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Canadian Nurses in the South African Military Nursing Service: Some Reminiscences Forty Years Later

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Late in 1941 and early in 1942 some Canadian nurses found themselves serving the armed forces in areas far removed from any foreseeable battle site. A group, eventually to number some three hundred nurses, was to serve neither with the Canadian forces nor with the British, but with those of Canada's sister dominion, South Africa. Many warm memories have remained, many strong ties are still unbroken by time and the links between South Africa and Canada have been maintained both by contacts between Canadian nurses who married and remained in Africa and their Canadian friends who have visited them. The unusually close *esprit de corps* is reflected in a newsletter which was published up to August 1972: *The Ontario Springbok News Letter of Canadian Nursing Sisters serving in South Africa, 1939-1945*.(1) In addition, many of these nurses continue to meet at least once a year and thus maintain the old camaraderie of the war years.

Basically the reason why Canadian nurses were recruited to serve in South Africa was the difficulty of moving casualties from the Western Desert to Great Britain. The dangers at sea were very great and obviously the presence in Britain of extra casualties was undesirable when an invasion by Germany might occur and add to the air raid casualties, whose number was growing nightly.

The number of new beds envisaged, eight thousand, was beyond the capacity of the South

African government, which was to staff the new hospitals, some of which the British government was building. On June 18, 1941 the Union of South Africa therefore turned for help to the Canadian Government. It asked to be allowed to recruit three hundred Canadian-trained nurses. These would serve with the South African Military Nursing Service (SAMNS). The agreement of Ottawa was not long in coming especially as many Canadian nurses were anxious to serve but were not finding the opportunity to do so with the Canadian forces as quickly as they wished.(2) The financial arrangements were that the South African government would be responsible for pay, allowances, transportation from Canada and back, as well as a clothing allowance. Provisions for pensions were also made.

The clothing allowance was, apparently, about fifty per cent of what was needed and, an unfortunate lack of knowledge of climatic conditions in South Africa on the part of the Royal Canadian Army Medical Corps, which was charged with selecting, equipping, and generally making all arrangements for the nurses, led to its being unsuited to the weather. Some, assigned to Johannesburg, at an elevation of 5 740 feet (1 750 m) where the winds blow across the open veld, found their greatcoats, which were of summer weight, decidedly unsatisfactory.(3) The uniforms, which were those designed for Canadian nursing sisters, had in any case to be altered to adapt to the very great difference in climatic zones where the nurses served, for, eventually some were to serve also in Egypt and Italy.

The salary, to be borne by South Africa, was, unfortunately, another source of unhappiness for the nurses who found that the announced pay was to be diminished by monthly deductions for accommodation and rations.(4) However, in time, this unfortunate misunderstanding, as well as the fact that the rate compared unfavourably with that paid to nurses serving with the Canadian forces, was to be rectified.(5)

There was no lack of volunteers who eagerly replied to the newspaper advertisements and the Canadian Nurses' Association's own campaign. A one-year contract was readily signed by those who considered themselves so fortunate as to be selected. At the end of the first year there would be an option to renew the contract 'for the duration of the year plus not more than six months' (6). Though the pay was not great, the experience was, and when time came to renew contracts more than two-thirds did so. They then signed the 'Oath to be taken by a Serving Officer or Soldier for Service Anywhere,' the so-called 'Blue Oath' by which these 'volunteer member(s) of the Union Defence Forces ... [agreed to] serve anywhere for the duration of the present war and for a period of six months thereafter unless otherwise legally discharged'(7) the nurses were from then on allowed to wear an orange flash which was attached to their epaulettes.

