

# HON

B.C. HISTORY OF NURSING SOCIETY NEWS

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*On January 12, 1940, the VGH SON Alumnae presented a pageant called "History of Nursing" for the graduating class. The commentator was Elizabeth (Beth) McCann (VGH 1939). She is standing right of the seated person and the other, to the left, could be Julia Walters (VGH 1934) later Silvertown. She was Director of Nursing Education in the School from 1948 to 1949 when she left to be married.*

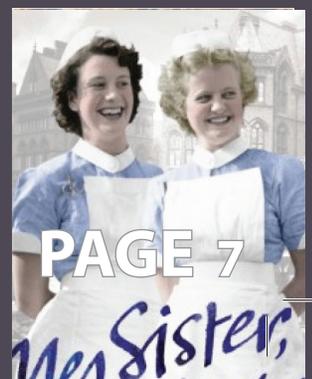
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## SAVE THESE DATES

**APRIL 14, 2011: BCHoN Annual General Meeting, CRNBC, Arbutus Street, Vancouver**  
For more information please visit: [www.bcnursinghistory.ca](http://www.bcnursinghistory.ca)

**MAY 11, 2011: VGH School of Nursing Alumnae Open House from 10:00 AM - 2:00 PM**  
Place: Heather Pavilion -B South - Look for signs and balloons.  
We are excited to be holding our 2nd Open House and invite you to pay us a visit. All rooms will be open so you can view our uniform collection, large archives and museum, hall displays, lounge and office. Special displays will be arranged such as pediatric and military nursing, polio with an iron lung and our newly created doll collection and many more.

**MAY 27-29, 2011: CAHN/ACHN Annual Meeting in Fredericton, NB**  
The meeting will be held jointly with the Canadian Society for the History of Medicine at the University of New Brunswick, from Saturday May 28 to Monday May 30, 2011. The theme of the 2011 Congress is Coasts and Continents: Exploring Peoples and Places. Further information can be found on the CAHN website at <http://cahn-achn.ca/>.

**MAY 28, 2011: Royal Jubilee Hospital School of Nursing 120th Reunion, Victoria BC**  
For more information visit: <http://www.rjhnursingalum.com/reunions.htm>

**JUNE 9, 2011: BC History of Nursing Society, Executive Meeting - CRNBC**  
For more information please visit: [www.bcnursinghistory.ca](http://www.bcnursinghistory.ca)



# President's Message

BY KATHY MURPHY, PRESIDENT

It is Annual General Meeting time and we look forward to seeing you on Thursday, April 14, 2011 at 4pm at the CRNBC building on Arbutus and 13th. At this time, the reports of the many activities of our society will be highlighted, the Budget for 2011-2012 will be presented and the annual elections will occur.

As this gathering tends to be longer than 2 hours, you are invited to bring an appetizer or dessert and \$5 to cover the costs.

The membership renewal process is underway. Thanks to those who have also included a donation to assist in the operation of the Society. It is not too late to renew your membership or to encourage others to join.

After several years as Chair of the Archives Committee, Don Ransom resigned from this position recently. Working with the Archivist, Don was responsible for the collection, assessment, and storage of archives and artefacts and responding to requests for information. Marjorie Ralston has been appointed to fill this position.

After reading this publication, I encourage you to view our website and see the changes being made by our new resource people, Anita and Jens Petersen of Technica Systems. Several areas are being revised and Pages of History will soon be added.

**I LOOK FORWARD TO SEEING YOU AT THE AGM ON APRIL 14th**



# Editor's Desk

BY SHEILA RANKIN ZERR

The newsletter committee would like to acknowledge Diana Bright's contribution to the newsletter committee over the years. We are sorry that she has resigned from the committee but wish her all the best in the future. We welcome Barbara Bavinton as a new member of the newsletter committee. It is so important to have input from Vancouver Island and we know Barbara will represent our many members living outside the Vancouver area.

