

RNAO REMEMBERS



Region 10 members, including regional representative Carmen Rodrigue (far right), thank veteran nursing sisters at Oct. 15 event.

RNs planned and participated in Remembrance Day events across Ontario this year, representing the profession and saluting veteran and peacekeeping nurses for their work at home and abroad.

RNs GATHER IN OTTAWA TO PAY TRIBUTE TO COLLEAGUES AND FRIENDS

By Anne Gilchrist, RN, MSc(A), and Bonnie Hall, RN, MScN, GNC(c)

Nursing sister Pauline Flynn recounts one experience she had during the Second World War as though it happened just yesterday. She was working in a military hospital in England when a young soldier came in for care. She looked into his eyes and saw a little boy who was just old enough to learn to shave. He couldn't have been more than 18. Flynn says she will never forget the pain in his young eyes when he learned both of his legs would be amputated...but she held his hand and nursed him through it all.

This story of nursing care in trying times was just one of 20 shared by nurses at a Remembrance Day event hosted by RNAO's region 10 on October 15 in Ottawa.

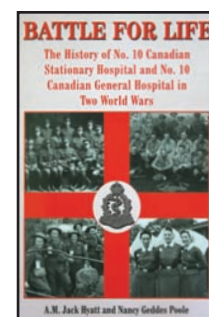
The day began with a candle-lighting ceremony and a moment of silence in remembrance of those nursing sisters who have passed away. All in attendance then heard about the rich careers of the 20 nursing sisters who so graciously shared their time and their experiences with us.

Retired Lieutenant Colonel Hallie Sloan was on hand to deliver a colorful history of their organization. To connect nursing of the past with nursing of the future, RN Suzanne Barnett was also invited to share the results of her RNAO advanced clinical practice fellowship in a long-term care psychiatric facility.

It was an honour to spend a few hours with these veterans who have contributed so profoundly to the health of Canadians. We all felt proud to be in the same profession as these amazing nursing leaders: our beloved nursing sisters. **RN**

FORGOTTEN HEROES RECEIVE RECOGNITION IN PRINT

Two little known south-western Ontario military hospitals and the hard-working nurses in their employ are featured in a *Laurier Centre for Military Strategic and Disarmament Studies* book entitled *Battle for Life* (www.canadianmilitaryhistory.com). No. 10 Canadian Stationary Hospital and No. 10 Canadian General Hospital served during the First and Second World Wars. According to RN Joan MacDermid, a retired nurse who coordinates the archives at Stratford General Hospital, neither hospital has received much attention in the history books. *Battle for Life* recognizes each hospital's important place in history by offering stories



of staff and surviving patients, MacDermid says. The book also features interviews with nurses about their experiences while at war. **RN**



RNAO REMEMBERS VETERAN AND PEACEKEEPING NURSES AT TORONTO'S OLD CITY HALL CENOTAPH

Executive Director Doris Grinspun represented RNAO at Toronto's Old City Hall Cenotaph on Nov. 11, laying a wreath in memory of Canada's nursing veterans and peacekeepers. RNAO was one of 109 participants at the event, which was organized to pay tribute to all men and women who have supported Canada's war efforts. The federal government designated 2005 – the 60th anniversary of the end of the Second World War – the Year of the Veteran.

DID YOU KNOW?

- During the First World War, 3,141 Canadian nurses volunteered their services. By the end of the war, 46 lost their lives: six killed or mortally wounded; 15 lost at sea (including 14 who died when their hospital ship was torpedoed); 15 died of disease; seven died after returning to Canada; and three in the deliberate bombing of a hospital in France.
- The only Canadian nurse to perish due to enemy action during the Second World War was a navy sister who died following more than two hours on a life boat after the sinking of the SS Caribou off the coast of Newfoundland.
- Two Canadian nursing sisters, Kay Christie of Toronto and May Waters of Winnipeg, were the first and only Canadian nursing sisters to become prisoners of war. After two years in captivity in Hong Kong, they were repatriated to Canada.
- After the First and Second World Wars, nursing sisters continued to serve in the armed forces. Nursing Officers, as they are now called, have served in the Gulf War, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Rwanda and Somalia.

Source: Veterans Affairs Canada, www.vac-acc.gc.ca

RN remembers mission to Sicily, reunion with brother

NAME: BETTY BROWN

OCCUPATION: RETIRED NURSING SISTER

HOME TOWN: OTTAWA, ONTARIO

Why military nursing?

Betty (Nicolson) Brown had just graduated and started work as an OR nurse at Winnipeg General Hospital in the early 40s when a surgeon from the army barracks at Fort Osborne walked into the hospital in search of new nursing recruits. At only 23, and still too young to go overseas, Brown was afraid the war would be over before she had a chance to serve her country. She realized this was her chance, and jumped at the opportunity to enroll. It was a job that made perfect sense to Brown, whose father, brother and two sisters served in the First World War.

By 1942, Brown was on her way to a Canadian Red Cross Hospital in England. She was there for a year before beginning her journey to the battlefields. "In the spring of '43, we thought something was in the wind because we started training," she says of the first signs of a secretive mission to the Mediterranean. "We went on long marches, had gas drills, and started learning tropical medicine."

Sure enough, the hospital was preparing

to leave for Liverpool in June. In the history books, Brown's hospital is referred to as "the first hospital of British and allied armies to make a beach landing in an army invasion."

And what a landing it was.

Ready for the toils of war, 50 nurses, a matron, and 24 medical officers poured onto just one of the many ships headed to Sicily that summer. They sailed to Algiers, docked for the night, and then headed to Augusta Beach to land. That's when the German Army started to attack. "All the nursing sisters were given life jackets and went below," Brown recounts. "We were fortunate, we weren't hit, but our supply ship beside us was hit and it went down."