The three hundred nurses travelled in five different groups, some by way of the United Kingdom, some directly from New York. The first group, numbering eighty, and originating from every Canadian province, was ready to leave by early November 1941. Their trip began with a week's stay in New York (in part due to a dock strike) where they shopped avidly; the \$50.00 granted to each nurse before leaving Canada obviously went much further than it would now! They had a

good time visiting the sights and enjoying free tickets to shows, and as one remarked, "Most of us are not in favour of sleeping ... We can do that later"(8). The group, under the command of Lt Christine Macdonald, as Acting Matron, went on board the *S.S. Kawsar* and sailed from New York on November 22, 1941. The ship, built for the short Alexandria-Marseilles run, was of ten thousand tons and therefore somewhat small for the Atlantic crossing. After lying in dock for weeks because of the strike, she was 'cold, dusty and with an air of tawdry splendour: lots of gilt, velvet hangings, etc. all well worn'(9). But all in all, the accommodation and meals were adequate, on a ship which must have resembled a sailing tower of Babel: Welsh captain, Egyptian deck officers, Syrian doctor, Polish chief engineer, the second Greek ... while the stewards were from Goa(10). Fellow passengers were almost as mixed, with missionaries, a Turkish student and one lone American officer 'on his way to the Middle East to observe desert warfare' and, of course, the eighty Canadian nurses(11). Before many days, the American officer was no longer a neutral observer, for the attack on Pearl Harbour occurred. To some of the nurses it seemed as though they were travelling in quite the wrong direction, and worry about the people at home began (12).

After a zig-zagging trip across the Atlantic, for the ship was unconvoyed, stops at Port-of-Spain and Recife (Brazil), the usual fun of 'crossing the line,' despite the war-time conditions, the *Kawsar* docked at Cape Town on Boxing Day 1941. For this first group of nurses, the inadequate great-coat was hardly a problem for they were, within a few days, leaving by train for Durban and, on the train the temperatures were often more than 110 deg F (about 45 deg C)(13). From there they were sent to various hospitals throughout the country, to Springfield, Sonderwater, Cottesloe, Oribi, Wynberg, Roberts Heights, Baragwanath, and others.

The second contingent, which was headed by Miss Gladys J. Sharpe, then matron of the Toronto Military Hospital, also went from New York direct to South Africa. Miss Sharpe had been appointed liaison officer between the two governments and the British Mission to Canada. This had been done at the request of the Canadian Nurses' Association.(14) This second contingent, some eighty nurses, had met in Montreal on December 28 1941 and from there had travelled to New York City where they boarded the *El Nil*, an Egyptian ship captained by a Scot. There were several delays in New York before the final departure on January 3, 1942 and engine trouble which meant a stop-over in Trinidad (a mixed blessing for it also meant a few hours ashore each day). The group arrived in Cape Town on February 5, 1942 and from there, as had the earlier group, the nurses dispersed to several hospitals in South Africa.

As for the third contingent, their trip to South Africa was an even longer one for they went by way of Britain. Accepted on October 1, 1941, and supposed to sail from New York on the *M.V. Selandia* early in January 1942, these nurses, headed by Miss Mary Mercer (Captain N/S, RCAMC), found themselves playing a long waiting game, with instructions to proceed, and then to wait, until, finally, in April 1942 they were on their way. The most distant group, that from British Columbia, began their odyssey from Victoria on St. George's Day, 23 April 1942, to be joined by others in Vancouver and eventually to leave, not from New York on the *Selandia*, but

from Halifax in a convoy destined for Britain. Their ship was the *RMS Andes* which sailed on May 3 1942 and arrived in Liverpool nine days later. Among the group of nurses was Miss Elizabeth L. Clement, now retired in Victoria (15).

The trip, in a convoy which included the *Aquitania* was not without incident, as the escort one night came on a submarine which had surfaced, fired against it, and then depth-charged it when it submerged. When the convoy broke up and the *Andes* made for Liverpool at top speed with only two corvettes as escort, there was yet another encounter with a German submarine. These nurses thus had their first taste of fire, happily for many also their last. This particular group immediately went to No.15 Canadian General Hospital at Bramshott, Surrey. Even on the train trip, the rigours of wartime Britain: cold, and severe rationing, were brought home to them (16). The group spent about three weeks in England and, despite the wartime conditions, had a happy time. There were the usual sight-seeing expeditions, theatre tickets and various forms of entertainment customarily provided for service personnel. These nurses had perhaps a double advantage for South African as well as Canadian, and the usual British, organizations vied with each other to entertain them. Many, of course, had ties with Britain and were able to visit relatives in various parts of England and Scotland. The only problems, one remembers, were the cumbersome and heavy respirator and tin hat which had to be carried about at all times, somewhat tiresome companions for sight-seeing, but part of every serving member's lot in those days (17).

