Four faces of nursing and the First World War

Paula Kitching

With the centenary approaching, article after article will appear on battles, the men who fought, those who refused, those that died, those who returned and those that made the decisions. There will be articles on the home front and the women that stepped into the men's shoes often to be expelled from them once the men returned. However, the First World War took more British women to the front of the conflict in an official capacity than any modern war before it. This article explores the experiences of some of those women.

It is the image of Florence Nightingale that is brought to mind in most people's thoughts on war and nurses. Floating around in her long dress, tending to the needs of the brave soldiers whilst lobbying the establishment to change the despicable treatment of the men that fought, Florence Nightingale is an almost mythical figure of campaigning compassionate womanhood. It is true she made a difference, as did her equally daring and courageous contemporary Mary Seacole, to the treatment of those unfortunate enough to be injured during the Crimea war (1853-56). However, perhaps both their most important actions were simply to highlight the appalling realities of the provision of medical care for the injured servicemen at all.

Nightingale was near the Crimea in an official capacity, invited there along with 38 other nurses to tend to the wounded of the Crimean conflict that were evacuated to Scutari Hospital in Istanbul, Turkey. She was part of a changing approach to the treatment of the professional soldier, recruited by the Secretary of State for War and retained by the War Office on her return, she worked within the establishment to improve medical conditions.

The difference that her and her nurses had made, followed by her decision to train and support the field of nursing back in London, had a direct bearing on approaches to medical services in war. She wrote: 'The Introduction of Female Nursing into Military Hospitals' as well as establishing her own training courses. When Nightingale's work reached the ears of Queen Victoria, the monarch responded by setting up the Royal Victoria Hospital at Netley, Southampton. The hospital opened in 1863 to care for military patients.

The military took the decision that from 1866 nurses should be formally appointed to Military General Hospitals. This was followed by the creation of the Army Nursing Service in 1881. Women recruited to the service served in military hospitals in the UK but were also dispatched to the Boer War in South Africa, Sudan, Egypt and anywhere that a British medical hospital was established.

There was no doubting the impact that professionally trained medical teams of doctors and nurses could have on survival and recovery rates for injured and sick servicemen. Having men recover and return to service was an asset in a professional army where a an endless pool of conscripted recruits did not exist. The Royal Army Medical Corps was formed by Royal Warrant on the 23 June 1898. The Director General of the Army Medical Services was Alfred Keogh placed army nursing sisters of the Army Nursing Services onto the war establishment of the Medical Services in 1901. Next in 1902, The War Office officially formed The Queen Alexandra's Imperial Military Nursing Service (QAIMNS) under a Royal Warrant to replace the Army Nursing Service and the Indian Nursing Service.

In 1902 no national formal qualification for nursing existed, instead there were a mixture of hospital based courses for different types of conditions (after all this is pre NHS), such as general nursing, fever conditions, nurses for children. Training course

(top) The Voluntary Aid Detachment (VAD) base at Etaples. © IWM (Q 8026)
(centre) The surgical ward at Chateau Mauritien, Wimereux. © IWM (Q 8005)
(bottom) Women of Queen Mary's Army Auxiliary Corps in Le Touquet. © IWM (Q 8031)

Vera Brittain as a Voluntary Aid Detachment nurse, 1915.
Courtesy of VB Estate/McMaster University Library, Hamilton, Canada

Vera Brittain and her brother Edward, 1915.
He was killed in Italy in 1918.

varied across the board, despite this QAIMNS nurses were required to have completed three years training before joining, be aged between 25 and 35 years of age, well educated, unmarried and of 'high social status' it was to be an elite service. Members tended to be the daughters of army officers, farmers, clergy, merchants and professional men. The exacting standards made recruitment difficult and in 1908 a QAIMNS Reserve was formed to meet the gaps in home hospitals.

When war broke out in 1914 some of the strict membership conditions were relaxed but in the main the service remained as it always had. The big increase was in the QAIMNS Reserves. At the beginning of August 2014 there were less than 200 members of the reserve available to be mobilised. At the end of 1914 over 2,200 professional nurses from across the UK had joined on yearly contracts with over 12,000 serving as part of the Reserve during the First World War. The yearly contracts were a stipulation by the War Office – not for the women's own professional needs but so that she could be dismissed with the minimal of fuss if the war ended.

