

## 1917 – THE HALIFAX EXPLOSION AND THE VG HOSPITAL

By Gloria Stephens



VG HOSPITAL -1917

### A PUBLIC WARD –VG

The VG Hospital physicians and nurses played a crucial role in helping the victims of the Halifax Explosion, Dec.6, at 9am. The resources at the hospital were taxed to the limit. The effects of this explosion raised National awareness need for medical, safety and public preparedness and disaster planning.

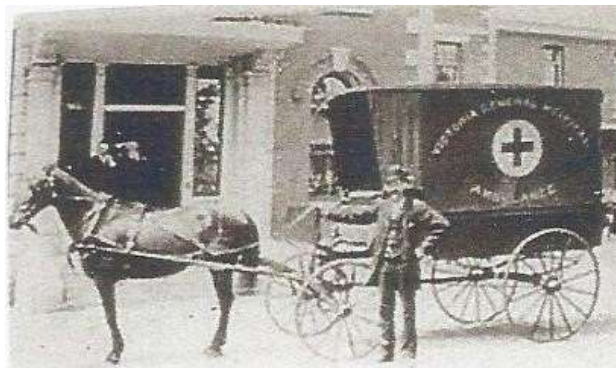


At the time of the explosion, the hospital was being depleted of nursing staff as they became Nursing Sisters and the majority were deployed overseas. Hence two Head Nurses were given 'special training' in general anaesthesia by Dr. J. F. Lessel who was the official Anaesthetist in the hospital at the time. Dr Lessel arrived at the VG in 1912 and prior to this time, surgeons gave the ether or chloroform to the patient and then performed the surgery under questionable circumstances. An operating room nurse tried to monitor the patient's condition with another nurse assisting the surgeon at surgery. Amazing that most patients survived. With the aftermath of the explosion all facilities and staff of the hospital were worked to the limit as hours passed into days before outside help arrived to relieve them. To help with all the necessary surgeries, Dr Lessell quickly taught a few nurses to administer the anaesthetic agent as the situation was urgent. The Head Nurse in the OR was Jessie MacDonald, VG graduate, class 1915.



DR. J.F. LESSEL

Within moments of the explosion every access to the hospital was completely congested with horse teams and stretchers carrying the injured and dying. Stretchers were everywhere crowding the halls and lined up outside the hospital.



The Superintendent W. Kenny was away attending a conference the day of the Halifax Explosion, so the total running of the hospital was directed by Dr. C. Puttner, who at the time was Director of Pharmacy and Assistant Superintendent.



Unfortunately, the day following the explosion, due to all the stress of dealing with streams of dying and injured into the hospital, Dr. Puttner suffered a heart attack.



Dr. C. Puttner

Bertha Archibald accepted her appointment to the VG in September of 1917, as Assistant to Dr. Puttner. Since Puttner was tied up directing events within the hospital of



December 6, 1917, he could not be in the pharmacy. So on the day of the explosion, Bertha had, by herself, the full responsibility and burden of mixing drugs and keeping the supply available at this chaotic time. All the windows in the Path. Lab were blown out and she worked frantically having to wear her heavy coat. She was subsequently assisted by a nurse and then a volunteer druggist from New Brunswick.

Bertha Ogilvie Archibald was a native of Bedford and attended the Halifax Academy, Maritime College of Pharmacy which was affiliated with Dalhousie University. Before she entered pharmacy she entered nursing at Calgary General and on a visit to the pharmacy and in discussion with the director there, she “lost her heart to pharmacy”, as quoted by Bertha. She developed plans for the new hospital’s pharmacy (Victoria Building, 1948) which included a parenteral room for preparing sterile solutions, ordered such new equipment as a gas oven, sterilizer and coloured- coded the different drugs and solutions. She had an Emergency Kit at the ready, day or night with different drugs and supplies. She had a meeting with the Director of J&J and ordered gauze and adhesive in different lengths so she would not have to do this for the different departments of the hospital. J&J then had this idea distributed throughout the world on her advice. Outside her office was a poster: “Your Pharmacist is a specialist in dispensing medicine”.

Bertha was the first to mix a solution of Novocain for spinal injection as an anaesthetic in Nova Scotia in 1921, at the request of Dr. J. G. McDougall. It was to be sent to Charlottetown to be used on an elderly patient who required leg amputation and could not tolerate a general anaesthetic. It was a successful operation. Berths then had to continue mixing the drug to supply the province and elsewhere until the medical firms had the drug dispersed in ampules

Bertha retired after 29 years as a Registered Pharmacist at the VG. During her time she is noted for her many innovations that she brought forth in hospital pharmacy practice and her many recommendations to the drug trade which resulted in improvement in methods of manufacturing or packaging drugs. Bertha’s health declined as a result of her heavy duties of war years, difficulties of securing skilled staff in adequate numbers imposed a burden on her health. She underwent a serious operation in the Pavilion, recovered but she needed to retire.

The medical staff, nurses and auxiliary staff worked without a break for the first 2-3 days and nights following the explosion. This also was true of all levels of staff, for instance the maintenance staff worked tirelessly repairing or boarding up all the 500 windows which were blown out, glass everywhere. Chaos was added by the arrival of family and friends searching for relatives. Another problem which made the situation worse was the snow storm which started the evening of December 6.

At the VG alone three operating rooms were used continuously for two days. Dr. George



Murphy while operating, the skylight fell down cutting his hand but after changing his surgical glove, he continued

with the operation. The patient was not injured. The Head Nurse of the Operating Room was Jessie Macdonald VG class of 1915. Following

this experience Jessie resigned and joined the #7 Dalhousie Medical Unit as a Nursing Sister in WW1 and served overseas. The Night Supervisors at the time of the explosion were Sarah Archard and Eveline Pemberton.



