Commemorating the 100th anniversary of World War One

This newsletter commemorates the role played by nurses who served in World War One, the Great War. As we remember the fallen, we also remember with gratitude and pride our forebears who served in hospitals near the front line, across Europe and the dominions, as well as back home in Blighty. It has been said that nurses fought two battles during 1914-1918; one for King and country and one for nurse registration. They provided exemplary care in often difficult conditions, adapting their practice to deal with new medical and surgical techniques that developed in response to the horrific injuries and wounds in a war that killed, maimed and injured servicemen on an industrial scale.

Highlights of this edition include Dr Anne Cameron’s article on the archives held at the RCN, showing how Beatrice Bowman encouraged soldiers in her care to record their experiences of war in an album. Our Chair, Dr Claire Chatterton, gives us a fascinating insight into how National Trust property, Dunham Massey, has been transformed back into Stamford Military Hospital. Rosemary Cook’s article shows how Queen’s National Institute (QNI) nurses worked in territorial hospitals, caring for the casualties of war across Europe too, facing the danger of being torpedoed at sea.

RCN Congress and other events

Committee members have been busy supporting WW1 nursing events across the UK. This includes WW1 medical matters on 9 May at Chalfont St Giles, where Professor Christine Hallett and Rosemary Cook gave presentations. Dr Claire Chatterton, Diane Yarwood and Dr Johns Adams presented a fringe event at Congress – see the report in this issue. At Congress, the Monica Baly Awards were presented and details about the winners will be in our next newsletter. A meeting was also held at Congress between Claire Chatterton and Cris Allen of the RCN Mental Health Forum to consider joint work. We will be reporting on this in our next newsletter.

The HoNS has organised a series of events to mark the anniversary of WW1 including a study afternoon, Frontline nursing; then and now, which takes place at RCN HQ 14 October 2014, 1.30 to 4.30pm and costs £30. This celebrates the contemporary and historical work of the Defence Nursing Forum and the HoNS. Topics include casualty evacuation from WW1 to Afghanistan and from shell-shock to post-traumatic stress disorder. There are six extra events held jointly with RCN Library and Archives, including one to be hosted in the RCN Edinburgh office. Open to RCN members and the public, see http://www.rcn.org.uk/development/library_and_heritage_services/whats_on for full details.

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A fascinating album of WW1 recollections has been discovered among a box of un-catalogued documents in the RCN Archives’ storeroom. The album belonged to Chief Nurse and Superintendent of the US Navy Nurse Corps, Miss J. Beatrice Bowman (1881-1971), who was relieved from active service in the early months of the war in order to go to England with the American Red Cross.

By February 1915, Bowman was serving on Munsey Ward at the American Women’s War Hospital in Paignton, Devon. She invited the patients, many of whom were casualties from the British Expeditionary Force, to record something of their wartime experience in her album.

Unique and moving
Thirty-two men contributed letters, sketches or poems, in which they recall their preparations for departure from England; combat experience and life in the trenches, including the searing pain of trench foot; serving with a field ambulance; and the 1914 Christmas Day truce with the enemy.

Many also express their gratitude to ‘Sister Beatrice’ and the doctors and nurses of the American Women’s War Hospital for the kindness, attention and skilled treatment. This unique, moving and historically significant volume has now been fully catalogued and is available at the RCN Archives in Edinburgh (reference: C/760).

Another soldier’s contribution recording his terrifying experiences on the battlefield.
Sanctuary from the trenches

Dr Claire Chatterton

When I first moved to the North West 10 years ago, I became a volunteer at Dunham Massey Hall, spending three very happy years there.

Formerly the home of the Grey family, the Earls of Stamford, Dunham is now managed by the National Trust. As a nurse with a keen interest in history, I was fascinated to find out that Dunham had been transformed into a military hospital during WW1 and that Lane Jane Grey, the daughter of the house, had worked there as a voluntary aid detachment (VAD) nurse.

I was delighted to discover that for this year and next, Dunham Massey is marking the centenary of WW1 by telling the story of the Stamford Hospital, where 282 soldiers were treated between April 1917 and January 1919. The ward, soldiers’ recreation room and operating theatre have been recreated and replace the grand interiors. Actors in costume tell some of the stories of those who nursed and were nursed, using material from the extensive archives.