When war was declared in August 1914 the numbers of Britain's military land forces were shockingly low compared with those on the continent. Despite the levels of professionalism of those that did exist (and that professionalism was very high and very well respected) it was apparent from the start that new recruits were going to be needed. Lord Kitchener, Secretary of State for War, launched his mass drive for volunteers resulting in Kitchener's army.

Even before 1914 it was apparent that if a full scale land war was to break out involving British troops, additional support would be needed. In 1909 the 'Scheme for the Organisation of Voluntary Aid in England and Wales' was set up by the War Office with a similar scheme established in Scotland at the end of the year. This created male and female Voluntary Aid detachments to support territorial medical services. The VAD's were organised and trained by the Red Cross and St John's Ambulance Association. Even before war broke out the units had become popular with 1823 female detachments and 551male ones. Once war started the VAD's were formally under the Joint War committee of the British Red Cross and St John of Jerusalem. Professional medical support including nurses was going to be a key element of the support and supply train of Britain's approach in this conflict.

The women volunteers came with a variety of skills and ages, although most would be described as being middle class, with some upper class volunteers. The majority had never been in paid employment, yet, despite this they went on to staff hospitals and other auxiliary units. The thousands of women in the military hospitals at home and overseas provided the face of home and peacetime to many of those injured. They carried out basic nursing support and in some cases with experience advanced surgical support and care, but they also spent time with patients, writing letters for those unable to and providing comfort to those who needed to share the horror of what they had seen and been part of.

For many women becoming a VAD meant being able to 'do their bit' just as their brothers, fathers, uncles, sweethearts and sons were. In whatever capacity they served they were often required to face the reality of the conflict, stripped of romance and idealism in a way that they had not been expecting. They were at the front line both physically and emotionally.

Vera Brittain

Perhaps the most famous of the VAD nurses was the writer Vera Brittain. Vera Brittain was born in Newcastle-under-Lyme in 1893 to a wealthy family. She was educated at boarding school and went to Somerville College, Oxford University, to study English Literature. In the summer of 1915 after one year at Oxford she delayed her degree to become a VAD nurse, serving throughout the war in London, Malta and France. She is perhaps typical of the VAD profile: well bred, educated and with no practical experiences outside of the home environment and yet she knuckled down and got on with the long hours, in difficult conditions, to treat the horrific wounds that are the nature of battle.

During the war she kept a diary and a regular correspondence with her brother Edward Brittain MC, her fiancé Roland Leighton and her two close friends Victor Richardson and Geoffrey Thurlow. In 1916 she wrote to her brother that: 'If the war spares me it will be my one aim to immortalise in a book the story of us four.' Her fiancé had already been killed by that time. In her correspondence and her memoir *Testament of Youth* she is honest in her description of the hard work her role entailed and the terrible sacrifice that she saw by men and women around her.

She records the experience of near fainting when faced with a gangrenous wound and of the injustice of doctor shortages at a time that the War Office

Cavell in the garden with her two dogs before the outbreak of the First World War. © IWM (Q 32930)

A group photograph showing Nurse Edith Cavell (seated centre) with a group of her multinational student nurses whom she trained in Brussels. © IWM (Q 70204)

was refusing the offer of women doctors joining up.

In the end Vera was the only one of the five to survive. Both the experiences of loss and her own experiences as a nurse left an incredible mark upon her. Her poems reflect her feelings and the realities of conflict just as the male war poets did.

> But still the stars above the camp shine on,
> Giving no answer for our sorrow's ease,
> And one more day with the Last Post has gone,
> Dying upon the breeze.
>
> *Taken from the 'Last Post' from the Verses of a V.A.D. Etaples 1917.*

The work that for many defined the loss of a generation *A Testament of Youth* was published in 1933 after many years of trying to grapple with the war years. It is a remarkable memoir of that time, recording the suffering that she and others encountered and continued to live with.

Her first-hand experience of war made her into a lifelong pacifist, a champion for women's rights and a political campaigner. Although she did marry, her relationship was always under the shadow of the loss of her three friends and her brother. When she died in 1970, her daughter Lady Shirley Williams (the former Labour, SDLP and Liberal Democrat MP) scattered her ashes on the grave of Vera's brother wartime grave in Granezza British Cemetery, Italy as had been her wishes – in death she returned to the era that had marked her forever.