**WE WELCOME YOUR COMMENTS SO PLEASE LET US KNOW YOUR IDEAS FOR FUTURE NEWSLETTER EDITIONS.**

# A STUDY OF TWO WORLD WAR II MILITARY NURSES:

HOW THEIR HOSPITAL TRAINING IN THE 1930S PREPARED THEM FOR WAR BY: SHEILA J. RANKIN ZERR

This paper examines the oral histories of two World War II (WW II) military nurses. The content of these interviews offer the nurse historian an opportunity to examine how the 1930s hospital training programs prepared the nurse for front line military nursing.

## Oral History Recordings

Oral history recording provides a means of capturing past nursing experiences that would otherwise be lost to future generations. The Royal Jubilee Hospital (RJH) School of Nursing Alumnae embarked on an oral history project of their hospital school graduates. Sixteen oral histories are now recorded and available to nurse historians through the RJH School of Nursing Alumnae office. June (Plummer) Newton, a 1941 RJH graduate (Pearson, 1982)[1], served as a WW II military nurse in Italy. She recorded her military experiences in 2002 and 2009.

The British Columbia History of Nursing Society, has been recording oral histories since 1987. The oral history project began as a celebration of the 75th anniversary of the Registered Nurses Association of British Columbia (RNABC). The History of Nursing Society has continued this project and added to the collection. Presently there are one hundred and eighty cassette tapes and CDs recordings. These recordings are available to historians and researchers in the library of the College of Nurses of British Columbia, current name of the RNABC (CRNBC Library)[2]. As a participant in this project, the author took the rare opportunity to record Rose Spencer while she was visiting Canada in 1989. Rose (Rodgers) Spencer served in India in WW II with the Queen Alexandra Imperial Military Nursing Service (QAIMNS).

### Nurse Training Program

June Plummer from Kinsella Alberta, took her nurse training at RJH, Victoria, 1938-1941. Her choice of nursing was influenced by her father, a WW I veteran. He credited a nurse with saving his infected foot. The doctors were about to amputate but the nurse (named June) asked that she be allowed to try hot fomentations a while longer. She was successful in controlling the infection and saving his foot (Newton, 2002)[3].

June's three year hospital training program provided in hospital residence living with strict rules of conduct. The curriculum included Medical Surgical Nursing, Pediatrics, Obstetrics and Psychiatry. She was given extensive clinical experience and the responsibility of managing an entire unit on afternoon and night duty as a senior nursing student (Pearson, 1982)[4].

Rose Rodgers began her nursing training in Aberdeen in 1936 at 17 years of age. She started with diseases of children then progressed to fever training where she studied Bacteriology with laboratory training. She entered general training at the Glasgow General Hospital. While training there she was blamed for the death of a patient and was required to start her training period from the beginning. By 1942, Rose had completed seven and a half years of training and WW II was being felt in Glasgow. Rose's hospital training included experience nursing war wounds of patients burned and wounded from the bombings around Glasgow (Spencer, 1989)[5].

### Enlistment

June was working as a staff nurse at the Queen Alexandra Solarium Children's Hospital, Victoria, when she enlisted in the Canadian Army Medical Corps in 1942. Her military service began in Canadian Military Hospitals in Victoria and Prince Rupert. She traveled across Canada by train to Halifax where she spent six weeks in overseas training. She boarded the SS Cavina to cross the Atlantic in January 1943. The seas were rough, many suffering from seasickness. They followed a zig zag pattern to avoid the U Boats (Newton, 2002)[6].

Rose Rodgers joined the army in 1942 in Scotland and was called to take basic training with the QAIMNS in Lincoln College at Oxford University. During training at Lincoln College life was



**June Newton, 1943**



**Rose Spencer**

grim. The lavatory was across the square in another building, food was scarce, and there was no central heating. The recruits could hear the constant drone of the planes overhead. They got so used to the sound of the planes they could tell what planes were flying overhead (Spencer, 1989)[7],

The QAIMNS was established by royal warrant on March 27, 1902 replacing the Army Nursing Service (Taylor, 2001)[8]. This nursing service expanded throughout the years. The nurses served in the major wars from the Boer War on. During WW II the QAIMNS nurses served abroad in many countries.

