

Missing From History: The Royal Canadian Navy's First Nurses

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This year, 2010, marks the 100 anniversary of the Royal Canadian Navy and the Royal Canadian Mint has issued a coin honouring:

The first women accepted officially in the Royal Canadian Navy are 6 nurses who served during August 1914 on *His Majesty's Canadian Hospital Ship Prince George*, the only Canadian Hospital Ship to ever sail with the Canadian Navy¹.

Despite this acknowledgment of a rather unique event, *His Majesty's Canadian Hospital Ship (HMCHS) Prince George* does not seem to appear in any published documentation of those days^{2, 3, 4, 5, 6}. The six Nursing Sisters, four sick berth stewards, and the Surgeon in Charge who served as medical staff on that ship are not mentioned in any military accounts of the time nor is their service mentioned on their military personnel records. The evidence of *HMCHS Prince George's* service is fleeting and buried in an avalanche of telegrams, letters, and meeting notes.

The start of the story.

When war was declared on August 4 1914, the British Navy, whose last hospital ship had been wrecked in June of that year, began their scramble to immediately convert three ocean liners. The fledgling Canadian Navy had never had any hospital ships and in Esquimalt, Vancouver Island, the potential threat of a nearby German cruiser brought a very immediate need for military and medical preparation. By August 8 the Grand Trunk Pacific Railway (GTP) steamer *Prince George* had been hastily requisitioned by the Department of National Defense and its conversion to a hospital ship commenced⁷. A few days later the Royal Canadian Navy's first hospital ship was ready for service⁸.

HMCHS Prince George prepares for war casualties.

Dr. Charles Barron Wainwright, an English born and educated physician with qualifications as a surgeon, had just completed a year as one of 3 "internes"⁹ employed by Victoria's Provincial Royal Jubilee Hospital (PRJH) and was newly registered with the College of Physicians and Surgeons of British Columbia¹⁰. In response to a request on August 3, 1914, Dr. Wainwright accepted the position of Surgeon in Charge of *HMCHS Prince George* and was instructed to purchase medical stores and surgical instruments locally¹¹. He immediately placed an order with Chandler and Fisher, surgical instrument makers in Vancouver, monitored the conversion of *Prince George's* guest cabins to accommodate the sick and wounded, the creation of an operating room, and the widening of doors and elevators to accommodate stretchers and wheelchairs. As was typical of hospital ships, the pharmacy would have been equipped with bandages, gauze, lint and wool for dressings, splints, sterilizers, as well as analgesics such as Morphine, Tincture of Chloroform and aspirin, disinfectants, and anaesthetics such as chloroform and ether^{12, 13}. Because of the urgency, surgical instruments and equipment for immediate use were likely obtained from the local hospitals until navy supplies were delivered.

Later hospital ships employed an electrical mechanism which processed salt water to produce hypochlorites which were used for disinfection, but *HMCHS Prince George* would have carried gallons of the traditional carbolic acid used at that time¹⁴. It was usual for converted hospital ships to be installed with swinging cots of canvas stretched and laced over a wooden frame with each cot supplied with blankets and pillows. In this manner over 500 patients could be accommodated in the converted ocean liners.¹⁵ It is unknown how many such cots *Prince George* contained.

In addition to medical supplies Dr. Wainwright was instructed to recruit three nurses. At that time most graduate nurses in Victoria found employment in private duty nursing or in the employment of the two major hospitals, the Provincial Royal Jubilee (PRJH) and St Joseph's, and many of them belonged to the growing volunteer Militia. From these ranks Dr. Wainwright secured the volunteer services of six graduate nurses, all members of the Victoria Militia. The change from three to six nurses is not documented but was probably prompted by Dr. Wainwright's plans for 24 hour staffing of wards and operating room and supports the premise that *Prince George* expected to serve more than 300 patients.