Edith Cavell

One of the best known nurses at the time of the First World War and for the years immediately following it was Edith Cavell. Edith Cavell was a vicar's daughter born on 4 December 1865 in Norfolk. Educated privately, she adopted much of her family's religious devotion. In her twenties Edith worked as a governess living for a time with a family in Belgium. When her father became ill in 1895 she returned home to help tend him. At the age of 30 she decided to train as a nurse.

She trained in London and spent some time in hospitals in Maidstone and Manchester. In 1907 Edith went to Belgium to work for a Doctor who wanted to professionalise nursing there (up till then the majority of nursing was still carried out by nuns in Belgium). Edith was involved with the training of new nurses and by 1912, was providing nurses for three hospitals, 24 communal schools and 13 kindergartens. She was also lecturing on nursing to all sections of the Belgian medical community.

She was in Norfolk on holiday when Germany invaded Belgium but she returned immediately to her hospital which was quickly converted into a Red Cross Hospital, for German as well as Belgian soldiers. When Brussels was captured the hospital became a German military hospital – 60 English nurses were sent home, but Edith Cavell and her chief assistant Miss Wilkins remained. The British Expeditionary Force (BEF) was now in action in Belgium as part of the push back against the Germans.

The autumn of 1914 saw heavy fighting. A number of British soldiers found themselves behind enemy lines and made their way to the hospital – realising that Edith was British they appealed for help. With the help of the Belgian resistance Edith became part of an underground network helping to smuggle Allied servicemen out of German occupied Belgium and out to Holland.

In August 1915 a Belgian collaborator gave Edith and the network away to the Germans (the man was later caught and charged by the French). No incriminating papers were found but the network had been revealed and on 5 August Edith was arrested.

She was held and interrogated for 10 weeks and kept in solitary confinement. Eventually she was tricked into admitting everything, having been told that the others had already confessed.

Her confession made the charge of treason easy. On 11 October she was put on military trial and along with a named Belgian accomplice, Philippe Baucq, she was pronounced guilty and sentenced to death by firing squad. The sentence was carried out the in the early hours of the next day.

It is estimated that Edith helped approximately 200 Allied servicemen to escape. She believed that her actions were part of her responsibility as a nurse; not to have helped them would have put the soldiers' lives in danger.

From the moment of her arrest Edith became a famous martyr figure. The British authorities decided not to lobby on her behalf claiming that they would only make the situation for her worse. The Americans and Spanish, though, were horrified that a woman nurse had been arrested and was being interrogated. They campaigned tirelessly for her, writing letters to the German authorities and the newspapers. The American official in Belgium, Brand Whitlock, stayed up half the night of the

11/12 of October trying to get a stay of execution.

On the night before her execution an English Chaplain, Stirling Gahan was allowed in to see her. He reported her as being calm and reflective he also reported her last words:

> Standing as I do in view of God and Eternity, I realise that patriotism is not enough, I must have no hatred or bitterness towards anyone.

Across Britain, France and the USA the execution of a Red Cross nurse who had been 'helping' people seemed appalling to the public. To the authorities and the media it became a powerful tool of propaganda about the viciousness of the Germans. Edith took on a heroine like status especially when her last words were publicised. Visit a French Museum with a collection from the period such as the Historial de la Grande Guerre, Péronne, Somme Battlefields, France and you will see on display some of the merchandise produced after her death celebrating her as a sacrificed heroine.

Her body was buried near to where she was shot but at the end of the war it was returned to England and she is buried in Norwich Cathedral. A statue to Edith Cavell is outside Norwich Cathedral and in central London. Her family set up a trust to create care homes for nurses to recover from their experiences, especially of war. The Cavell Nurses Trust still exists to this day.