Rose received her embarkation orders in February 1943. She boarded an Indian Office ship but was not allowed to know the route or destination of the ship. While on the ship she met David Spencer her future husband. They planned to wed at the end of the war. They eventually arrived at their destination, Bombay.

#### War Experience

June was first assigned to the Canadian Overseas Hospital in Bassingstoke. She began in the psychiatric ward. She was moved to neuro/head injuries and then on to plastic surgery. Her embarkation orders came again and she undertook further training that included boot marches. She was assigned to Italy.

On August 1943, thirty eight days after the Allies landed, Sicily was captured but not the German Army. They had escaped to mainland Italy. The victory that brought about Mussolini's downfall and Italy's surrender was no easy conquest (Taylor 2001)[9]. Thousands of allied forces lost their lives or were wounded before victory was realized. Total Canadian casualties, 26,254,

June was assigned to the Canadian Field Hospital in Caserta, north of Naples. She recalls how the wards were full of wood as every bed was set up with traction so soldiers could move or have limbs in traction. Many had missing limbs. Many had burns that required saline dressings twenty-four hours a day. Many had malaria, chills and high fevers.

Antibiotics were introduced to military hospitals in 1943. Doctors and nurses marveled at the drugs effect on soldiers with repulsive wounds infected with gas gangrene. The new yellow powder that smelled like "old hay" began to revolutionize the treatment of wounds (Taylor, 2001)[10]. June witnessed the miracle of antibiotics in fighting the horrendous wounds she witnessed in Italy.

## India

After arriving in Bombay Rose and her fellow QAIMNS nurses received further training then she was sent to Poona with four other nurses.

India, officially the Indian Empire, declared war on Nazi Germany in September 1939. The provinces of British India, being imperial colonies of the United Kingdom, were by default a part of the allied Nations (Kux, 1992)[11].

The Military Nursing Service Indian Army had its origin in the Army Nursing Service formed in 1881. This nursing force went through many changes. In 1902 it was designated to the QAIMNS. British and Indian nurses were part of this nursing service. During WW II British nurses were posted to military basis throughout India (Spencer, 1989)[12]. Rose, with her four QAIMNC mates were assigned to a military hospital in Poona. Rose was placed on the fe-

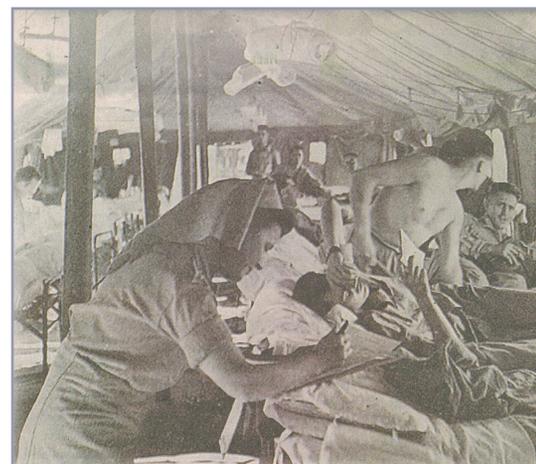
ver ward where she worked along with Indian Nursing Sisters. The Indian nursing sisters were required to stay in their own section of the hospital. Indian Army patients and British Army patients were treated separately with separate staff caring for them. The diseases Rose encountered in the fever ward were polio, typhoid fever, dysentery, serum hepatitis, and venereal disease. Many patients were prisoners of war.

The heat of India was unbelievable. There was no air conditioning and the nurses found it difficult to adjust. Rose spent two and one half years at the hospital in Poona. She met many interesting people, learned to enjoy Indian cuisine, and visited Government House many times for social gatherings.

