



## CANADA'S NURSING SISTERS 1914-1918

Although female nurses had been employed by the military during the North West Rebellion of 1885 the Canadian Army Nursing Service was only officially organized in 1901. On the outbreak of the First World War in August, 1914, only five nursing sisters were serving in the Permanent Force, with a further eighty as part-time members of the Militia.

When the order to mobilize was received by the Matron of the Canadian Army Medical Corps, Margaret Macdonald, in September 1914, a frenzy of recruiting and selection took place to meet the requirements of the Canadian Expeditionary Force. Less than a month later Matron Macdonald and one hundred nurses landed at Plymouth, England. Initially these nurses were billeted at St. Thomas Hospital in London but in November, thirty-four of them, under Matron Ridley, were posted to France for duty in No. 2 Stationary Hospital. The remainder of the nurses stayed in England to work in other military hospitals.

On November 4, 1914 Margaret Macdonald was appointed Matron-in-Chief and granted the rank of Major. This gave her the distinction of being the first woman in the British Empire to be granted this rank. It should also be mentioned that the Canadian nursing sisters were the only ones to hold military rank and be under military control, unlike those serving with other armies.

A second group of twenty Canadian nurses was sent to France in November 1914. They were attached to British Stationary Hospitals. Nurses from both these groups became eligible for the 1914 Star, for which very few Canadians qualified.



As the war progressed more nurses were recruited and sent overseas to staff the growing number of medical facilities being set up by the Canadian army, both in England and France.

No. 1 Stationary Hospital, accompanied by No. 1 Canadian Casualty Clearing Station, had been sent to France in February and these were followed by No. 2 Canadian General Hospital in March. In May 1915, No. 1 Canadian General Hospital was ordered to France. This hospital remained three years at Etaples, until it was forced to move to a safer spot at Trouville, due to repeated aerial bombings, which claimed the lives of staff and patients alike.

In August 1915, nursing sisters were sent to Africa to work in conditions that were considered to be the worst in any in the war. The Canadian nurses were part of No. 1, No. 3, and No. 5 (later to become No. 7) Stationary Hospitals. No. 5 Hospital was set up on the outskirts of Cairo and No 1 and No. 3 were sent to the Greek island of Lemnos.

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In April 1916, No. 3 Stationary Hospital was transferred from Lemnos to Boulogne, France. By this time there were nine units of the Canadian Army Medical Corps in France and Belgium in which nursing sisters were employed. In addition to those mentioned above, No. 4 Stationary (which became No. 8 General), No. 1, No. 2 and No. 3 Casualty Clearing Stations were now in operation.

By the end of the war in 1918 a total of 16 Canadian General Hospitals, 10 Stationary Hospitals and 4 Casualty Clearing Stations had been set up and staffed with Canadian nursing sisters. A total of 3141 nursing sisters were enrolled in the Canadian Army Medical Corps during the First World War, of which 2504 served overseas. By this time the nurses had been nicknamed "bluebirds" as they wore bright blue cotton uniforms for hospital duty.

During the First World War Canadian nursing sisters served in Britain, France, Greece, Malta and Egypt, while the Nursing Service operated as an integral part of the Military medical

services. Nursing sister casualties included; six killed, six wounded, 15 drowned by enemy action (the result of the sinking of the hospital ship *Llandovery Castle*), and 18 dead from disease. They received 328 decorations, 169 were mentioned in dispatches, and 76 were brought to the notice of the Secretary of State for War.

Perhaps their greatest accomplishment was the undying gratitude of the thousands they saved and the realization that military nurses were capable of playing a significant role in future conflicts.

**Further Reading;**

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