

# GOWER REMEMBERS

## Sister Nellie Tuck

(1882-1943)



*“This certifies that Miss Nellie Tuck, St. John’s, nurse, is physically sound, and capable of standing the strain of military nursing.”* (Letter signed by Dr. Hugh Hunter Cowperthwaite, 241 Duckworth Street, St. John’s, Newfoundland, August 28, 1915)

Nellie Tuck was born in St. John's on November 08, 1882, the daughter of Mary Ann LeDrew and Eli Tuck. She was one of at least nine children, five of whom died as infants or small children: Benjamin (age 7 years, 3 months) and Sarah Gertrude (a newborn), both of whom died on November 22, 1879; and Mollie (age 6 years ) and another Sarah (age 4 months) in 1886; the fifth was still born in 1880 (and not baptized). Those who survived to adulthood, in addition to Nellie, were her brother Henry (1884-1941), commonly called Harry, and her sisters, Ida Isabella (1875-19??) and Alma (1889-19??).<sup>1</sup>

Tuck attended the Methodist College in St. John's, where she proved to be a good student. In 1890 she received a copy of the book *The First Lady in the Land* by Acton Davies for being second in her class; she also won a book prize for Spelling (*The Evening Telegram*, July 09, 1890). She excelled in French in the higher grades, winning prizes in both 1897 and 1898, and she also received a Special Diploma of Distinction awarded to all students of the College in the higher grades who achieved a first or second place in any subject.

After graduation from the College, Tuck spent the first decade of the twentieth century in eclectic pursuits. She worked for a number of years as a clerk at Dicks & Company, the major book and stationery store in St. John's. On March 16, 1908, *The Evening Telegram* informed its readers: “Miss Nellie Tuck has secured the position of lady assistant at the Dental parlors of Dr. Lehr and Dr. Perkins. This is quite an up-to-date movement and all the first-class dental parlors in the United States have lady assistants.”

In addition to her work, Tuck had an active social life. She was a bridesmaid on three separate occasions during that decade: for her sister Ida Isabella's marriage to W. G. Currie in 1902, for her friend Janie Louise Blatch's marriage to W. H. Peters in 1904, and for her friend Ethel D. Moores' marriage to Rev. Jabez Saint in 1908. In 1905 she was elected Treasurer of the Methodist College Guild at its annual general meeting in

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<sup>1</sup> For additional information on Eli and Mary Ann Tuck, see “Private Harry LeDrew Tuck (1884-1941)”, No. 51 in this series.

October. In March of 1909 she had a minor role in the musical pageant, “The Temple of Fame” held at the Methodist College Hall.

That event would be her last in St. John’s for a while. Later that year she enrolled in the training program for nurses at the Montreal General Hospital Nurses Training School. She studied there for three plus years, graduating on November 27, 1912. While she was there her mother died, at age 61, on September 09, 1911. After graduating from nursing school, Tuck spent the next three plus years in private duty nursing in St. John’s, where she resided with her father and her sister Alma at 46 Freshwater Road.

By the summer of 1915, a number of Tuck’s friends, both male and female, had signed up for service overseas. After receiving a medical clearance from Dr. Hugh Cowperthwaite, she made application, dated August 29, 1915, to the Queen Alexandra’s Imperial Military Nursing Service Reserve (QA’s) to work as a nurse overseas. She received notification of her acceptance on October 24.

The few months that followed involved getting the necessary vaccinations and making plans for sailing to England. Before she departed, the Newfoundland Nurses Association presented her with a citation and “a purse of gold” at their monthly meeting, held on January 06, 1916. She left St. John’s seven days later, at midnight on January 13, aboard the SS *Stephano*, arriving in New York City on January 16. From there she travelled to England, where she met with officials of the QA’s and received her first assignment, to Wharncliffe War Hospital, Sheffield, on February 19, 1916, which marks the start of her war service.

Until the Spring of 1915, Wharncliffe War Hospital had operated as the South Yorkshire Asylum. It was transferred to the jurisdiction of the War Office on April 01, 1915, following which it underwent a major transformation to equip it to handle the many thousands of patients – war casualties – who would spend time there over the years that followed. It was there that Tuck would spend the next year nursing these casualties.

Tuck had volunteered for overseas nursing service with the express desire to be part of the foreign nursing service, not limited to a hospital in England. Therefore, when her first year of service was coming to an end, she was reluctant to re-sign without the promise of being posted closer to the front lines. Her superiors concurred and she agreed to an extension. Her next assignment would take her across the European continent, to Salonika, at the northern end of the Aegean Sea, between Greece and Turkey. She left Avonmouth in England on April 12, 1917, for Marseilles; she departed there on May 15 on board the HS *Valdivia*. On May 26, she arrived at the 29<sup>th</sup> General Hospital at Salonika.

There is an old adage that says “you should be careful what you wish for”. Perhaps Tuck should have kept that in mind before accepting an assignment to Salonika. She was there less than two weeks when, on June 08, she was admitted to hospital, possibly with severe dysentery; five weeks later, on July 14, she was transferred to the Red Cross Convalescent Home; on July 30, she returned to work. On October 07, she was back in hospital, this time with symptoms of malaria. She again spent time in the Red Cross Convalescent Home before rejoining colleagues at the 49<sup>th</sup> General Hospital on November 10, 1917.

