

COLONEL JOAN FITZGERALD'S STORY

By Gloria Stephens, Dec. 2017

Colonel Joan Fitzgerald (Ret'd), OMM, OSTJ, CD, was born in Halifax, NS, 1920, the daughter of James and Nina (Chisholm) Fitzgerald. Joan graduated from the Convent of Sacred Heart, Halifax and from the Halifax Infirmary School of Nursing in 1941.



In 1942 Joan joined the Royal Canadian Army Medical Corps (RCAMC) as a Lt. Nursing Sister and served in Newfoundland, England, Italy and Belgium during WW2. She served in the combat zone in Italy and Belgium where fighting was fierce and many severely wounded came through her unit. Her brother Jack was killed in WW2.

In the post-war period of WW2, she was selected and posted to Randolph Field in San Antonio, Texas to be trained as a Flight Nurse with the RCAF. This 9 week course included parachuting and being able to adjust care under difficult circumstances. This was followed by a further 21 week on-the-job training in a USAF C-47 Dakota. The course covered every phase of aeromedical nursing including loading securing patients, coping with medical effects of turbulences, high altitude indoctrination, managing psychiatric cases and plus meteorology in-flight communications, emergency evacuation, landings in hostile terrain including mid-ocean ditching. Upon graduation, Joan was attached to USAF 1453 Medical Air Evacuation Squadron. For trans-pacific evacuation, specially rigged four engine long range aircraft were used and were the C-54 unpressurized cabin craft, the C-118, C-121 and the C-97 pressurized cabin. Crossing the Pacific in these propeller-driven planes took up to 42 hours of rough, cold, noisy flights. The planes were fitted with litters, stacked in fours on both sides of the aisle, to fly as many as 35 patients with one nurse and no doctor but with one or two medical assistants. Larger planes could carry as many as 60 patients. Once in the air the nurse performed the usual bedside care such as dressings, suctioning chest wounds, administering drugs, feeding and doing the best to maintain morale in the most difficult conditions. The Flight Nurse had medical authority and was expected to make medical and technical decisions regarding the patient's care which were often well beyond her hospital training. These decisions could include changes in altitude, emergency landings to the pilot.

Joan served in the Korean conflict from 1950 to 1953 as a Flight Nurse. She was one of the six Canadian Nursing Sisters who reported for duty in 1951 under Matron Captain Margaret M. Dodderidge. She dealt with severely wounded patients as well as many suffering from Haemorrhagic Fever (not common), venereal diseases (very common), Malaria, serious burns and emotional stress and battle fatigue. (Haemorrhagic Fever was later traced, 1976, to a virus spread by field mice and now known as Hanta virus, 2001. This is characterized as acute febrile illness with increased capillary permeability, hypotension and renal

damage. Soldiers haemorrhaged while their kidneys were shutting down. At the time, no particular treatment was available other than psychological support.)

While serving in Korea, the nurses were stationed in Kure, Japan and their quarters were situated by an open sewage canals containing rotten vegetables, dead animals, live rats and raw sewage. Their rooms were often infested with cockroaches and the nurses used water-filled cans to isolate their beds from crawling insects. They had lights in their quarters but no running water. Plastic on the windows did nothing to keep out the cold during the winter months. Their dress code was a blue uniform with brass buttons, leather belt and the traditional white apron and veil and in the humid weather of summer became unbearable. The nurses worked a 12-hour shift with one day off a week with no extra pay in spite of their 'higher responsibilities'. Joan survived all this and was returned to Canada where she remained in the military service.

By 1968 Joan was promoted to Lt. Colonel and became Matron-in-Chief, Canadian Forces Medical System. Joan Fitzgerald is recognized in the military circle as a Canadian National figure as throughout her long military career she worked constantly with perseverance and dignity to update and modernize the military nursing curriculum, teaching methods and especially providing the means of advancement for the military nurse. She accomplished this and also improved the 'working conditions' of nurses under the military command which provided the ability of nurses to meet the 'Standards of Care' for the military patients. Joan made improvements in the methods of providing efficient and effective medical care to the wounded in a combat zone. She also developed teaching programs for nurses equipping them to nurse troops and fellow nurses suffering from stress conditions and mental health issues.

According to a personal friend, "Joan was always immaculate and presented herself professionally on and off duty with dignity and pride in her chosen career as a nursing officer in the Canadian Forces. She was a very organized person and never really relaxed but still was a 'down-to-earth' person. Very much respected by her colleagues and staff as she 'ran- a-tight-ship' but always fair-minded. The standards of military health care system and the method of delivering care to the troops were her main concern, which she diligently worked to improve throughout her military career. She was somewhat difficult to get to know and did not socialize very much during her military time nor after retirement".

In 1972 Joan was again promoted, this time to Colonel, which at the time was unheard of for a nurse and especially a woman. Being Colonel, she became the Canadian Forces Director of Nursing.

Joan was an inspiration to all nurses, especially military nurses as she was recognized as a leader who characteristically met career challenges throughout WW 2. She provided efficient medical services during this daunting time in the battlefields of Italy and Belgium where heavy fighting occurred, and she not only attended to the wounded but to those suffering from infectious diseases. Joan helped to restore the physical and mental health of the prisoners of war upon their release and returned them to Canada by Air Evacuation, after the Korean War. She devoted herself to promote the value of women in the Canadian Forces.



In 1973 Joan was the first military woman to graduate from the Canadian National Defense College. She also was the first woman to work with the College team conducting lecture tours throughout the country and elsewhere. The picture is Joan in Singapore conducting a lecture. Joan retired in 1976 and resided in Halifax on Young Avenue by Point Peasant Park.

Joan's awards included: Order Military Medal, Order of St. John and the Canadian Decoration medal.

Joan died September 7, 2013 at age 93, following a brief illness in the Queen Elizabeth Health Sciences Centre, Halifax. Following a Mass at Canadian Martyrs Church, Inglis Street, Halifax, she was buried at Gate of Heaven cemetery, Lower Sackville, NS.

The Nursing History NS Society nominated Joan for the Canadian Nurses Association, Memorial Book, December 2017.