Rose and two other nursing sisters were sent to serve in a British and Indian hospital in Belgaum. Again, the hospital was divided with separate British and Indian sections. The British nurses cared for the British soldiers posted to the Belgaum area. They also cared for members of their families. On August 29, 1945 the war was over. Rose was called to appear before the commanding officer. Three cases of the Pneumonic form of the Bubonic Plague were admitted to the hospital and drastic action was necessary.

The Plague had broken out in the Moroccan Indian soldiers barracks. All had been Italian prisoners of war and were extremely debilitated. One patient already in hospital, a young Indian military attendant, contacted the disease. The four patients were placed in a hut apart from the hospital. Rose was told she could refuse the assignment but that she was the best prepared to provide the care needed due to her extensive Scottish training in fever nursing. It meant great risk. Her wedding to David was to take lace in two weeks. She accepted the assignment (Spencer, 1989)[13].

All staff, doctors and nurses had to be injected with the Plague Bacillus. Rose was placed in the hut with a night attendant. DDT spray was constant and made it hard to breath. They wore rubber coverings on their feet. They were fully gowned and wore face masks. The heat in the hut was terrible. The disease fol-



**Rose and David's Wedding  
September 12, 1945**

lows a pattern of crisis to death. In seventy two hours it can be all over (Kugler, 2008)[14]. Rose took full responsibility for the four patients in her care and made all treatment decisions. The witch doctor appeared to put a spell on the patients and the disease.

The three original patients died. Rose speaks of the wonder when the young boy patient, who developed the disease in hospital, opened his eyes and she knew he would live. Once it was safe, he was transferred to the hospital for care. The bodies, all clothes, and effects were burned, along with the hut.

Rose recounts that they got to the boy in time. She witnessed the miracle of treatment drugs and antibiotics (Kugler, 2008)[15]. To the best of knowledge of the time, this patient was the only case to recover from Pneumonic, Bubonic Plague in the history of medicine. Rose was placed in quarantine for eleven days. Her marriage to David took place as planned just two days after she was released from quarantine on September 12 1945.

#### Conclusions

Both nurses received post war commendations for their outstanding nursing service during WW II. In 2008, June Newton was chosen, by the Canadian Nursing Sisters Organization, to be their representative at the 55th Armistice of the Korean War. She traveled to Korea with her daughter. Rose Spencer received commendation from the Commander in Chief in India. Rose recounts she first heard of this honor when she read about it in the Times. She was presented with her decoration at Buckingham Palace.

High praise for both nurses and high praise for their nursing training preparation. Both young nurses, straight out of hospital training programs, met the challenges of war with such distinction.

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# MEMORIAL DOLL UPDATE

## MEMORIAL DOLL HONORING NINA RUMEN CREATED



A memorial portrait doll has been added to the collection to honor Nina Rumén. The portrait doll depicts a WWI Canadian Military Nurse. Nina wore a modified version of this uniform during her military career.

# NEW WEBSITE

[www.vghnursingschoolalumnae.com](http://www.vghnursingschoolalumnae.com)

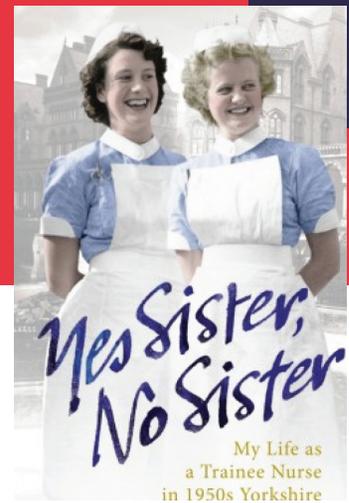


The VGH School of Nursing Alumnae Association has a new website. The site will soon be updated with archival and museum items as well as back newsletter issues. The goal of the site is to create a central place for Alumnae to communicate and stay in touch. Graduates can take advantage of Educational Bursaries, apply for membership online as well as sign up for email alerts.

