000 nurses served in the Canadian Army Medical Corps (CAMC), including 2,504 overseas. Nicknamed “Bluebirds” because of their blue uniforms, white aprons and white veils, Canada’s Nursing Sisters saved lives by assisting with medical operations and by caring for convalescing soldiers.

All Canadian military nurses were graduates of accredited schools of nursing, were between the ages of 21 and 38, single and without dependents. All were volunteers and there was never a shortage of candidates. In January 1915, for instance, there were 2,000 applicants for 75 positions.



Figure 7: Canadian Army Medical Corps nursing sister taking a break at No 2 General Hospital Le Treport, France

CAMC nurses served in thirty military hospitals and casualty clearing stations in France, Belgium, Greece, Malta and Eastern

Mediterranean. As patients arrived by truck or rail, the nurses were among the first to meet wounded soldiers, cleaning wounds and offering comfort. They assisted in surgery and often had primary responsibility for cleaning post-surgical wounds and watching for secondary infections.



Figure 6: WWI Nursing Sister Ward Dress



Figure 8: Nursing Sister providing bedside



Figure 9: A Nursing Sister assisting a doctor in a ward at the tent hospital. She is holding out a tray for him to take instruments.

Founding Members Canadian Army Nursing Service

Georgina Fane Pope 1862 - 1938

Served In:

Boer War 1899-1900

1902 Second Tour (senior
Nurse)

Canadian Army Nursing Service
1908

WWI – Matron Canadian Army
Medical Corps

Honours & Awards

Queen Victoria's South African
Medal

Royal Red Cross (South Africa – 1st
Canadian Nurse to be awarded this
medal)



Margaret Clothilde MacDonald 1876 - 1948

Served In:

Spanish American War 1898

Boer War 1900 – 1901

Canadian Army Nursing Service
1901 – 1908

WWI Canadian Army Medical Corps
Matron-in-Chief 1st Contingent
Canadian Expeditionary Force

Honours & Awards

Royal Red Cross 2nd Class

Mentioned in Dispatches

Second World War 1939 – 1945

In September 1939 Canada again found itself thrust into a world conflict and again the Nursing Sisters answered the call of duty at home and abroad serving in England, France, Belgium, The Netherlands, Italy, Algeria, Hong Kong and South Africa caring for Canadian troops, local civilians and prisoners of war.

While blue dresses, white aprons and veils continued to be worn by Nursing Sisters, on landing in Northwest Europe they wore battledress similar to all other Canadian soldiers

In addition to serving on land, RCAMC Nursing Sisters also served aboard hospital ships returning patients to Canada



Figure 10: RCAMC Nursing Sisters in battledress in landing craft Normandy



Figure 12: Nursing Sister assisting surgeon in operating theatre at 6 Casualty Clearing Station (CCS), a basic hospital for surgery and short-term convalescence, in support of the First Canadian Army, then stationed in England.



Figure 11: RCAMC Nursing Sisters and other medical staff on board hospital ship Letitia

By war's end 3,656 Nursing Sisters had served with the Royal Canadian Army Medical Corps of which 17 lost their lives.

Early Matrons

Royal Canadian Army Medical Corps

Elizabeth Lawrie Smellie

1884-1968

Trained at Johns Hopkins School of Nursing Baltimore, Maryland

Red Cross Nurse Prior to Joining CAMC 1915 London

Served at Shorncliffe Army Camp & No 2 Canadian General Hospital Treport, France

Appointed Acting Matron of CAMC 1917

WW2 Matron in Chief RCAMC Nursing Service 1940-1945

Instrumental in the formation of the Canadian Women's Army Corps and subsequently, the formation of RCNMC.