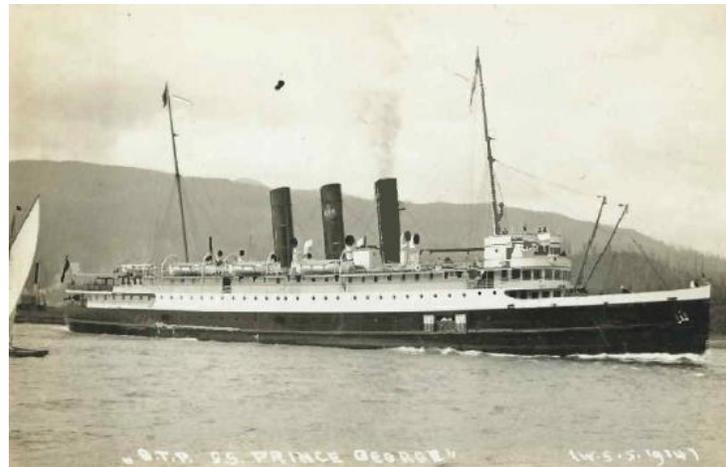
The Navy Nurses.



Acting Nursing Sister Elizabeth Pierce c.1914.

Elizabeth Pierce was born in Ontario and was a 1908 graduate of the School of Nursing at the PRJH. Prior to volunteering for Navy duty Pierce had been “head surgical nurse at the Jubilee” and also at the “Bute Street Hospital in Vancouver”¹⁶. She was appointed Acting Nursing Sister [The Canadian Army Medical Corps equivalent is Acting Matron], receiving a pay rate of \$100 per month. Dr. Wainwright notified the Senior Naval Officer at Esquimalt that the nurses should “rank as officers and have had sufficient training, hence deserve a rating above Sick Berth Steward”¹⁷. Although little is known of the nurse's life aboard *HMCHS Prince George*, Acting Nursing Sister Pierce appears to have enjoyed the experience as she posted a post card of *Prince George* to her family declaring that “a life on the ocean waves suits me very much”¹⁸.

The military life also suited Elizabeth as she later served over five years with the Canadian Army Military Corps (CAMC) in Operating Rooms in England and near the front line in France, and received the order of the Royal Red Cross Class 2 (ARRC) for her bravery and devotion to duty¹⁹. Florence Nightingale was the first recipient of this decoration which was awarded exclusively to female nurses until 1976. Following her war service Elizabeth returned to Victoria after her demobilization in 1920, and registered with the newly formed Graduate Nurse's Association of British Columbia as she continued her nursing career as a nurse with the Victorian Order of Nurses in Victoria^{20, 21}.



Post card written by Elizabeth Pierce and mailed at the end of *HMCHS Prince George's* service, 1914. J.Johnson collection.

At the time of her appointment to *HMCHS Prince George*, Mabel Ogilvie Lindsay was 33 years old. Scottish born, she had completed her nurse training at the Radcliffe County Hospital in Oxford, England, a nursing school that graduated its first nurse in 1891 under the direction of Miss Alice Fisher, a well-known "Nightingale"²². Before travelling to Canada, Lindsay spent three years with the Queen Alexandra's Imperial Military Nursing Service (QAIMNS) for India, where she cared for the British servicemen and their families who were serving in the British Raj²³. During this turbulent time in India's history, Mabel would have gained a unique experience in caring for the sick and wounded in military service. She was the only *Prince George* Nurse [the

equivalent of a CAMC Nursing Sister] with military experience other than that of the volunteer militia.

Following her service on *HMCHS Prince George*, Mabel also joined the CAMC and spent over five years in England, France, and on other hospital ships, also earning a Royal Red Cross 2 Class for her work. During her five years overseas Mabel experienced frequent episodes of respiratory infections culminating in a severe bronchopneumonia which left her with damaged lungs and unable to perform “general service”²⁴. After her demobilization in July 1920 she registered with the Graduate Nurses Association of British Columbia but appears to have spent the remainder of her life in San Francisco where she died in 1966 at 85 years of age²⁵.