# BOOK REVIEW

## YES SISTER.NO SISTER

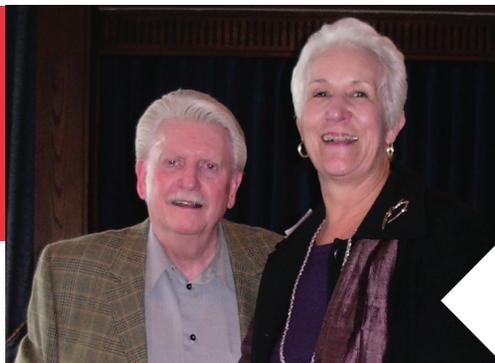
BY JENNIFER CRAIG: EBURY PRESS/RANDOM HOUSE  
342 PAGES, SC. \$17.95 BY NAOMI MILLER



This well written book takes the reader through the training years at a Yorkshire hospital 1952-56. The first person story starts with a class of thirty three girls aged 18 or 19, and details the three years till thirteen of them achieve Registered Nurse status. Fellow students, instructors, supervisors, interns and others are introduced by their very English nomenclature, appearing in order of rotation in the hospital. The individuals are described by their physique, accents, mannerisms and roles within the hospital. Typically there are bright moments as each new procedure is mastered, sad moments when a patient dies, fury when an injustice is heaped on a student's head, or banter with classmates while off duty. Narrative describing teamwork as each challenge is tackled takes the reader on a roller coaster ride feeling the fear and frustration, relief and satisfaction, exhaustion or exhilaration, or fun and laughter. Craig's word pictures are excellent!

Progress reports as Jennifer and colleagues work their way through training may even be presented as a letter to Mum and Dad, an interview with a senior examiner, or description of a change of uniform. When the end of the three years was reached there was scant fanfare (nothing like the red roses and ceremony in America). Two of her classmates were soon married. Jennifer took a midwifery course in London then went back to Leeds where she was instantly put on staff at her training school. Descriptions of her duties as Night Sister then Ward Sister (Head Nurse) are beautifully written. When she had proved to herself that she was a good nurse, instructor and coordinator she happened to hear about opportunities in Canada. The book concludes with Jenny and her buddy arriving in Vancouver in 1961 promised jobs in Vancouver General Hospital.

This book was originally published in 2002. It was relaunched in soft cover in the fall of 2010.



## MEMBER ANNOUNCEMENTS

### DON RANSOM HONORED

Don Ransom is honored at the March 19th luncheon for his outstanding work as Chair of the Archives Committee.

### BOOK LAUNCH

Sharon Simpson and Karen Abbott launch their book "Traditions and Transitions; History of the Nursing Programs at Thompson Rivers University, 1973-2003 at the March 19th luncheon of the BC History of Nursing Society

## A LETTER OF THANKS FROM MARGARET SCAIA

### Dear BC History of Nursing Members:

I think that some of you know that I am working on my PhD in History and Nursing at the University of Victoria. I want to thank you for your involvement in my research around the history of nursing in Calgary and Vancouver, 1960-1976 over these past few months. I placed several advertisements under the auspices of the BC History of Nursing, Canadian Association of the History of Nursing, UBC Nursing Alumni, St. Paul's, Vancouver General and the Royal Columbian Nursing Alumni as well as the Holy Cross, Calgary General and the University of Calgary Nursing Alumni.

In addition, a number of nurses gave me important personal contacts which I was able to follow up with great success. I completed 37 interviews with nurses who obtained their nursing education in Vancouver or Calgary between these dates and I am now starting to look at these interviews in depth. I want to thank all of you, and other supporting alumni and individuals who have enabled me to make these contacts and complete these interviews. In particular I would like to thank Glennis Zilm for her insight, wisdom and guidance in developing the protocols, goals, process and structure for this part of my research.



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