Col Smellie also taught Public Health Nursing at McGill University in Montreal for a time and was Chief

Superintendent of the Victorian Order of Nurses from 1924-1947

Honours and Awards

Royal Red Cross, 1914-1915 Star, War & Victory Medal 1917

Commander of the Order of the British Empire 1934

WW2 Volunteer and War Medal

George V Jubilee Medal

Centennial Medal

Mentioned in Dispatches 1916 & 1917



Figure 14: Colonel Elizabeth Lawrie Smellie C.B.E., R.R.C., L.L.D. CWM

Source: Beaverbrook Collection of War Art Canadian War Museum

Emma Florence Pense

1884 – 1965

Served In:

WWI England and France

Appointed Acting Matron CAMC 1917

WWII Matron-in-Chief Overseas 1939-1942

Honours & Awards

Royal Red Cross 2nd Class February 1917

1914 Star February 1917

Royal Red Cross 1st Class June 1918

War & Victory Medal 1918

War & Volunteer Medal WWII



Figure 13: Emma Pense, Matron-in-chief, England of Royal Canadian Army Medical Corps. Source National Portrait Gallery, London

Korean War 1950 – 1953

26,000 members of the Canadian Military participated in this conflict over the three-year duration, 60 of which were nurses from the Canadian Army Medical Corps. Wounded and ill soldiers were treated at the British Commonwealth Hospital in Kure, Japan where the nurses were stationed. A second hospital was established near Seoul in 1952 and the 25th Field Dressing Station near Tokchong in 1953. Both these treatment areas were located in less than ideal locations with less than ideal living conditions. They did however facilitate faster evacuation of the wounded to the hospital in Kure.

At the end of the war, the Air Evacuation of Canadian soldiers back to Canada was undertaken, as a joint effort with



Figure 15: Royal Canadian Air Force nursing sister chatting with a patient from the Korean War as they take off for Canada



Figure 16: RCAMC Nursing Sister on the steps of the British Commonwealth Hospital in Kure, Japan

both Canadian and American pilots participating in addition to RCAF flight nurses. The journey home began in Japan then to Hickman Field (Hawaii), then Travis Air Force Base (California), then McCord Field (Washington) and finally to DVA (Department of Veterans Affairs) Hospitals in Canada.

Decades of Change 1968 – 2015

The unification of the Canadian Armed Forces took place on 1 February 1968, when the Royal Canadian Navy, Canadian Army, and Royal Canadian Air Force were merged to form the Canadian Armed Forces with common army-style ranks and rifle green uniforms.

The Royal Canadian Army Medical Corps had previously combined with the Royal Canadian Navy and Royal Canadian Air Force medical branches to become the Canadian Forces Medical Service.

In October 2013 the Canadian Forces Medical Service was renamed the Royal Canadian Medical Service

Post-unification nurse's work dress uniform became a common white nurses' uniform and generic white cap and the term "Nursing Sister" was no longer used. Gone was the "Blue Bird" uniform, apron and white veil they had worn for over six decades. The white work dress, less the



Figure 18: A Canadian nursing officer serving with the Disaster Assistance Response Team (DART) treats a disaster survivor.

cap, continued in wear until mid the 1990's when inpatient care in Canadian Forces medical facilities ended. Today nursing officers maintain the clinical skills required for operational deployment by being attached to civilian hospitals where they wear burgundy scrubs. When operationally deployed they wear the Canadian Disruptive Pattern (CADPAT) camouflage uniform, with the jacket generally replaced with a burgundy scrub top in a clinical setting.



Figure 17: CFMS nursing officers work dress

Afghanistan 2001 – 2014

During the Afghanistan mission close to one thousand Canadian Forces Health Services (CFHS) personnel, including 200 nursing officers and civilian contractors deployed and provided exemplary healthcare for Canadian soldiers, coalition members, and Afghan civilians.



Figure 19: Canadian nurse on the job in Kandahar Afghanistan

The CFHS deployment was part of the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) contribution to the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) mission. The Health Service Support Unit, based in Camp Julian near Kabul, was classified as a Role 2 health services facility within the overarching health service plans for the Kabul area.

In October 2005, the operational plan changed and was highlighted with the teardown of Camp Julian and the move to Kandahar Airfield (KAF) where Canada assumed the lead



Figure 20: Aeromedical evacuation team in action. in patient transfer to the Landstuhl Regional Medical Center,

of the Role 3 Multinational Medical Unit (R3 MMU) until October 2009. Under the Canadian command, the R3 MMU earned the reputation as one of the best trauma hospitals in the world. Patients requiring ongoing specialized care were evacuated to the US Regional Medical Centre in Landstuhl Germany.

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