Amid the chaos, the nursing sisters rappelled down the side of the ship, each clad in their trademark navy blue skirt, blouse, tie, fedora hat, stockings, and shoes. "We never, ever dreamt we would be on a boat in a convoy and going over to land with troops," Brown says, adding the landing officers on shore were "aghast when they saw nursing sisters coming off the ship."

Responsibilities

Once on shore, the hospital took over a building not far from the harbour. It was a small space and cots lined the inside and outside walls of the facility. Brown remembers that although the German Army continued to bomb the harbour, and soldiers on the



RNAO'S PERTH CHAPTER TO CONTINUE TRADITION IN HONOUR OF WWI NURSE

It's been almost 90 years since 33-year-old RN Elsie Gertrude Ross succumbed to pneumonia, but she still has at least one admirer.

Doug Johnson, a 79-year-old Southampton man whose father served during the First World War, has laid flowers on Ross' grave for the last three years, hoping this small token of respect will remind people of her important nursing work.

Johnson never knew Ross, but while he was growing up, his father often talked about Ross as the first Toronto Division nurse ever to be given a full military funeral, complete with a procession of officers carrying her casket through an honour guard.

According to a death notice in the *Toronto Daily Star* in 1916, Ross' funeral was attended by about 50 war-scarred heroes.

outside cots would be hit by shrapnel from the exploding shells, the greatest flux of patients were suffering from malaria and dysentery. Soldiers were also treated for post-traumatic stress disorder, or shell shock as it was known during the war. As an OR nurse, Brown was involved in all the surgical procedures at the hospital, treating burns and injuries from explosions. She remembers when penicillin was first introduced, and the profound effect that had on the care of the soldiers. "We did what we could with what we had," she remembers of the first days in Sicily without their supplies. It was difficult but she says they were fortunate enough to find a cache of German supplies left behind by the retreating army.

Challenges

Brown says her most vivid and troubling memory is one of a Sicilian man who died while plowing his land. This first and most troubling exposure to death came when she and the other staff were setting up supplies in the OR and heard the sounds of wailing getting closer and closer to the hospital doors. When they looked to see where the noise was coming from, they saw a donkey cart surrounded by mourning, screaming Sicilians who were hoping for help to save a man who had run over a land

"Many of the veterans hobbled behind the gun carriage on crutches, while others trudged along with the aid of a stick," the newspaper reported.

"What they must have thought of her...these guys came out, injured, in the cold, to walk with her," Johnson said. "That woman must have been something special."

RNAO's Perth chapter agrees, and will take over the tradition for Johnson.

"By laying flowers on Ross' grave, we're honouring the sacrifices of all nurses who contributed to the war efforts," Perth executive member Janet Heinbuch says, admitting she first heard about Ross when an article about Johnson appeared in her local newspaper. "I brought (the clipping) to the next executive meeting and we all agreed this would be a great way to honour all nurses in Perth County." **RN**



Photos from the 40s show Brown at work (top) and with fellow RNs in men's fatigues after their uniforms sank to the bottom of the ocean.

mine. "We realized there was nothing we could do," Brown remembers. "That was the first awful sight that I had seen there."

Memories of a job well done

In many ways, the tragedies of war affected Brown on a personal level, especially when she found out her 18-year-old brother, a fighter pilot, was shot down over the desert by enemy fire while Brown was training in England. She would later find out by telegraph that he had been found and taken to safety by Arabs in the desert. His rescuers took him to their tent, dressed him in Arab clothes, darkened his face, and moved him back to the allied forces over the span of a one-week period.

"One day I was leaving the OR and I always walked through the ward to talk to the boys before I left. I saw this young air force guy and I went over to him; he had just arrived from the desert," Brown recounts. "I said to this fellow, I have a brother in the air force and he was with the

450 squadron in the desert. He said to me 'the 450 squadron isn't in the desert, they're here in Sicily.'"

Brown was ecstatic, and later found out her brother was staying a short distance from the hospital. "I was absolutely thrilled. I couldn't believe it," she says, her voice cracking with emotion. Later that night she was sitting on her cot, sewing, when one of the nurses came into the

room and yelled from the opposite end: "Your brother's downstairs."

"I jumped off my cot, threw the scissors and ran down the corridor," Brown says. "There were these wide stairs and the guards were at the bottom of the stairs at a table to one side. I saw Donald at the bottom of the steps, covered in dust, with shorts on, and desert boots up to his knees and an Aussie hat because he was with an Australian air force unit. I got about six steps down and I jumped. I remember one of the guards at the table saying 'oh, it's alright...it's her brother.'"

Future plans

This year has been a busy one for Brown. She was selected last spring to represent the Canadian Nursing Sisters at the 60th anniversary of D-Day on Juno Beach. She joined then Governor General Adrienne Clarkson and the Prime Minister and his wife for a one-week visit with dignitaries from around the world.

"I'm very proud of all those girls (nursing during the war). It was incredible," she says, adding, "I am really proud of all the young men who gave the ultimate sacrifice. I get a really warm feeling when I think about all our boys."

Brown plans to continue her 11-year tradition of volunteering at Canada's war museum, where she talks to visitors about her experiences.

There are no signs this 88-year-old veteran is slowing down. And the requests keep coming. In early November she was invited to drop the puck at an Ottawa Senators hockey game.

"When I was first married and living in Ottawa, nobody even knew I was a nursing sister because we never talked about what we did during the war," Brown says. "I'm so happy that people have taken such an interest in the history of our nursing sisters." **RN**