

SYNOPSIS

WWI Canadian Army Nursing Sisters Serving Overseas

Introduction

Much is made of the changes in military tactics and equipment (i.e.: airplane, tank, machine gun, etc.) during WWI but a comparable change in military medical care occurred with the addition of trained female nurses to the medical staff. Under the guidance of a limited number of doctors, Canadian nursing sisters managed their hospital wards, directed the ward's enlisted medical orderlies in addition to their hands on medical and spiritual care of their patients. The improved medical care saved many soldiers' lives in addition to returning wounded soldiers to their units faster. It should be mentioned that Canadian nursing sisters treated any soldier arriving at their hospital, not just Canadian soldiers.

Treatment & Importance

The primary philatelic challenge is that most of the time an envelope from a female soldier (nursing sister) looks the same as from a male soldier. For each of the former there were 170 of the latter. All countries overseas to which Canadian Army Medical Corps (CAMC) nursing sisters were appointed are represented in this exhibit. Most nursing sisters served in France and/or England over the four years of WWI. In this exhibit the country imbalance is due to only four Canadian hospitals being sent to Greece for two years and one Canadian hospital spending a year in Cairo, Egypt. Combined they were staffed by about 200 nursing sisters. Four CAMC nursing sisters were appointed to the Anglo-Russian Military Hospital, St. Petersburg, Russia, each for six months. In total, material related to 3.6% of all Canadian nursing sisters serving overseas is presented in this exhibit.

Knowledge & Research

As Canadian nursing sisters were simultaneously serving in France and England for more than four years and the Mediterranean for two years, it was decided to follow a Canadian soldier wounded at the front as he received treatment from Canadian nursing sisters at respective types of military hospital. For security reasons the envelopes have no return address or addressor. Therefore, identifying outgoing nursing sister covers involves a dance encompassing APO postmark location (where known), censor cachet (where known), hospital nominal roll (where found), comparing censor's signature & addressee's last names to listing of Canadian nursing sisters. Also contributing are published Canadian military official histories for when and where most Canadian military hospitals were located.

Condition & Rarity

The most identifiable mail is that addressed to Canadian nursing sisters. However, these items had to survive being stored in a trunk as she lived out of the trunk for several years, changed hospitals, went on leave and in some cases was in hospital as a patient. Only two covers from Russia are reported and one is included in this exhibit. Also displayed is a self-censored cover from N/S Margaret Parks MD, the only female doctor in the CAMC. Mail from Lemnos and Salonika, Greece, (respectively Gallipoli campaign and Serbian campaign) and Cairo, Egypt, (Mesopotamian campaign) are highly sought after. The condition of envelopes, postmarks and cachets are the best available under wartime conditions overseas.

Presentation

A few photo postcards are included for variety. As they are without publishers there is no deltiology to discuss. Taking photographs of military personnel and material was forbidden so postcards are elusive.

With the centenary of WWI there is an increased interest in what Canadian military personnel did during WWI. Accumulation of this material has taken more than 30 years to accumulate.

WWI Canadian Army Nursing Sisters Serving Overseas

Postal history of WWI Canadian army nursing sisters serving overseas is displayed through mail sent or received by 89 (3.6%) of them.

Canadian army nursing sisters (N/S) were the first women in the world to serve as commissioned officers in their national army. Nursing sisters were granted the rank, pay and allowance of an Army Lieutenant and Matrons were granted the rank of Army Captain. When WWI was declared, five nursing sisters were serving in the Canadian Permanent Army Medical Corps. During WWI 2,504 Canadian nursing sisters served overseas as members of the Canadian Army Medical Corps (CAMC) and 39 died overseas. Nursing sisters served in army hospitals, ie: #1 Canadian Stationary Hospital (#1 CSH), #1 Canadian General Hospital (#1 CGH) and special hospital (Westcliffe Eye & Ear). In 1915 nursing sisters were also posted to Casualty Clearing Stations (CCS) [in Korean War a Mobile Army Surgical Hospital (MASH)].



Royal Red Cross, 2nd Class
presented to N/S E. Francis Upton

Incoming and outgoing military mail was received at a hospital's Orderly Room. The Canadian Postal Corps generally arranged for incoming mail to be delivered to the unit with the rations. Outgoing mail was forwarded to the nearest Army Post Office (APO) for initial sorting and bagging. The bag types were: mail to Canada, to other countries and British military addresses. At the Base APO (BAPO) Canadian mail was resorted into bundles to one of 14 Canadian cities. The city bundles were combined at London, England, for forwarding to each Canadian city.

For security reasons outgoing Canadian military envelopes have no return address or addressor. The envelopes from 422,000 soldiers overseas look the same as those from 2,500 nursing sisters overseas. Therefore, identifying outgoing nursing sister covers involves a dance encompassing APO postmark location (where known), censor cachet (where reported), hospital nominal roll (where found), check censor's signature & addressee's names to a list of Canadian nursing sisters.