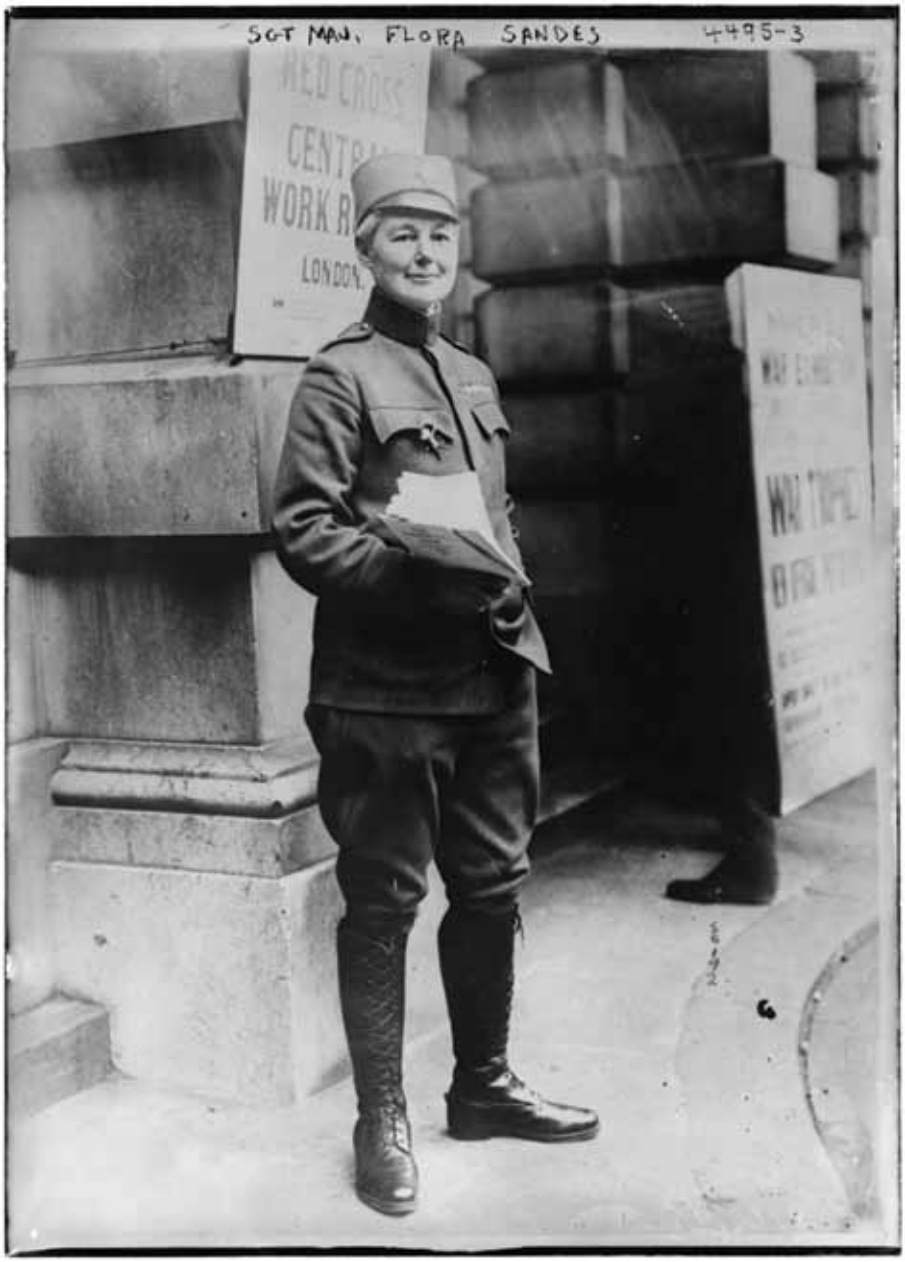
Flora Sandes

Another daughter of a clergyman propelled into nursing had a very different experience from that of Edith Cavell.

Flora Sandes was born on 22 January 1876 in Nether Poppleton, Yorkshire. Her father was a clergyman, originally from Ireland and as a child her family moved around to different religious postings. She was educated by a governess and always something of a 'tomboy' for her time – enjoying riding and shooting. In her spare time she trained with the Ladies' Nursing Yeomanry. Immediately at the outbreak of the First World War she volunteered to become a nurse, but her lack of qualifications meant she was turned down.

Undeterred, she joined a St John's Ambulance unit organised by an American and left England for Serbia on 12 August 1914. The intention was to help with the humanitarian crisis there which had happened as the Austrians, with their Balkan allies, had caused as they attacked Serbia, a key part in triggering the whole conflict.