Dr Claire Chatterton with Katie Taylor, who is House and Collections Manager at Dunham Massey.

As we commemorate nurses of WW1 and as the RCN approaches its centenary in 2016, we would remind all HoNS members to encourage any member with an interest in nursing history to join us at www.rcn.org.uk/myrcn or by phoning 0345 772 6100. We want to organise more events across the UK, but need members’ support.

WW1 exhibition

An exhibition, Front line nurses: British nurses of the First World War takes place from 4 August 2014 until 31 March 2015 in the nursing history room of the RCN Library & Heritage Centre. Nurses, both military and civilian, made important contributions to the allied war effort and also sustained the principle of humanitarianism at a time when human life seemed to hold little value. On the centenary of the WW1, this exhibition commemorates the professional nurses who worked, served and died between 1914 and 1918. A range of WW1 nursing books are available to browse alongside and members can borrow many of these from the RCN libraries.

On behalf of the HoNS and our readers, I end by commemorating all the nurses who have cared for and continue to care for our armed forces and the casualties of war.

Ruth Davies, Associate Professor in Child and Family Health, Swansea University
r.e.davies@swansea.ac.uk

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When we think of nurses in WW1, we mostly focus on those portrayed in the recent television series *The Crimson Field*. That is army nurses, supplemented by ward sisters from the UK’s big teaching hospitals and, of course, the VADs – the ‘untrained’ nurses who proved so important to the overall capacity of the hospitals. But there was another group who contributed just as much and were arguably better prepared than most to be there: Queen’s Nurses (QNs).

So-called because they were trained under the auspices of Queen Victoria’s Jubilee Institute for Nurses in London, QNs had hospital training first, followed by six months’ district nurse training at the Institute. They were taught to deal with injuries, industrial accidents, infectious diseases and illness of all kinds – as relevant to the soldiers at the front as to the families they usually dealt with.

They were also schooled in public health, maternity and child health: issues that made them invaluable to the beleaguered local communities across war-torn Europe. But perhaps most important of all – and what set them apart from the hospital nurses who joined the army nursing reserve – they were used to adapting and applying their nursing skills and knowledge in a variety of circumstances.

**Tact and diplomacy**

Much of the QNs’ training focused on how to apply the principles they had been taught – of asepsis, hygiene, the value of fresh air and clean water, the importance of positioning and patient comfort – in people’s homes, using whatever resources came to hand. Their textbooks show how to ‘extemporise’ blinds for the window, how to remove furring from a WC pan, and how to lay out the dead in a room occupied by the living.

But they were not busybodies making families feel inadequate. They were also taught tact and diplomacy, how to engage the family in the patient’s care, and teach the principles so that they left the patient and their carers better equipped to cope after they had gone.

This practical outlook would have been invaluable as the tide of war casualties swelled. Many QNs in England were involved in setting up hospitals in a variety of settings – schools, colleges, country houses, churches – to receive the first refugees and injured solders returning to the UK.
The QNs’ magazine of October 19141 reported:

“…everywhere Queen’s Nurses are in request for special work, in addition to their own duties, heavily increased as these are and likely to be during the coming winter. For suffering through the war is not confined to our soldiers, and their families, but is felt acutely in unemployment and consequent privation, sickness, and general misery in every corner of the land…”

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“A large proportion of Queen’s Nurses are now working in Territorial Hospitals….But one and all are cheerfully accepting the situation, remembering that they too are soldiers of the King and must submit to discipline….Very thankful we must all be that our splendid Navy is standing between us and the torture and misery that has descended on Belgium and France.”

Wounded warriors
Queen’s Nurse Tait McKay wrote from Plymouth, where she was acting as Matron of the Fourth Southern General Hospital. “The business of transforming Salisbury Road Schools and the adjacent Baptist Church into a War Hospital of 520 beds was completed on August 20th and patients were admitted from the adjacent forts … The first batch of 102 wounded warriors arrived from the Front on August 21st, forty of those were stretcher cases, and as soon as the news leaked out considerable excitement prevailed … The second batch numbering all 132, including fourteen Germans, arrived on September 25th.”

