

Canadian Women at War 1914-1918

By Curator of History Dr. Lorne Hammond

A mourning Mother Canada looks out on the fields from the Vimy Monument, the tragic symbol of the cost of World War I on so many families. At home, women worked in industry, food production, education and training, and for the Red Cross. War also brought the vote for most, but not all, British Columbian women in 1917. Less well known is the story of British Columbian women who went overseas and served, and in some cases were wounded or killed in the theatre of war.

More than 2,500 Canadian nurses served overseas during the war. Most were young graduates but were also experienced senior volunteers. On August 21, 1915, 72 women marched down Government Street in the uniform of the Canadian Army Medical Corps. These young nurses were graduates of programs at the Royal Jubilee Hospital, St. Joseph's Hospital, Vancouver General Hospital and St. Paul's Hospital in Vancouver. Some volunteers came from hospitals as far away as Winnipeg. Already professional nurses, they then went through military training at Macaulay Point camp in Victoria, where they learned how to march and to treat injuries specific to war. Each held the rank of Lieutenant, to give them official rank above wounded soldiers.

Travel overseas was not without risk. One BC nurse died in the sinking of the Lusitania. From 1914 to 1918 dozens of ships carrying Red Cross supplies, wounded soldiers or floating hospitals were sunk. Fourteen Canadian nurses died when the hospital ship Llandovery Castle was torpedoed in 1917. Other nurses died at the front, in air raids or during the shelling of field hospitals, and some were gassed. They too are found in war graves in England, France, Salonika, Cairo and South Africa. Our Royal BC Museum and Archives collections keep their memories alive.

For every nurse who lost her life, many others were wounded. One such nurse was Gladys Muriel Carvolth, whose uniform we have. Gladys was 31 when she signed up in Esquimalt to join the No. 5 Overseas General Hospital in July 1915. She made arrangements to send her pay to her mother in Chilliwack and left for the war. She became an official casualty two years later with bronchial pneumonia in both lungs. After convalescing in England she returned to serve in the No. 5 Canadian Field Hospital in Salonika, Greece. Her health problems returned and she spent part of 1919 in a veterans' ward in British Columbia. Gladys married George Stewart in June of 1919, was demobilized that November and died in Saanich at the age of 93.



Nursing Sister's uniform worn by Murney Pugh during World War I. Credit: RBCM 964.101.1a-g

Ellanore Jane Parker was one of the first nurses injured by gas, inhaling it while treating soldiers during a poison gas attack. Her injuries were permanent. For the rest of her life she was confined to bed as an invalid. She made a living as a writer of novels and wrote a column for the *Los Angeles Times*. Until her death she was cared for by a nurse she met in France, Murney May Pugh. Murney, one of five members of her family who served, typed up Parker's drafts and cared for her until her death. In 1965 Murney sent Provincial Archivist Willard Ireland a small yellow trunk containing both nurses' uniforms, Ellanore's drafts, letters and a scrapbook of photographs of a nurse's life in the field hospitals. Today, because of her gift of memories, we can share those images with you.

There are other echoes of these nurses' lives in our collections. We have an artillery shell made into a trophy for the Nursing Sisters Foot Race at Salonika. That field hospital was paid for by British Columbian donations and staffed by BC nurses. We have a Christmas note to them from Premier Richard McBride, whose own sister served there, tending wounded from as far away as Gallipoli. These are just a few of the 2,500 Canadian women who served, who we remember today through our collections.

If you would like to learn more of their stories I highly recommend Maureen Duffus' book *Battlefront Nurses in World War I*. For more about Ellanore Parker and Murney Pugh, see *look* in this Learning Portal *pathway*.