At 24 years of age Penelope Mellen was the youngest nurse appointed to *Prince George*. In the summer of 1914 she had just graduated from the PRJH School of Nursing where her last student work experience had been in the Pemberton Memorial Operating Room, where no doubt she worked with Surgeon Wainwright²⁶. At this time the Mayo Clinic in the United States had been using nurses as anaesthetists for several years and many Canadian Nursing Sisters were later used in this role in casualty clearing stations across France²⁷. Since *Prince George* carried no physician anaesthetist it is quite likely that Nurse Mellen, with her recent OR experience or Nursing Sister Pierce with her surgical experience, was expected to fill that role.

Following her time on *HMCHS Prince George*, Penelope Mellen also joined the CAMC and spent two years with the #2 Canadian General Hospital (CGH) and #3 Casualty Clearing Station (CCS) in England and France, until resigning her commission in June 1917²⁸. One year later she married Major Stanley Gordon Chown, a surgeon with the CAMC who was awarded an Order of the British Empire (OBE) for his service in the #2 CGH and CCS in both France and Belgium. After the war they settled in Winnipeg, Manitoba where Dr. Chown became Chief of Pediatrics at the Winnipeg General Hospital and their eldest son became a Member of Parliament for that city and daughter Margaret was instrumental in establishing speech therapy services at all the major hospitals²⁹. Penelope remained a member of the PRJH Nursing Alumni Association.



Penelope Mellen, centre, PRJH Pemberton Operating Room, c.1914. BC Archives F-07786

Annie Dover was born in Toddington, Bedfordshire, England in 1887 and came to Canada some time prior to 1914. Her School of Nursing is unknown. She was a member of the Victoria Militia when she was recruited for service on *HMCHS Prince George* in August 1914. Little is known of her background other than she was working as a graduate nurse in Victoria and was a member of the Militia, when she joined the hospital ship's medical staff.

Following her time on *Prince George* Dover also joined the CAMC as a Nursing Sister and spent four years at a variety of CGHs and Stationary Hospitals in both France and England. Her war experiences were plagued by several incidences of poor health and she was treated for a variety of debilitating infections, influenza, and being generally "run down"³⁰. She was demobilized in 1919 and after a brief period spent in Victoria after the war, she has left no trace of her life.

Bessie Irving Watson was also English born, in Cockermouth, Cumberland, in 1882. She graduated from the School of Nursing at the Royal Southern Hospital in Liverpool which had opened in 1859 under the advice of Florence Nightingale and was renowned for instituting the first horse-drawn ambulance service in the United Kingdom³¹. Like the other *Prince George* nurses Bessie was working in Victoria as a graduate nurse and a member of the local Militia when she joined the ship's medical staff.

In March 1915 Bessie Watson joined the CAMC where she spent time with the #2 CGH in France and from January 11, 1916 at the West Cliff Canadian Eye and Ear Hospital in England. On February 28, 1916 while on leave in England, she married Basil Aylmer, a captain in the Canadian Overseas Expeditionary Forces. At that time Basil Aylmer was reported on the casualty list and it is highly likely that Bessie have nursed him during his hospitalization in England³². She consequently resigned her commission in June of that year and returned to

Canada³³. During that short time of war service Bessie was awarded the Royal Red Cross 2, the 1914-15 Star, and the British War and Victory medals. She returned to British Columbia where she remained until her death in 1956 in Queen's Bay, Kootenay Lake. Her only son Mathew Aylmer died at Normandy in 1944³⁴.



The Royal Red Cross 2, the 1914-15 Star, the British War Medal, and the Victory Medal.

Born in 1884 in Fort Williams, Ontario, Emma Gertrude Black moved to Victoria with her family as a young child. She completed her nursing training at the PRJH, graduating in 1912³⁵. She was also working as a graduate nurse in Victoria and like her peers a member of the local Militia. Following her 1914 summer service on *Prince George*, Emma joined the CAMC and served for four years in both France and England³⁶. She served overseas until early 1919 when she returned to her mother's home in Vancouver and later worked at the Summerland Hospital on Okanagan Lake in central BC³⁷.