The nurses left gradually in small groups, the one to which Miss Clement belonged finally boarding the *S.S. Staffordshire* at Avonmouth, a ship which evidently had not been prepared for a group of women. Their arrival meant some hasty moves of quarters, but eventually the passengers, many from Scottish and Welsh regiments, accepted the nurses. The convoy, collected just below Glasgow, finally left on the usual zig-zagging course which evidently meant crossing the Gulf Stream just off the Caribbean! Freetown, Sierra Leone, although it did not afford the chance of landing, did result in the enterprising Senior Service (the Royal Navy) producing bananas and mangoes, a very rare treat for anyone in those war-time days.

The *H.M.S. Rodney* and the *H.M.S. Nelson* protected the convoy from there on over the ever-deepening blue of the Southern Atlantic until the day before the arrival at Cape Town, July 1, 1942. The Canadian nurses were on their way, two days later, to one of the Southern Hemisphere's largest hospitals, eventually serving approximately one thousand five hundred patients. This, the Baragwanath Military Hospital, had just been built by the British Government and was not even officially opened (18). The first matron of the hospital, at first intended to deal with all types of medical and surgical cases, was Miss Sharpe. The hospital, however, gradually specialized in treating tuberculosis patients, most of whom came from the Middle East and India, via hospital ships which landed in Durban, and from there to the small station near the hospital about five miles south of Johannesburg. It would appear that the majority of the Canadian nurses served there at some time or other (19).

The early days, as remembered by one of the nurses, were also dusty days, but when spring arrived grass was sown and the wards were less dusty. But there were many pleasant things to compensate for the cold winds and the occasional extra dust. The unique hospital, as Gen Jan Christian Smuts remarked 'financed by ... Great Britain, built by South African labour, and served by a professional nursing staff of which four-fifths were Canadian' (20) was of great concern to the people of Johannesburg, who saw to it that each ward was adopted by some business or service group, and provided with extras and even little luxuries.

Christmas was, of course, a special time with turkeys, a 'great big beautiful Christmas cake,' funds for female patients and staff to be taken to the Johannesburg pantomime, and, even more thoughtful, perhaps, were the efforts to collect rare photographic film and take pictures of many patients (alone or in groups) for their families. The wards were decorated with what I understood to be the traditional colours for Christmas used in South Africa: pale blue, peach and pink, quite a departure from the green and red usually associated with Christmas, by most of the patients (21).

When the hospital became totally a tuberculosis hospital, this meant some added amenities for the staff who could enjoy 'the beautiful swimming pool built by a swimming club in Johannesburg' then totally at their disposal, as were the tennis courts. Lawn bowling remained a sport shared with the patients (22). The 'lovely, little, red brick chapel' built close to the wards was shared by all denominations, with the nursing staff providing 'the blue carpet for the middle aisle and the blue cushion kneelers' (23).

The first matron of the hospital, Gladys Sharpe, who continued her distinguished career in Canada, spent only one year in South Africa. Her replacements as matron were Miss Henrietta Fick, an Afrikaans lady and, when she was transferred, Miss Margaret E. Stoney, from Lancashire, England (24). Besides the Canadian and South African nurses (who were called 'Sisters' in the British manner) were 'nurses' who had 'left their jobs to help care for the wounded and ill servicemen.' They came from every profession and business and were trained on the job. Some two hundred of them served at the Baragwanath Hospital. Natives, civilians, or soldiers, saw to 'the cleaning and dishwashing.' (25)

The living quarters for the nurses were spartan, of rough brick, interior as well as exterior, linoleum floor, equipped with folding camp cots and very thin mattresses, while the army blanket seemed to some 'more suitable for covering a horse than a person'(26), though, in time, spring-filled mattresses and white blankets were welcome improvements. With no heating of any kind in the rooms, except by some lucky chance an electric heater bought in town, they were only slightly more comfortable than the ablution blocks which never had provision for heat. One feature that was appreciated was the 'night hut' where those who were on nights moved during their tour of duty.