L. Ethel Nazer described nursing Sikh and Gurkha wounded at the Netley military hospital. She wrote, “Five out of the last twenty were hand and arm wounds and these walked in; the other fifteen were all heavy stretcher cases; some had six or eight wounds from shrapnel and three were badly frost-bitten; one has since died, another developed tetanus and several amputations have had to be done; all the wounds are horribly septic on arrival but it is surprising how quickly they clean up with regular dressing and attention…”

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A nurse at the front

Claire Chatterton

Edith Appleton – known to her family as Edie – was a professional nurse who nursed close to the front in France throughout the whole of WW1, until she was demobilised in December 1919. Some years after her death, a series of diaries in which she had recorded some of her experiences were found in a drawer by her great nephew, Dick Robinson. Now War diaries, a nurse at the front, edited by Ruth Cowen, is available in hardback and paperback and has been in the Sunday Times bestseller lists.

I found it a fascinating and thought provoking read. She writes with compassion about the suffering she witnessed and the nursing care that attempted to ameliorate this. Amongst the entries are her first experiences of the damage wrought by mustard gas and the enormous human cost of battles such as the Somme. She also records her (very limited) off duty time and I found it poignant to read how she was still able to find and savour beauty in the surrounding countryside and coastline, amidst the carnage around her. The book also contains some of her sketches and drawings. She received the Military OBE, the Royal Red Cross and the Belgian Queen Elisabeth medal for her dedication and bravery.

I was lucky enough to hear Dick Robinson talk about the diaries and her life, while his daughter, Sara, read extracts from them in my home town of Chester. It was a fascinating and enjoyable talk and I am delighted that he and his wife will be giving a similar session at RCN HQ on Thursday 6 November at 5.30pm. Further details of this event can be found at http://www.rcn.org.uk/development/library_and_heritage_services/whats_on/view_all_events

More information about her life and diaries can be found at http://www.edithappleton.org.uk/

QNs also travelled to Europe, often joining the army nursing reserve to bring their skills to the front line of war nursing, and into local villages devastated by the conflict. In April 1915, Ethel Ubsdell reported from Chalons-sur-Marne: “Hearing that a certain village had been severely bombarded I started off in the car to see if help was required. We called on the Mayor of the place who told us that a certain woman was expecting her baby and gave us directions to where we should find her. We arrived at the place and found one wall of a house … We alighted in a black hole and fell over some children, three of them, ranging from 5 years of age down to 2 years. Hearing another moan from a corner [we] found the poor mother lying on straw, having given birth to a child about an hour previously … [we] carried the whole family up to the car, and conveyed them off to the hospital.”

Perils of torpedoes

Travelling to and from Europe, it was inevitable that some QNs should also experience the perils of torpedoes. Meirion Evans wrote: “Our ship was torpedoed at 10 am and sank in an hour. The nursing staff (66 of us) were the first to be lowered into the life boats, and were in our boat for three hours, when we were picked up by an ally’s destroyer. The last hour was dreadful as the boat was full of water and we had to stand up and cling to one another to do anything we could to get hold of. The sea was so rough by this time that the waves were coming right over our heads at times, and two or three nurses were washed away, but a splendid sailor boy rescued them. They said the boat would have floated forever, but I am afraid in another half hour we should have been done up.”

At the end of the war, some 600 Queen’s Nurses were still on active service all over Europe. Some were awarded medals for their bravery and devotion to duty. One wrote rather wistfully: “The life is intensely interesting, healthy and invigorating. To a certain extent it is unsettling, and one wonders what ordinary life in England will appear like afterwards.”

References

1. Editorial. Queen’s Nurses’ Magazine, October 1914
2. www.dn150.org.uk accessed 26 June 2014
DIANNE YARWOOD recommends

Medical services in the First World War

An historian with a special interest in 20th century British social history has produced this slim volume, which is packed full with wonderful illustrations, photographs, quotes from letters and diaries and extracts from official reports and other contemporary sources.

Rather than take a strictly chronological approach to the descriptions of the medical services employed in the first 18 to 20 years of the 20th century, she has used headings such as ‘preparation for war’ and ‘counting the cost’. This approach makes for poignant reading and provides a useful framework to aid our understanding of some of the less well-known challenges faced by all those involved. For example, the chapter on ‘Transport’ tells us that despite the consensus view in medical services, no motorised ambulances were sent to France in 1914. It was only after the battle of Mons, when large numbers of wounded were left to die or be captured, that the horse drawn wagons were replaced.