Flora Sandes returned to London to raise funds for medical supplies, after only six weeks Flora's country-wide tour had yielded more than £2,000.
Courtesy of Julie Wheelwright, Oxford University Press.



Once in Serbia Flora Sandes joined the Serbian Red Cross. She returned home to England for a time in 1915 but decided to return, reaching Serbia again in early November 1915. Despite warnings from many not to travel into Serbia especially from the British consul in the area, Flora made her way to an ambulance unit and worked for the Second Infantry Regiment of the Serbian Army. Conditions were already difficult with disease causing as many deaths to the Serbian forces as battle injuries. Serbian forces were under-equipped, relying on the limited support of their allies for military supplies.

By the end of November 1915 the Serbian Army was under attack from the Austro-German and Bulgarian forces. Flora along with large sections of the Serbian army retreated into Kosovo and the Albanian mountains. In her book *An English Woman Sergeant in the Serbian Army* she describes an offer by the English consul to be evacuated to Salonika just as the retreat is occurring, but instead decides to stay with her Serbian colleagues. She then goes on to describe how she checks with the Serbian military that she is travelling with, if as a woman she will cause more of an anxiety for them than a help. The response she records is:

> For them it would be better if I stopped, because it would encourage the soldiers, who already knew me, to whose simple minds I represented, so to speak, the whole of England. The only thought that buoyed them up at that time and still does, was that England would never forsake them.

Whilst travelling through the mountains in the severe winter conditions with Bulgarian soldiers on

Nellie Spindler

the attack, Flora formally became part of the Serbian forces. Armed and dressed in riding breeches, then uniform, she became part of the army, fighting in battles and roughing it in makeshift shelters.

On her first arrival in Serbia Flora did not speak the language but as she travelled with her new colleagues she picked it up as well as a great many of their customs. The experience of the retreat and living as a soldier provided her with a remarkable insight:

> Before when I had been working in the hospitals, and I used to ask the men where it hurt them, I had often been rather puzzled at the general reply of the new arrivals, "Sve me boli" ("Everything hurts me"), it seemed such a vague description and such a curious malady; but in these days I learnt to understand perfectly that they meant by it, when you seem to be nothing but one pain from the crown of your aching head to the soles of your blistered feet, and I thought it was a very good thing that next time I was working in a military hospital I should be able to enter into my patients feelings and realise that all he felt he wanted was to be let alone to sleep about a week and only rouse up for his meals.

Flora and her company along with thousands of the retreating Serbians were eventually evacuated to Corfu for some time before returning to Serbia. It would have been perfectly possible from there for her to leave and return to Britain, instead she remained part of the Serbian forces having risen to the rank of corporal.

Once back in Serbia she remained a fighting member of her regiment until during a serious battle for the Serbians to regain Bitola (Monastir) in 1916, when she was seriously wounded by a grenade. Flora had been engaged in hand to hand combat at the time of her injury and received the highest decoration of the Serbian military, the Order of the Karadorde's star, she was also promoted to Sergeant Major.

That year she also published her autobiography *An English Woman-Sergeant in the Serbian Army*, based on her letters and diaries. She published it to raise money for the Serbian Army. Her injury had left her unable to fight and she was reassigned to running a hospital, with a return to nursing. At the end of the war she was commissioned as an officer (the first woman to be commissioned). She didn't leave the Serbian army until October 1922.

Flora married a fellow officer Yuri Yudenitch, in May 1927. She was recalled along with her husband to military service in 1941 but the German invasion was too swift for them to take part. Her husband died in September 1941. Flora spent the last years of her life in Suffolk and died there in November 1956, her obituary was in *The Times* newspaper. Flora's autobiographies do not paper over the hardships she experienced but neither do they concentrate on gory details. Instead she tells a remarkable tale of fortitude, determination and loyalty to a group of men and a nation that she had adopted and appears to have adopted her. Starting in nursing she travelled a long road to be the only British woman formally accepted as a fighting soldier in a military unit.

Nellie Spindler

However, the story of Flora Sandes is very much the exception and not the usual story of nursing, and some would argue not formally a nurse at all.

For the last real figure it is a return to those who went as part of the inherited tradition of Nightingale – a member of the QAIMNS, a young woman called Nellie Spindler.