Matters would get worse before they got better, however. On December 18, she was re-admitted to hospital and later that day put on board a hospital ship and taken to Malta. In the meantime, a Medical Board had declared her unfit for further service, effective November 29, 1917, and had invalided her from Salonika. After a brief stay in Malta, she embarked for England on December 31, 1917, by ship to Marseilles, and then by train to northern France, across the English Channel by boat, arriving in London on January 10, 1918. There she was admitted to the Sick Sisters Hospital.

News of her illness did not take long to reach home. *The Evening Telegram* for January 14, 1918 reported that her father had received a cablegram informing him of her “sick furlough”. Meanwhile, *The St. John's Daily Star* of the same date speculated that her illness was of such severity that she may be sent home.

January, February and March of 1918 saw Tuck receiving medical care for her illness and enduring one Medical Board after another. Finally, on March 19, 1918, a Medical Board determined that she had recovered from the malaria and dysentery that forced her out of Salonika, but recommended that she not return to that place. Instead, she was posted to Clipstone Camp Military Hospital, in Mansfield, Nottinghamshire: her service there lasted from March 28, 1918 to June 20, 1919, during which time she nursed war casualties from all branches of the military.

Tuck applied to resign from the QA's on May 30, 1919; her request was granted effective June 20. Four days later, on June 24, she sailed from Glasgow, Scotland, on the SS *Cassandra*, for Newfoundland. Also on board were approximately 1,000 members of the Royal Newfoundland Regiment, some with their wives and children, returning home from the war.

It did not take Tuck long to find employment once she was back in St. John's. Later that summer, she was named head nurse of the Escasoni Hospital, Portugal Cove Road, in St. John's. Originally established as a treatment hospital and sanatorium for soldiers and sailors suffering from tuberculosis, it operated until December 1920, when its patients were transferred to other hospitals in the city.

Tuck's employment at Escasoni, while not long, did result in at least one good piece of publicity. *The Evening Telegram* for November 14, 1919, reported that the St. John's Boy Scouts troop "*recently paid a visit to Escasoni Hospital, where they did a good turn to the inmates by clearing up the grounds, and the head nurse Miss Tuck, did them a good turn by serving refreshments.*"

It would appear that Tuck worked as a private duty nurse for several years following the closure of the Escasoni Hospital. She had been living with her father and her sister Alma at 46 Freshwater Road since her return from Europe. On February 26, 1922, her father died, at the age of 78. His will, probate granted on March 27, 1922, indicated that he had left an estate valued at \$1,700.00, which was to be divided among his four

children in various bequests. He left his watch to his only grandson, Harry Gibson Currie.

On December 19, 1922, an impressive ceremony was held at Government House, at which the Governor, Sir William Allardyce, distributed war medals and decorations to 17 women for their war service. Fifteen of those individuals received the British War Medal and one received the Imperial Service Medal. The highest award presented that day was the Royal Red Cross, Class II, which went to Nellie Tuck.

Not long after receiving this highly-deserved medal, *The Evening Telegram* (April 17, 1923) informed its readers that “*Miss Nellie Tuck, late Superintendent of the Escasoni Hospital, has accepted a responsible position in one of the large hospitals in Winnipeg, and left by the Silvia last night to take up her new duties. Before Miss Tuck left the city, one of her kind acts was the contributing of a ten dollar bill to the Marine Disaster Fund.*”

Tuck spent several years in Winnipeg before moving to Torrington, Connecticut, where she became Night Supervisor of the nursing staff at the Charlotte Hungerford Hospital. She remained there for some years before she returned to St. John’s, where she, once again, became engaged in private duty nursing. She also worked for a period of time in the early 1940s with one of the clinics operated by the Department of Health and Welfare. In May 1943, she took ill, quite possibly a recurrence of the malaria that had affected her during the war. She died on November 22, 1943. Her brother, Harry, had died two years previous.

In commenting upon Nellie Tuck’s life, an anonymous writer in *The Daily News* for November 23, 1943, mused: “*Nellie Tuck was a capable and conscientious nurse. Her work was well and thoroughly performed giving unstintedly of her best she really adorned the profession to which she had consecrated her life. Generous in her disposition she contributed freely to church and philanthropic calls. She was an ardent patriot, a great lover of her country and a great Britisher, and it was a matter of*

*regret to her that when the present war broke out she was unable to volunteer again for active service. She is survived by two sisters, Mrs. W. G. Currie, in Toronto, and Miss Alma Tuck, of this city. The funeral will be by motor hearse on Wednesday at 2:30 p.m. from the residence of Mr. W. H. Peters, Allandale Road.”* What more need be said.



Royal Red Cross Medal, Class II

*On Sunday, November 16, 2014, Gower Street United Church initiated a program of commemoration that will last for approximately four to five years. On roughly every second Sunday through to the end of 2018, a brief write-up on one of these individuals, similar to this one, will appear as an insert in the Bulletin and there will be a reference to that person in the service. In this way, we hope to recognize their contribution to the war effort, the many sacrifices they made, some with their very lives, and the debt of gratitude we owe to each of them.*

*We also hope to learn more about them from their descendants or other relatives, thereby fostering a link between our past and our present as we begin our 203rd year as a faith community.*

*If you know of any relatives of these servicemen and women please contact Bert Riggs at [briggs@mun.ca](mailto:briggs@mun.ca) or at 726-6169.*