

Unsung hero: The story of a Canadian nursing sister

By Barb McKay

Sitting in her cozy cedar cottage in Blair's Grove, Pauline Flynn is an interesting study.

A casual meeting would reveal little more than a typical great-grandmother; charming and gracious. But she is much more. Her eyes are quick to light up, divulging her good-natured wit, but fail to hide a weariness that comes from tremendous heartache.

At 92 years old, Flynn knows she is one of the last of a group of women that is highly regarded in military circles, but little known by the general public. A nursing sister in the Second World War, Flynn has been honoured numerous times, less for her sacrifices than for the tremendous contribution she made to Allied efforts overseas and the hundreds of lives she helped save.

Flynn was born Pauline Lamont to a Canadian Railway station master and school teacher in January 1920. Because of her father's position with the railway, the family moved around a great deal. They settled in Port Elgin in 1930, an area they were familiar with. The Lamonts spent every summer at cottages in Blair's Grove. Flynn's great-grandfather, George Blair, came over to Canada from Scotland with his wife and children in 1848 for a Queen's Bush grant. The family settled in the area near Pine River that became Blair's Grove. Remnants of the first log cabin built by George Blair still exist, hidden beneath sand dunes.

While living in Port Elgin Flynn became friends with a nurse who trained at Toronto Western Hospital. Flynn decided to pursue her own career in nursing and graduated from the same nursing program in 1941. With the Second World War well underway in Europe many young nurses were eager to do their part, and Flynn was no different. As soon as she turned 23, the required age

for nurses to join the war effort, Flynn signed up and was trained at the Hamilton military hospital.

It was pitch black when Flynn and fellow nursing sisters sailed in a small ship through the St. Lawrence River to the Halifax harbour. Flynn could remember thinking that at that point they would board a larger ship to sail across the Atlantic, but the next morning when she awoke the ship was well out into the ocean.

The nurses arrived in England and the romanticized ideas of being a part of the war effort quickly faded away as the reality of the devastation everywhere around them set in.

"You think you're going to be prepared, but you never are," Flynn said.

As the convoy travelled through London the images were startling. Barrage balloons filled the city air to defend against low level aircraft attacks.

The nurses arrived at a hospital that had been set up in Sussex near the English Channel. The hospital was a series of huts joined together with rows of beds along each side. There was a pharmacy at one end and operating rooms at the other, which were taking in wounded soldiers around the clock.

"It's beyond your imagination," Flynn said. "A lot of the boys were so young. There was no time to be sentimental; we were getting them when they were freshly wounded."

That summer, 1943, was the summer of buzz bombs and penicillin. In July, penicillin became available to Allied troops fighting in Europe. At first, it was in short supply and it was only administered to the most desperate cases. Before long, it became more widely available and Flynn soon earned the nickname 'Lady of the Lance' from her charges, as she flew through the make-shift infirmaries injecting the men like she was aiming for the gold medal in a marathon.

Of all the memories of war, the fear that clutched her as aircraft flew low overhead and the knowledge that more men were dying as the ground shook with detonating bombs; the images that stick so well in her mind are of the young men who always had a smile for her and somehow remained cheerful, though they might have been missing an arm or a leg.

"Those boys were so wonderful," Flynn said. "They looked on us like their mothers, or sisters or an aunt. I really felt they respected us and remembered us fondly."

In the worst of circumstances, Flynn witnessed the best side of the boys in her care.

"That was the miracle of war," she said. "As soon as those boys could move they were trying to help someone else."

From England, Flynn was transferred to Belgium where she and 30 other nurses were crammed into a small former retirement home that had been condemned by the British and was overrun with rats. Flynn recalled that nurses had to be escorted back and forth to the hospital by armed guards.

It was in Belgium that Flynn experienced the devastating toll that war can take. After the country was liberated by the Allied forces in September 1944, the Germans made an attempt to take back the Port of Antwerp, which was used by the Allies to bring in guns and ammunition. The attack killed 500 Allied soldiers and wounded another 1,500 in one weekend.

The hospital that Flynn was stationed at became so full that the shell of a cathedral that had been bombed had to be used to take the overflow of wounded.

Flynn was also stationed at a hospital in Holland near the German border. Along with Allied soldiers, Flynn was also responsible for caring for a ward of prisoners of war. Her duties were limited mainly to changing bandages and administering penicillin because the prisoners harboured a great deal of animosity.

On May 8, 1945 peace was declared. Flynn said there was absolute elation and everyone pulled the blackout curtains from the windows and drank in the light. The soldiers in the hospitals celebrated but soon the reality set in that they would be returning home as different men, many missing limbs or disfigured.

The war with Japan still raged and Flynn and a number of other nursing sisters came close to being deployed to Asia, but that conflict too ended.

Rumour had it that if nurses agreed to escort foreign war brides to Canada they could leave Europe early. Flynn and some of her friends jumped at the opportunity to return home. It was winter at this point, said Flynn, and



Pauline Flynn displays the medals she was awarded for her service as a Canadian nursing sister during the Second World War. She was awarded the Queen's Diamond Jubilee medal in June. (Barb McKay photo)

the nurses found themselves sailing back to Canada on another small ship, not only with several war brides, but also five small children. The ship rocked violently in the rough water and at one point lost radio contact.

"Everybody on board was sick," Flynn said.

The voyage took two weeks. Flynn said the only thing that saved her was the tote of rum the Irish captain would sneak to her.

Back home in Ontario Flynn returned to nursing. It was a different world. The independence she had gained as a nurse during the war had made her more of a feminist, but working in the hospital back home she was once again in a man's world. Then she met and married Henry "Hank" Flynn, who had served in the Royal Canadian Air Force as one of the original radar men. Hank worked with the Canadian government and the couple moved around in Canada and the United States, finally settling in Ottawa. Through the years, Flynn kept in contact with her nursing sister friends and became an active spokesperson for the Nursing Sisters Association of Canada.

"I wouldn't have changed any part of my life," Flynn said. "I made lifelong friends."

Sadly, the nursing sisters that Flynn considered her closest friends have passed away. In 2007, Veterans Affairs Canada interviewed Flynn and other nurses to capture the experiences of these brave and dedicated women.

Flynn has received many medals for her service in Europe, including the Second World War Star medal, the King George VI medal and

in June, the Queen's Diamond Jubilee medal. As a member of the Nursing Sisters Association of Canada she has attended many Remembrance Day and veterans appreciation events and has met Prime Ministers Jean Chretien and Stephen Harper.

In 1998, Flynn and four other nursing sisters were chosen to represent the association on a pilgrimage to France and Belgium. By chance, she struck up a conversation with a Col. Thomas Gilday, an original member of the First Special Service Force, better known as the Devil's Brigade. When he learned that Flynn spent her summers in Blair's Grove, he looked at her in awe and asked if she knew Charlie Mann. The two of them had served together during the war. Flynn didn't know the former Kincardine mayor, but said she would say 'hello.' But as time passed, Flynn had all but forgotten about the encounter, until one day when she turned on the television.

"This year I happened to see Charlie on his 90th birthday and I said, 'I have to go meet him and say hi from Tom Gilday,'" Flynn said.

Gilday had passed away in 2001, but Flynn and Mann spent an afternoon last month recounting memories of the war and the time they each spent in Europe.

"It's good to talk to someone who has been there," Flynn said.