

Royal Red Cross Medal
Sister Janet Wells RRC.

Dr Adrian Greaves

The Military Nursing Medal, the Royal Red Cross Decoration and the Associate Royal Red Cross.

The Royal Red Cross medal (or more accurately decoration) was introduced to Military Nursing by Royal Warrant by Queen Victoria on 27 April in 1883 which was St George's Day. The decoration is awarded to army nurses for exceptional services, devotion to duty and professional competence in British military nursing. Queen Victoria wanted a special award for the distinguished service by women nursing sisters in South Africa.

The Royal Warrant said that it be given:

upon any ladies, whether subjects or foreign persons, who may be recommended by Our Secretary of State for War for special exertions in providing for the nursing of sick and wounded soldiers and sailors of Our Army and Navy.

A second and lower class, Associate, was added during [World War I](#) in November 1915.

A recently discovered letter from David Rattray, Fugitives' Drift Lodge South Africa states;

Florence Nightingale was the first recipient of the Royal Red Cross with Sister Janet Wells not far behind. She was only 18 years old when she was posted to Zululand to command a medical post. She earned the nickname *Angel of Mercy*.

She performed numerous operations, tended the sick and wounded, and brought an air of discipline, tempered by her charm and femininity, into a chaotic and desperate situation. Towards the end of the war she was sent to Rorke's Drift where she administered to the remaining garrison. She walked the battlefields of Rorke's Drift and Isandlwana where she collected flowers for her scrapbooks – already containing many sketches and photographs, which survive to this day.

After the war she returned to her home and family in London, just in time for her twentieth birthday. Recognition by Queen Victoria followed, who decorated her with the Royal Red Cross, the nursing equivalent of the Victoria Cross. She was the second recipient of the award; the previous recipient was Florence Nightingale.

Hers is an amazing account, of bravery and determination, which I commend to everyone who loves adventure; it will especially fascinate students of the Anglo-Zulu War to whom this account will come, I am sure, as something of a surprise.

David Rattray

Zululand

2005.



Cameo , Royal Red Cross, Russian Red Cross and South Africa Campaign Medal
Sister Janet Wells.

The background of Sister Janet Wells

The Anglo Zulu War of 1879 caused many British soldiers and Zulu warriors' terrible wounds, and disease was rife. Hospital care was in its infancy, especially in the British army, and so it is remarkable that in the midst of this terrible war this nineteen-year-old English nurse, Sister Janet Wells, was sent from London to take charge of the isolated British army hospital at Utrecht in Zululand. Already a decorated veteran with the Russian Red Cross for her service to the Russian Army in the 1878 Balkan War, she was highly experienced at treating war wounds. During her service on the front line at Utrecht she treated over 3,200 patients, both British soldiers and Zulus, many from the battles of Hlobane, Khambula and Ulundi.

From *The British Journal of Nursing* June 26th 1920.

The little bronze cross, of no intrinsic value, bearing the words 'For Valour' instituted by Queen Victoria on January 29th 1856 as the decoration of the Victoria Cross – is probably more coveted than any other; for it indicates that the wearer showed conspicuous bravery, initiative and resourcefulness 'where valiant men were all' – under circumstances of extreme peril. So far, it has only been awarded to men, but the Zulu War of 1879 proved beyond question that women are more than equally capable, not only of enduring danger

unflinchingly and heroically, but of voluntarily assuming responsibilities which involve exposure to, and disregard of, great dangers, from motives of patriotism, or in order to save life.

Prior to the South African War (Boer War 1900) the Royal Red Cross was regarded as the Nurses' Victoria Cross. It also was instituted by Queen Victoria, on St George's Day 1883, 'For zeal and devotion in providing for, and nursing, sick and wounded sailors, soldiers, and others with the Army in the field, on board ship or in hospitals'. It was only rarely awarded and conferred real and well-maintained distinction on its possessor.

As well as being awarded the RRC decoration, Janet Wells was eventually awarded the South African Medal for the care of soldiers and Zulus in the Anglo Zulu War. But the award of the South Africa Campaign Medal and the Royal Red Cross only came about as a result of a struggle for women at war to be equally recognised.

How did she qualify for the South African General Service Medal?

The issuing of Sister Janet Wells with her South African General Service Medal was not automatic. Official recognition for the services of the Stafford House nurses was mixed. In his report to the War Office, the Surgeon General of Natal, J A Woolfryes wrote 'The Sisters of Charity belonging to the convent at Pietermaritzburg having rendered their services, three of them were employed at an early stage of the war at Fort Napier Base Hospital. In March an application having been made to the Bishop of Bloemfontein, the Lady Superior and three Sisters of the Community of St Michael & All Angels were sent to Ladysmith and did good work at the hospital there. Towards the close of June, two lady Sisters of the All Saints at Cape Town, who had gained experience in the Franco-German War, were despatched to Durban with a trained nurse by Lady Frere, and performed excellent service in the Base Hospital at that station, being transferred to the Convalescents Depot at Pinetown on the arrival of Lady Superintendent Deeble and six nurses, and Surgeon General Ross, CIE, with seven sisters of the Stafford House Committee in July. Of the Netley nurses, four with Mrs Deeble were posted to Durban and the remaining two were sent to Newcastle. Of the Stafford House sisters, four remained at Durban, two were sent to Pietermaritzburg and one to Utrecht (Sister Janet Wells) but this institution was subsequently modified according to circumstances.

Surgeon General Woolfryes then delivered a deliberately worded snub to the civilian Stafford House team 'All the nurses, but most especially those belonging to Netley, under the superintendence of Mrs Deeble, and of the religious communities did much excellent work and contributed materially by their tender care and skilful nursing to alleviate the suffering of the sick and wounded. I might add that by their example they stimulated the Hospital Orderlies to greater earnestness and zeal in the performance of their duties'.