Nellie was born in Wakefield in 1891 into an ordinary family. Her father was a policeman who had risen to the rank of inspector before the war. She decided upon a career in nursing and trained

at the Township Infirmary, Leeds from 1912 to 1915. After her training she responded to the growing call of people to volunteer for the war effort and joined the QAIMNS Reserves. She served as a Staff Nurse at Whittington Military Hospital, Litchfield, from November 1915 until May 1917.

In May 1917 she was sent to a Casualty Clearing Station in Flanders. A Casualty Clearing Station (CCS) was a mobile medical station close to the front line. It was there that casualties were removed to straight from the battlefield and would be given whatever medical attention was available. Depending on the size and permanency of the site, this could be anything from a rudimentary treatment to full surgical operations. A CCS could be forced to pack up and move with little notice if it came under fire or was required to be in a different position. Usually the CCS would be made of tents and makeshift buildings.

As time went on and some of the battlefronts became more permanent some CCS had more permanent structures and formed part of a more complex medical system of care and treatment before the sick and injured were evacuated further back behind the line. Most CCS were often marked not just be their tents but by the small burial ground that was inevitably created next to them. For the modern day visitor to the battlefields of the Western Front, many of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission (CWGC) cemeteries that now exist are there as a result of being on the site of a former CCS.

The staff of a CCS were a mixture of medical (surgical) male doctors from the RAMC, nurses – female and orderlies, or VAD's. Some lived close to the site, billeted in tents whilst others might be put up in the nearest town of village and be expected to travel to their shift each day.

The CCS were often very close to the front line and officially this was one of the closest places to the front a woman could be stationed.

A number of CCS existed on the approach to the town of Ypres, Belgium, a site of some of the fiercest fighting of the whole of the First World War. It was in one of these (now the site of Brandhoek CWGC cemetery) that Nellie went to serve in May 1917. She was there as the third Battle of Ypres (Passchendaele) began in July 1917, treating the large number of casualties that the battle created. However, the CCS that she was at was close to the transport supply lines and became a target for the German bombardment. On 24 August 1917 the CCS was hit by enemy fire and a number of nurses were injured, including Nellie. After about 20 minutes she died of her injuries. The CCS was packed up and all members evacuated to the site of Lijssenthoek CCS hospital and now CWGC cemetery. With no time to bury the dead, Nellie's body along with the other casualties was taken with them.

Nellie was buried at Lijssenthoek with a full military funeral, including the Last Post played over her grave. Just like every other confirmed death in the conflict, her family were informed by telegram from the War Office that she was 'Killed in Action'. She had an obituary in her local paper and in the *British Journal of Nursing*. Nellie was 26 when she was killed.

Today her grave is one of 10,755 graves at Lijssenthoek CWGC cemetery, the only woman to be buried there. Although very few nurses were actually killed in action so close to the front (she is only one of two buried in Belgium), it doesn't take away from the very real danger that they faced in their role as a nurse serving overseas in the First World War.

Back home in England Nellie's death was a very clear reminder of how the war was an all-encompassing beast. Men and women were its victims and all would pay the price either physically with their lives or with their battle-scarred futures.

Of course these four women: Vera, Edith, Flora and Nellie are just a fragment of the women's nursing story of the First World War. Over 90,000 women served as VAD's over the course of the war, over 12,000 with QAIMNS and its reserves, 8,140 as part of the Territorial Force Nursing Service and thousands more as Assistant Nurses, Special Military Probationers and volunteers. The experiences of the women who served so close to the front lines in any number of capacities such as nurses, drivers, office clerks and cleaners for military quarters have all been overlooked, overshadowed by the statistics of the men that served and never returned.

Yet these women were valuable eyewitnesses to a war that changed the established world. Many returned to civilian life physically injured and mentally scarred by their experiences, for most there was no time to discuss what they had been part of – everyone had done their bit. The role of women in conflict and in civilian life was changed forever by the First World War. Those women and their actions would influence the next generation of young women who would recognise that, although women were far from being considered equal they no longer wanted to be ignored.

The experience of the women so close to the front line deserves a stronger presence in remembering the First World War and in the research that the centenary should provoke.

Of course these four women Vera, Edith, Flora and Nellie are just a fragment of the women's nursing story of the First World War.

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