Each postal history item represents a day in the life of a Canadian nursing sister as she served in a foreign country, learned military life and applied new medical procedures to military nursing. Canadian nursing sisters went overseas without the right to vote and returned home with the vote.

Noteworthy items are highlighted by a black border and important text is underlined.

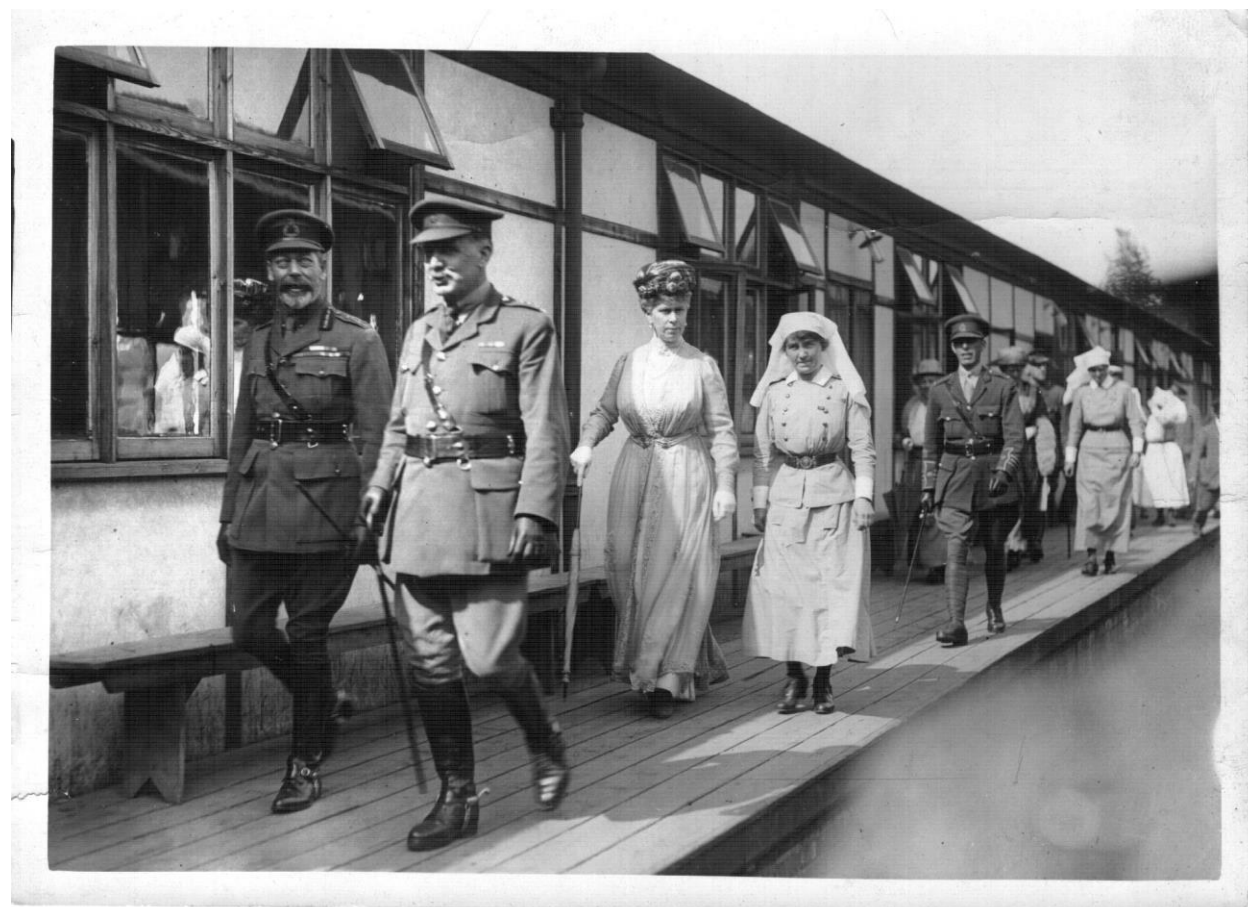
References:

- Daniel, F.W., "The Field Censor Systems of the Armies of the British Empire 1914-1918", 1984, Private publisher (Censor #)
- McPhail, A., "Official History of the Canadian Forces in the Great War 1914-19, The Medical Services", 1925, F.A. Acland.
- Nicholson, G.W.L., "Canada's Nursing Sisters", 1975, Samuel Stevens Hakkert & Co
- Proud, E.B., "History of British Army Postal Service, Volume II", 1980, Proud Bailey Ltd (APO #)

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Through mail to/from 89 nursing sisters over four years we will follow a wounded soldier in the order he would meet Canadian nursing sisters in their medical facilities. Within each section the order is by hospital number and its location on the date the item was posted. All countries where Canadian nursing sisters served are represented.

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Ontario Military Hospital, Kent, England. May 29, 1919 Royal Visit. King George V (L) with Col. D.W. McPherson (OC), Queen Mary with Matron M.H. Smith, LtCol R.A. Bowie (2i/c) and N/S J. Stronach. Photograph by The Central News Ltd, London.