Some aspects of the work may have been harsh, and living conditions also, but this was, of

course, to be expected in wartime and many nurses, as mentioned earlier, elected to stay for the duration and six months. As volunteer members of the South African forces, which in essence they now were, after signing the 'Blue Oath,' they were moved more freely. Groups of nurses were sent from Baragwanath closer to the battle zones, some to Egypt in the Helmhah Garrison, and to Helwan, or other parts of North Africa, and some, eventually to Italy.

One group which went to Egypt was led by Miss Elizabeth Clement herself. The trip from South Africa to Egypt was by sea, from Durban on the *M.V. Selandia*. As this was in February 1945, there was little left of normal shipboard service and everyone had to do some 'housekeeping' to replace the non-existent stewards; though the nurses found nothing too odd in this, evidently some wives of high ranking officers felt aggrieved. And, even in wartime, there was the usual fun of crossing the line.

These Canadian nurses in the SAMNS served in No. 5 South African General Hospital which was situated in the Helmhah Garrison. As it was next to the 64th British Hospital, the two hospitals alternated in admitting troops, with the South African troops, naturally, always having prior claim to their own hospital. No.5 S.A. General Hospital was something of a new experience for the Canadian nurses for the wards were mostly tented, though each tent had floors and walls of mud brick or cement. The resultant height helped the ventilation as did ventilators in the roof. The lack of ready hot water in wards, kitchens, etc. meant that the South African native soldiers employed there were faced with much added work. However, they were not slow to discover the poverty of the neighbouring Egyptians and soon used tea leaves, coffee grounds, and crusts were bartered for the heavier work (27). Since neither electric nor gas sterilizers were available, fish boilers fuelled with methylated spirit did very well, and when wicks ran out, gauze bandages made ideal replacements. Primus stoves were the source of the ever-needed cups of tea. Life in the tropics always means unfriendly fauna, especially insects, and some of the old buildings of the hospital were home to white scorpions who tended to drop onto the chart desk at night, while, in another, enormous earwigs collected in holes in the cement floor. Methylated spirit was one quick way of sending these pests to a fiery end.

Tropical diseases were also more prevalent than they had been in South Africa. Malaria was so common that it became routine to take blood slides from any patient admitted with a high fever. Provided the slide was taken to the lab at top speed (before the flies had eaten the blood) quick identification of the type of malaria present was easily made and treatment was begun at once. In the native medical wards there were even more strange tropical diseases, including typhus and leprosy (28).

For this group of Canadian nurses VE (Victory-in-Europe) Day was celebrated in Helmhah, a suburb of Cairo, with much visiting between the varied allied Messes. According to one account, a British general determined that the celebration required fried eggs for everyone, though this meant breaking down the door of the kitchen, in the officers' mess, a permission easily granted by the Colonel who said: 'Let him break down the door, we don't have a General to break down

our kitchen door every day.' The general was not well versed in primus stoves. After having nearly lit the whole mess, he had to settle for raw eggs with Worcester Sauce (Bombay Oysters) which were served to everyone under his unbending gaze (29). There was the opportunity, while in Egypt, to spend holidays in Palestine, a favourite place at the time, reached by train, though once in that country, hitch-hiking was the preferred mode of transport.

By September 1945, the South African hospital in Cairo was due to close, but there as elsewhere, repatriation of the troops was slower than expected. This meant a few added months for the volunteer nurses who did not leave until February 1946. They returned to the Union by ship, from Tewfik, a military port near Suez, which they did not see as plague raged there and they had to be taken by tender to the ship. On arrival in Durban they were granted generous leave, regardless of leave in Egypt. A few worked again in South Africa when their leaves were finished, but it was soon time for the long trip back, this time in conditions of peace, without the drills, life-jackets, depth charges, etc. of the earlier trips (30).