Drawing on letters and diaries of those involved in medical care gives the book a feel of reading a personal biography and the enthusiasm and determination of those nurses, be they trained or ‘volunteers’, comes across strongly.

Susan has also managed to include an impressive amount of detail relating to nursing and medical practices that were first developed or employed during the hostilities. For example, wound irrigation, triage system, limb replacement, reconstructive facial surgery and the treatment of shell shock. But what also comes across is the lack of coordination of services across the various fields of war and that so much essential medical service was reliant on fund raising at home and charitable giving, rather than government funding.

This is an amazing little book, with an unbelievable amount of detail and I recommend it as both an excellent introduction to medical care in WW1, but also as a fascinating and informative read.

CLAIRE CHATTERTON recommends

Wounded: The long journey home from the Great War

Amidst the plethora of books that have been published about WW1, this book really stood out for me. A scholarly book, based on detailed research, it is also a compelling and very accessible read. Written in a style described by a reviewer in the Guardian as ‘literary journalism’ (or ‘creative nonfiction’), its focus is on the experiences of wounded soldiers and those who sought to treat and care for them. This includes stretcher-bearers, medical officers, surgeons, nurses, orderlies, chaplains, ambulance train personnel and the London Ambulance Column. In it, Mayhew (a medical historian) states that she wishes to, “put medical history back at the heart of studies of the Great War and give credit and understanding where it is long overdue.”

Her book focuses on the British Army on the Western Front and her narrative uses personal experiences found in diaries, letters and oral histories. She tells the stories of several wounded soldiers, interweaving these with experiences of some of the personnel who cared for them. These are supported by 34 pages of detailed notes and references and a six-page timeline that help to contextualise the individual stories.

The reader is given an understanding of a wounded soldier’s possible journey from the battlefield home to ‘Blighty’ (or back to the battlefield after treatment). It also outlines how some of the techniques tried and tested in this war
Life stories at RCN Congress

Our fringe event at RCN Congress took as its theme: *Life stories – their importance in deepening an understanding of nursing’s history and heritage.*

Chair Dr Claire Chatterton began by talking about the importance of history to our understanding of today’s issues. She told the fascinating account of an early registered mental health nurse, Maud Wiese, and how she constructed her life story through archival sources.

Dianne Yarwood spoke about her experiences of oral history taking. She reflected on how we can gain access to life stories and shared the approaches and techniques that can be used to extract these stories.

Dr John Adams, who has taken on the role of obituary writer at *Nursing Standard*, discussed nursing obituaries and why it’s important to mark the national and local contributions made by nurses. He argued that this helps to balance negative media coverage of the profession.

We were joined by a wide range of members, including Rachel Greaves from Council. Next year’s RCN Congress will be in Bournemouth, 21-25 June 2015, where we hope to have another fringe event.

All Congress delegates received a bookmark publicising the work that the society is doing to mark the anniversary of WW1 (pictured left). This is also available at the four RCN libraries. The image is of Nurse Mabel Annie Pearce who trained at the Worcester General Infirmary, 1908-1911, before joining the Territorial Force Nursing Service. This was established in 1908 by Matron in Chief, Dame Sidney Browne, later RCN President, who had retired from the Queen Alexandra’s Imperial Military Nursing Service two years before. In photographs, Pearce wears the QA medallion as well as the silver T on her cape.

Pearce kept an autograph album during her time with the Territorial Force Nursing Service at 42 General Hospital, Salonika and the 62 General Hospital, Bondighene, Italy, which we have in the RCN Archives. Mabel had a twin brother, Mr W G Pearce who was a soldier during WW1, although we don’t have details of where he served. Later, when she joined other nurses on the state register she was based in Sussex.

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I was struck by how many soldiers survived their wounds in an era before the discovery of antibiotics and in conditions that stretched medical and nursing personnel, and their patients, to the limits of human endurance. I was also interested to discover more about personnel that I knew little about, and some of the details in her narrative really struck in my mind. For example, the stretcher bearers whose hands were torn apart by wire and splinters and who found what seems like superhuman strength and endurance in the most horrific of circumstances; the chaplains who went out onto the battlefields to help the stretcher bearers and comfort the wounded, spent hours in the ‘moribund’ wards trying to give succour to dying men and dug graves and then buried scores upon scores of men; the volunteers of the London Ambulance Column who met the trains bringing wounded men home and transported them to hospital. There are many more stories to ponder.