JESSIE MacDONALD

EVELINE PEMBERTON

(Eveline had a Private hospital in a house on North Street

called Restholm, which was destroyed. Eveline also was the founder of the first Graduate Nurses Association of Canada and is known as the first Registered Nurse of Canada.)

Sarah Archard, a Night Supervisor, VG class of 1914, during the Halifax Explosion. As everyone else, she worked pass her shift, well into the day and was again on night duty the next night, as she directed, and nursed all the injured. She was an exceptional nurse



throughout her career. As so many did at the beginning of WW1, she joined the #7 Dalhousie Medical Unit and served in England, France and other areas of conflict. She was awarded the Royal Red Cross 2<sup>nd</sup>. Class, mentioned in dispatches and awarded the Queen of Belgium Medal. In 1935 was awarded the King George Jubilee Medal. After discharge from the Army Unit she was Superintendent of Nurses at Camp Hill Hospital. Sarah also was awarded the Queen Mary Needlework Guild Medal for all her nursing support over many years.



SARAH ARCHARD

Volunteers started arriving at the hospital with blankets, food, drinks and clothing and they assisted the medical staff as directed, transporting patients, dressing those whose clothes were torn from their bodies, feeding and generally trying to calm the victims even though they themselves were so disturbed. Almost immediately money and supplies arrived from across the province and elsewhere throughout the world.

At the time of the explosion there were four public, four military and seven private hospitals within Halifax and all were over capacity with patients in no time at all.

The Superintendent of Nurses was Clara Bowman who directed the nursing staff. Catherine Graham, VG class of 1895, whose job was to sort the injured into categories of need, as they arrived in the hospital & directed nursing and medical care of those injured. (In this day it is called triaging) She also worked with the Halifax-Massachusetts Health/Relief Commission which operated years after the explosion, with support from the Rockefeller Foundation. On December 8<sup>th</sup> the US Massachusetts military, under Major Geddings and a unit from Boston under Doctors Codman and Ladd and many others came from the states to aid the victims. Medical help and volunteers were first to arrive from all parts of Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, PEI and Newfoundland. Instantly after the explosion, 2000 were killed and 9000 injured.



Once the morgue of the VG was filled, the dead were transported to places like Chebucto Road School, Acadia School and other designated places.

Chebucto Road School built in 1910 as a 20<sup>th</sup> century classic revival style, designed by Walter Busch. Following the 1917 Halifax

Explosion, the school was used as a triage Centre, a First Aid Station and a morgue in the basement. The school was closed in 1975. Since 1998 the Maritime Conservatory of Performing Arts is conducted here.

Another place used as a morgue was the Acadia School on Argyle Street, which was the first 'free school' in Canada, built in 1814, for marginalized people of Halifax. Over the years has been used as a theatre, art school, church and currently as a restaurant. After John Snow purchased the building it was a morgue/funeral home for many years, used in two major disasters, the sinking of the Titanic and the 1917 Halifax Explosion.

By December 8 help arrived from other parts of the Province and the military relief from Massachusetts, medical unit from Boston. Also, Halifax City Council quickly set-up a Relief Commission with support from the Rockefeller Foundation.



ACADIA SCHOOL

Other places were utilized such as: the YMCA as a military hospital, the Halifax Ladies College and the Academy of Music. Doctors and nurses from Cogswell Street



COGSWELL STREET MILITARY HOSPITAL

Military Hospital set-up First Aid Stations on the Commons. Laura Hubley, VG class 1898 was the Matron of the hospital. She also was the Matron of the #7 Dalhousie Stationary Medical Unit during W1 and received the Royal Red Cross 1st class medal.



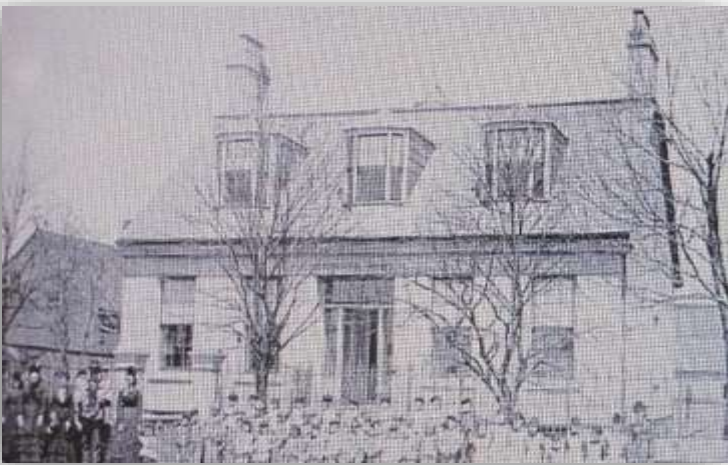
LAURA HUBLEY

The Camp Hill hospital treated 1400 patients in the first 24 hours following the explosion. The hospital had just opened its doors and hardly had time to test or monitor all its facilities before this onslaught of patients arrived. The all levels of staff were remarkable in how they coped with the situation. Several VG hospital graduates were nursing at Camp Hill at the time of the explosion, such as Jennie Hubley, Jessie Smiley, Irene Thompson and Anna Young, all of whom were Nursing Sisters.





Rockhead Prison on the shore of the Bedford Basin was badly damaged from the explosion and at the time there were 10 male and 3 female prisoners, and guards. Four prisoners escaped. Fortunately no patients or nurses were injured. Half of the building was a prison and the other half served as a hospital for the poor.



Protestant Orphans Home was completely destroyed by the explosion. At the time there were 24 children and 3 staff in the building and only 7 survived. Currently there is a monument at the site to honour the victims.