NURSES AT WAR

Newly released service records show how the Great War transformed nursing. Erin Dean reports

On August 21, 1917, staff nurse Nellie Spindler died when a shell hit the casualty clearing station where she was working in Belgium. The account of her death in the line of duty is one of more than 15,000 first world war nursing service records made available online for the first time by the National Archives.

Included in the 37 pages of Ms Spindler’s file is the letter to her mother in Wakefield, Yorkshire, informing her that her daughter had been killed.

The records reveal that the 26-year-old nurse had trained for three years at the Infirmary in Leeds. She died at 11.16am at clearing station number 44.

National Archives principal military records specialist William Spencer says the level of detail in the nursing records surpasses that which has survived for soldiers who served in the 1914 to 1918 conflict. The average nursing record is a substantial 50 to 60 pages, while one senior nurse has more than 600 pages in her file.

Start of registration

The involvement of nurses in the first world war led to major advances for the profession in its long campaign for nurse registration.

The Nurses Registration Act was passed in December 1919, leading to the formation of the General Nursing Council and the nursing register.

The fight for regulation, which began when doctors were registered more than 50 years earlier in 1858, was given added fuel by the regulation of midwives in 1902.

According to the Nursing and Midwifery Council’s website, the war ‘provided the final impetus to the establishment of nursing regulation, partly because of the specific contribution made by nurses to the war effort and also as a reflection of the increased contribution of women more generally in society’.

A sister and a matron from Queen Alexandra’s Imperial Military Nursing Service

Taken as a whole, the archive is an important contribution to the history of women, not just nursing. ‘It records the changing roles of women in warfare and society, the transition from home to the workplace that occurred in great numbers in the first world war,’ says Mr Spencer.

‘There was a large transfer of nurses from civilian roles into the military, and what they experienced in most cases was quite different from what they had seen before.’

The records cover nurses from Queen Alexandra’s Imperial Military Nursing Service, its reserve service and the Territorial Force Nursing Service.

Before the war, most military nursing was carried out by male orderlies. By 1914 military nursing had a proud history, but nurses’ service in the Crimean and Boer conflicts was on a tiny scale compared with that during the Great War. This was the first war where more soldiers died from injuries than from communicable diseases such as dysentery.

Nine million men died.

‘Nurses were pivotal in the first world war, taking on male roles in many cases and seeing damaged bodies on an industrial scale,’ says Mr Spencer.

The nurses were stationed at home in the UK, on the western front in Belgium and France, and further afield in eastern Europe and Egypt. ‘They were as close to the front line as the authorities could place them without them being in too much danger,’ says Mr Spencer.

Strict guidelines

Relatively few nurses were killed by enemy action. Of the 200 or so British nurses who died during the war, the majority succumbed to illnesses such as influenza and pneumonia.

Sue Light, a former military nurse who has carried out extensive research on the first world war, says that nurses lived by strict guidelines. They were all meant to sit down together at mealtimes and use tablecloths and fine china. They were instructed to bring a teapot, a camp bed, an iron, a rug and a pair of wellington boots as part of their kit.

The Sick Sisters’ Hospital in the Boulogne area of France cared for unwell nurses, and there was a string of rest clubs where they could stay for a day or two, or visit for tea, to read, write and relax, says Ms Light.

For many the war offered a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to travel. The Army Medical Services Museum in Surrey has memorabilia collected by nurses during their leave.

Museum director Pete Starling says: ‘We tend to have the same
A critical shortage of nurses prompted the authorities to admit married and widowed women to the service, and to consider applicants from a much wider range of hospitals.

**Peacetime hardships**

"Before the war, nurses tended to be daughters of army officers," says Ms Light. "Then during the war you got the daughters of sergeants and corporals. These women, who served as trained nurses, would never in a million years have been accepted into the regular service."

In one case preserved in the records, a former Welsh factory worker was recruited to the reserve forces. But when doors opened during the four years of conflict, they swiftly slammed shut when peace returned.

The Queen Alexandra regulars became, once again, a socially and educationally elite group. Married women could no longer serve and thousands of nurses were left searching for scarce jobs after the military hospitals closed. Many wrote to national newspapers complaining that they had been demobilised with only a few days' notice and had no job and no money to live on, Ms Light says.

A conventional life of marriage and motherhood was not as readily available as it had been; so many men had died in the war that it produced a shortage of potential husbands.

Some nurses found employment in homes for veterans, set up by the Ministry of Pensions, while others went to work in the community or in boarding schools.

Despite the hardships of the post-war years, the profession had taken a decisive leap forward. As Ms Light says: "Nurses were shaking off the image of the poorly educated, poorly trained and inarticulate nurse of the 19th century. The war changed the public perception of nursing."

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**SUMMARY**

The first world war opened up nursing to a wider range of women and earned new status for the profession. Nursing service records from the conflict, available online for the first time at www.nationalarchives.gov.uk, provide a detailed insight into the lives of nurses who were the first to handle war casualties on an industrial scale.

**Author**

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