

COMMEMORATING 14 CANADIAN NURSING SISTERS

By Gloria Stephens- July 2018

One of WW1 sea tragedies was the sinking of the hospital ship *Liandover Castle*, June 27, 1918 just off the coast of Ireland. It was a beautiful clear evening, calm waters, all lights ablaze clearly showing the large Red Cross on the gleaming white hull, when about 9:30 PM the German Submarine U-86, without warning torpedoed the ship. Immediately all lights went out, after a horrendous explosion.

The ship had arrived in Halifax, NS, June 17, 1918 with 644 military patients and left for Ireland June 20 with seven medical officers, 14 Nursing Sisters plus other ranks and crew.



The ship was commissioned to Canadian Forces July 16, 1916 with 622 bed capacity and a possible medical staff of 102. The ship was 11,300 tons and used to transport military casualties from England to Halifax, having made many trips over the years.

Following the explosion the evacuation of those alive was carried out in 10 minutes, some in life-boats and others jumping into the water and swimming away from the sinking ship which occurred in 20 minutes from the time the torpedo hit. Life-boats including the Captain's picked up those swimming in the floating debris.

Twelve of the Nursing Sisters were dressed in uniform with life-jackets and two were in 'night-wear' as they entered the # 5 Life-boat under command of Sergeant A. Knight and seven seamen. Number 5 was quickly lowered into the sea but without oars and drifted towards the ship's stern. Suddenly the 'poop-deck' broke away and when sinking caused a suction drawing #5 quickly into the vacuum, tipping all occupants into the sea. They were only together about eight to ten minutes. Sergeant Knight survived being picked up by the Captain's life-boat. He has been quoted as saying: "Nothing was more marked than the coolness and courage of the 14 Canadian Nursing Sisters".

The submarine Captain ordered the Sub to steam at high speed through the wreckage ramming life-boats, running down survivors and firing rounds at the swimmers, some 200 troops were massacred because the Germans did not want any witnesses for torpedoing a hospital ship especially at wars end. The Captain and crew were not punished because of a technicality in the law at the time. There were only 24 survivors with 234 victims and of the 97 medical staff, one officer and 5 other ranks.

Two Nova Scotians were among the 14 Nursing Sisters; Matron Nursing Sister Margaret 'Pearl' Fraser daughter of a former Lieutenant Governor of NS, D.C. Fraser. Pearl had spent three years in a Casualty Clearing Station at the front line in France before joining the *Liandover Castle* as Matron.





The other Nova Scotian was Minnie Follett, a Victoria General School of Nursing graduate of 1909. Before joining the LC she served with the first Canadian Expeditionary Force 1914, the first medical unit to be formed in Nova Scotia and was #1 Casualty Clearing Station. Follett was a member of #2 Canadian Stationery Hospital Unit, the first to arrive in France at Neuve Chapelle which was the only Canadian hospital unit in action during this battle. She served in many other areas in Belgium and France before being assigned to the Liandoverly Castle. She was 33 when the sinking occurred.

There are many plaques honouring these 14 Nursing Sisters throughout Nova Scotia, Ottawa to name two areas.

Early June 2018, Robert France, a World War 1 historian and Dalhousie professor at Truro Campus, who has walked the Western Front in France collecting stories, contacted the writer. Robert proposed to have a Commemoration ceremony at the 'Last Steps' on Halifax waterfront, June 20 as it was 100 years ago to the day that the Liandoverly Castle sailed from Halifax. After many emails and phone calls the writer suggested a possible time on June 20 at 4 PM following the AGM of the Nursing History NS Society. Those who were to participate brought their uniforms to the meeting where they donned the uniform after the meeting, hot as it was and proceeded to the waterfront.



COMMEMORATION CEREMONY for 14 CANADIAN NURSING SISTERS

(Note- pictures from here – Maureen Manuge) The nurses who participated in the Commemoration Ceremony were graduates of the Victoria General hospital, Halifax, the Aberdeen hospital in New Glasgow and a Hospital in Newfoundland, Western Memorial.



VGH- Iris Shea Maureen Manuge, Charlene Day, Janet Young, & many others



Aberdeen - Ivy Gibson



NL -Ida Berry

After lining everyone in order including a relative of Minnie Follett, Muriel Hale, the ceremony was ready to proceed.

The event was opened by Robert France who gave the history of the Liandoverly Castle and then proceeded to list off the name of each Nursing Sister, with a brief history of each. As each name was mentioned a nurse would walk through the gate of the Last Steps and throw a red rose on the water.



Up until 1921 the red rose symbolized the death of the military during WW1 and then the symbol became the 'Red Poppy'.

Minnie Follett's relative (Great Niece, Muriel Hale) was in attendance and she threw the rose while carrying a picture of Minnie. Here in the picture to the left, with her husband, which was a very emotional day for them.



Military personnel were in attendance to honour the military personnel who lost their lives in this ship's sinking.



When all the roses were in the water, Robert asked several folks to speak and the first was Gloria Stephens, President of Nursing History NS Society who gave a short description of the organization's objectives and accomplishments.



Next to speak was the relative of Follett, Grand Niece Muriel Hale.



The last to speak was Lt. Col. MacLean who explained how Nursing Sisters function in today's world.

Stephanie Martin composed an Opera about the sinking of the Liandoverly Castle and the loss of 14 Nursing Sisters. She is shown here talking to Joyce Baxter. The Opera was first performed June 26, 2018 in Calvary Presbyterian church in Toronto. Any nurse who attended the

Opera were given a blue and white ribbon to wear.



According to the last correspondence with Robert stating that he and Stephanie had a “very cursory chat about the possibility of arranging a conference sometime in the future that would bring together people interested in the Liandoverly Castle and her medical staff”, so the story is not yet complete.