Some nurses had found themselves even closer to hostilities near the Suez Canal where a hospital for one thousand patients, No.106 SA General Hospital, was set up at Quassassin. This hospital was to follow the Eighth Army westward, eventually being sited near Tripoli, where casualties from the campaign in Sicily were treated. It was to cross to Italy and follow the armies from Bari to Rome. Another South African hospital, No. 108 Mobile Hospital, had some twenty Canadian nurses serving there. They too found themselves in Italy eventually, but after a direct trip from Durban to Taranto. The conditions were particularly harsh for the hospital was serving the 6th South African Armoured Division, attached to the United States 5th Army, which fought its way through heavy terrain at times, across the rugged Apennines, with some weeks spent in several of Italy's most famous cities of art, Florence, Orvieto, and Bologna, before ending their part of the war in Milan(31). Some of the Canadian nurses attached to Nos. 107 and 108, SA General Hospitals in Italy were also sent to assist in British hospitals there.

Service for many was continued for a few months in England, particularly in Brighton where No.109 SA Hospital was established. Its chief task was to look after South Africans who had been prisoners of war, before they took ship for home. It was, coincidentally, a transit stop for many Canadian nurses returning from Italy.

Miss Nancy V. Lee is one of several Canadian nurses now living in Victoria who served in Italy with the SAMNS. She recalls the trip on the hospital ship *Tairea* 'all lights blazing' from Durban to Egypt and, after some six weeks there, at Helwan twenty-five miles west of Cairo, journeying again on the same ship to Taranto. The poverty in war-torn Italy was unforgettable, windows broken everywhere, including in hospital wards, water-systems destroyed so that all water had to be brought by military personnel and much carried by the nurses themselves, the cold, and above-all, the extreme hunger of many of the Italians. At times the nurses turned to running soup kitchens. They lived and worked in every imaginable shelter, from convents to castles, from girls' schools to tents and in one of Italy's most modern hospitals near Milan. There were also pleasant

leaves, either at resort hotels or sight-seeing in the famed art centres of Italy. (32)

Many of the nurses, perhaps one-third, married during the war, some in South Africa, and others near the war-zone. One nurse recalls that the fortunes of war prevented her marriage until a happy fate placed both she and her fiance' in Italy for a few weeks. Marriage in Bari was followed by a honeymoon at a YWCA, the only accommodation open to couples ... all the luxury hotels used by the Allied officers (as which the Canadian nurses were classified), being strictly segregated!

All the Canadian nurses interviewed are unanimous in their very fond memories of the years spent serving with the South African forces. It was for all of them an unforgettable adventure, which with the passing of time has left memories of interesting travels, warm friendships and continued correspondence with South African friends, of dangerous travels in submarine-invested waters, the grimness of war and sufferings witnessed, and sometimes endured. Time has removed much and only the warmth of the friendships made in the years of the Second World War remains.

Footnotes

1. A good collection of these was given by one of the nurses, Miss Elizabeth L. Clement, retired in Victoria, to the Public Archives of British Columbia (PABC). I am very grateful to her for having shared her memories with me and led me to *The Ontario Springbok* collection (NWP 940.5475/059).

Miss Nancy V. Lee also shared her memories with me as did three other nurses, also retired in Victoria who wish to remain anonymous. I wish to thank them all.

2. G.W.L. Nicholson's *Canada's Nursing Sisters*, Samuel Stevens, Hakkert & Company, Toronto, 1975, has devoted several pages (pp. 174-8 passim) to this chapter of the history of Canadian nurses in wartime. Part of his documentation was obtained from the nurses themselves, some of whom I have also interviewed or who lent me notes and newspaper clippings. Another useful source was 'Canadian Associations with the South African Military Nursing Service,' by D.O. Stratford, in *S.A. Nursing Journal*, March 1969, Vol. XXXVI, No.3, pp.33-35.