In July 1928, at 44 years of age, Emma married Sir John Frederick Whitworth Aylmer the 9th. Lord Aylmer of Balrath in County of Meath, Ireland, immediately becoming Baroness Aylmer. Sir John was the great, great, grandson of Mathew Whitworth-Aylmer the 5th. Baron, and Governor General of Canada from 1830 to 1835. He was also the older brother of Basil Aylmer, the husband of Bessie Irving Watson. Sir John and Baroness Aylmer lived in Vancouver until their deaths. On Sir John's death in 1971 the title briefly passed to his brother Kenneth and on his death in 1974 to his brother Basil until his death in 1977. Unfortunately Bessie had pre-deceased her husband so did not have the honor of the title of Baroness as did her friend Emma³⁸.

Preparing for duty.

The six nurses, Dr. Wainwright, Sick Berth Stewards H.S.H.Jones and D. Jones, and Assistant Sick Berth Stewards Pattison and Bush, were ready for service from August 8. We do not know what uniform the nurses wore but on such short notice suppose it to be the regular white hospital uniform of the time. Naval meeting notes record that,

The distinctive mark of the entire staff while performing their duties shall be an armband (white flag with red cross)³⁹.

As the hospital ship sailed the waters of the west coast the nurses would have continued the preparation for casualties. Dressings would have been prepared and sterilized by the hundreds,

the operating room readied for emergency surgery, wards stocked with supplies, the patient bunks stocked with linens, and extensive cleaning carried out in all medical areas. The Stewards and Assistant Stewards would have been trained for their role by the nurses and surgeon, and Sister Pierce, in her role as “administrator, hostess, and chaperone”, was responsible for planning the methods of care, staffing, and the well-being of the nurses in her charge⁴⁰. As Acting Sister [Acting Matron] of the hospital ship, Elizabeth Pierce was also responsible “for the due performance of their duties by the sisters and nurses, and for the maintenance of good conduct, efficiency and discipline” as described in the “Instructions for Canadian Army Medical Corps Nursing Service”. These instructions also described the need for a system for the security and management of drugs and most particular for those deemed “strong poisons” to be established, and keys made available for each nurse on duty (as cited in Mann, 2000)⁴¹. Later hospital ship nurses describe frequent drills to practice for ship emergencies, and little free time.

A short service.

While in Esquimalt the medical team received their first patient. A sailor from the Japanese cruiser *Idzuma* had broken his leg and was treated on board *Prince George*. During the remainder of the 26 days the *HMCHS Prince George* was in service, one of the nurses sprained an ankle and several suffered from sea sickness but no other patients were recorded (as cited in Johnson, 2010)⁴². Medical files from this time have not been found.

On September 2 1914, Vice-Admiral Kingsmill conducted an inspection of *HMCHS Prince George* and after praising the staff for their efforts he reiterated his earlier order for the ship to be “dispensed with” and returned to the Grand Trunk Pacific Railway⁴³. Japan had joined the allied war effort on August 23, 1914 and the presence of more modern war vessels, the Japanese cruiser *Idzuma* and the British cruiser *Newcastle*, in the northern Pacific, removed the need for Canadian ships to cruise the western coast. It was also known that all German ships were on their way to the south Pacific thus negating the threat to British Columbia⁴⁴. After just 26 days of service the Royal Canadian Navy’s first hospital ship was no longer needed and was refitted to resume her career as a passenger liner in the waters of the western coast of Canada and the United States.

The navy nurses and surgeon were released from their volunteer service and returned to their civilian lives and hopefully to the jobs they left just 26 days previously. All of the nurses continued their military career by joining the Canadian Army Medical Corps and serving overseas. Dr. Wainwright cancelled his registration with the BC College of Physicians and Surgeons and appears to have left Canada⁴⁵. Sick Berth Steward Denzil Jones served with the 20th Battalion, where he was mortally wounded at Ypres in 1917⁴⁶. None appear to have received any recognition from the Royal Canadian Navy during their lifetime. None have been named in any official navy histories. No photographs of their service are known, however the Royal Canadian Mint has acknowledged these first nurses of the Royal Canadian Navy by including their story and a photograph of World War II navy nurses, in their 100 year navy centennial coin and stamp package.

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