3. Clement reminiscences.

4. 'On the 30th August, 1941, the pay for volunteers was as follows:

Deputy Matron-in-Chief 20S 0d per day

Principal Matrons 18S 0d per day

Senior Matrons 16S 0d per day

Junior Matrons 14S 0d per day

Nursing Sisters 11S 0d per day

Staff Nurses 8S 6d per day

Senior Probationer Nurses 5S 6d per day

Probationer Nurses 5S 0d per day

with free rations, light, fuel and quarters, or an allowance of 25d a day each, in lieu of rations and quarters, if not provided. An allowance of 4d a day was also paid for laundry. Qualified and specially appointed members received a grant of £20 towards the cost of prescribed uniform, and unqualified members received £10 only, but also an additional £10 if required to leave the Union or Mandated Territory. All were paid a uniform allowance of 1s a day after 6 months service.

In 1943 there was an increase in pay and gratuities. As from the 1st October 1943, the members of the SAMNS received the following pay and gratuities, namely:

- (a) Probationer nurses on joining; and for the first year of service - basic pay 5/- a day.
- (b) Senior probationer nurses after 12 months' of satisfactory service as probationers - basic pay 6/- a day.
- (c) Senior Probationer nurses after 12 months' satisfactory service in that rank - basic pay 7/- a day.
- (d) All members of the SAMNS to have their laundry allowance increased to 6d a day.

5. The South African Nursing Services (Benefits) Order, P.C. 6938, did this on November 15, 1945. *Canadian War Orders and Regulations*, 1945, v.4, no. 8, November 26, 1945, (King's Printer, Ottawa, for Statutory Orders and Regulations Division, Privy Council Office) pp.232-3.

6. Nicholson, p.175.

7. The 'Blue Oath' was instituted on 4 February 1943. Information supplied in 1982 by the SADF Documentation service, who also provided a copy of the oath.

8. May MacDonald of Regina, 'Canadian Nurses Have "Whirl" in New York City,' Vancouver Sun, November 18, 1941. The recollections of Miss Jean Robinson, who travelled with the third group appeared in *The Ontario Springbok* of November 1961. She went to South Africa on the *Warwick Castle*, May 26, arrived in Durban July 4 and soon was posted to Roberts Heights in Pretoria.

9. Reminiscences of a nurse.

10. *Ibid.*

11. *Ibid.*

12. *Ibid.*

13. Nicholson, p.175.

14. Nicholson, p.176. She was a member of a family which gave distinguished service to Canada, for her brother Mitchell Sharpe was to be a long-term civil servant, concerned in particular with trade and commerce. In 1963 he became Minister of Trade and Commerce, taking up the Finance port folio in 1965 and becoming Secretary of State for External Affairs from 1968 to 1974.

15. Information on the *Andes* from her reminiscences and from National Defence Headquarters, Ottawa.

16. Clement reminiscences.

17. Clement reminiscences.

18. The cost was £328 000.00. SADF Documentation Service.

19. SADF Documentation Service, and Clement reminiscences.

20. Nicholson, p.176.

21. Clement reminiscences.
22. *Ibid.*
23. *Ibid.*
24. Clement reminiscences.
25. *Ibid.* One of these, Miss Val Howie (a good friend of many readers of this Journal. *Editor*), who served with the Canadian 'sisters,' has published an account of her service in 'A Military Nursing Saga: Service for the Duration from beginning to the end of War,' *Indaba*, February 1978, Vol. XXXII, No.378, pp.9-14,18.
26. *Ibid.*
27. Clement reminiscences.
28. Clement reminiscences and Nicholson, p.177.
29. Clement reminiscences.
30. Miss Clement, whose account has largely been the source of these few pages, left South Africa on the *Cape Town Castle* on July 15,1946 and arrived in Vancouver on August 13.
31. Nicholson, p.177.
32. Miss Nancy V. Lee's reminiscences, and Miss Val Howie, *op. cit.*

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