Sister Janet Wells and her Stafford House Committee had treated many thousands of serving soldiers under difficult circumstances who would certainly have given a glowing testimonial.

By singling out the Army's own nurses and the local religious orders for praise, Woolfryes was able to diminish the role played by the civilian Stafford House medical team. Still smarting from Wolseley's criticism of senior medical officers and his insistence on sending in the Stafford House medical team to help, Woolfryes blatantly attempted to get his own back. The Army establishment ungallantly sought to withhold due recognition of the service rendered by Sister Janet Wells and her colleagues by delaying the issue of their South African General Service Medal. Mrs Deeble and her six nurses received their medals in October 1880, while the Stafford House nurses and doctors had to wait nearly four years until July 1884 before receiving theirs.



Sister Janet at Utrecht; drawn by Trooper Patterson (the bearded patient).

THE ROYAL RED CROSS

The origin of this decoration was equally tortuous. There was considerable dialogue relating to The Royal Red Cross, even involving Queen Victoria. What follows is a review of this political struggle.

Parliamentary Papers

1. From Queen Victoria, Balmoral To Mr Childers. The War Office.

The Queen thinks it would be very desirable to establish a decoration for nurses who are employed on active service, and for those who assist them at home, and commands me to give you her views on the subject.

Miss Nightingale and a very few of the nurses under her and associated with her got a badge after the Crimean War: but that was only for that special occasion and very expensive, and not in the form of an Order, which the Queen now wishes to establish.

The badge or cross need not be of an expensive nature, and might be worn with a ribbon on the shoulder.

It should be awarded to nurses sent out by the War Office and also to others who have made themselves useful in the field, such as the Bloemfontein Sisters, in whose praise you wrote to the Queen last March.

Her Majesty would wish to confer this decoration on the nurses who served in the South African Wars as well as on those now in Egypt.

Sir Henry Ponsonby, Her Majesty's Private Secretary. September 12th 1882

2. To Sir Henry Ponsonby.

May I ask you to say to the Queen in reply to the command contained in your letter of the 12th instant about a decoration for nurses, that I will lose no time in considering the question, which, however, may require a good deal of inquiry and thought. Do you happen to be able to tell me, or to tell me where I can obtain, any information of the St. Katherine's foundation, of which William Ashley used to be the treasurer, and which, at his death, was, I think, utilized by her Majesty's special wish, for nursing purposes, to some extent? No one here has any information on the subject.

Mr Childers. The War Office. September 14th 1882

3. To Mr Childers. The War Office.

I did not mean to convey to you that the Queen preferred a 'decoration' for nurses to an 'order' because I do not clearly understand the difference.

Both must be conferred under certain regulations, and both are honours given by the Queen. Your proposal that the cross should be granted to nurses engaged in time of peace is a good one.

It is considered very desirable that 'those who have assisted at home' should be included. Would you take into consideration the rules it would be desirable to make for this order or decoration?

The Queen has had a Cross made as a model. Her Majesty is not quite pleased with it and will make some alterations. I send it to you to look at.

Sir Henry Ponsonby, Her Majesty's Private Secretary. October 23rd 1882

N.B. Those who have insisted at home would include the Queen and the Princesses.

4. To Sir Henry Ponsonby. Cantley

I send you a draft of the Royal Warrant which I propose to submit in due course for her Majesty's approval, establishing the new decoration for nurses.

The title has been a difficulty with us: but, upon the whole, I don't think that anything can be better devised than the 'Royal Red Cross'.

The Royal Red Cross has now been adopted by the whole Christian world as the symbol of aid to the sick and wounded in war; and it is the badge of our own Army Hospital Corps. You will observe that it may be conferred on princesses or any ladies for special services in providing for aid to sick and wounded soldiers, and on nursing sisters, whether serving in the field or in hospital.

I would strongly urge that the statutes of St Katherine's Hospital should be simultaneously altered so as to admit of pensions being granted to a limited number of the new *décorees*.

This would have a very good effect in showing that the object is both titular and substantial.

From Mr Childers. The War Office. December 12th 1882.

The decoration was instituted by Her Majesty the Queen, on St David's Day 1883.

The Nursing Record & Nursing World. October 7th 1899.

The decoration is a recognition of the 'zeal and devotion in providing for and nursing sick and wounded sailors, soldiers, and others with the army in the field, on board ships, or in hospitals'. It is usually conferred by the Queen in person, a kindly act which is much appreciated by the recipient of this honour.

The Royal Red Cross is, we believe, at present, the only decoration bestowed by her Majesty in recognition of women's work, and it has been a source of pleasure to us and to many others to see, in recent times, the names of nurses in the New year's and Birthday

Honours lists as the recipients of the Royal Red Cross. We hope that eventually a decoration will be instituted for women who have distinguished themselves in other branches of work. Women are now entering largely into public life, and performing services of public utility, and they, in common with men, appreciate the recognition of work well done. Foreign as well as British subjects are eligible for the Royal Red Cross, but so far those, other than British subjects, upon whom it has been conferred, are Royal ladies.

The British Journal of Nursing November 20th 1915.

A Royal Warrant dated November 10th was gazetted on Tuesday night for enlarging the Order of the Royal Red Cross, instituted by Queen Victoria on St. George's day 1883 'For zeal and devotion in providing for and nursing sick and wounded sailors, soldiers, and others with the army in the field, on board ships, or in hospitals.'

The decoration is now divided into two classes. It is provided that the First Class shall consist of a Cross, enamelled red, edged with gold, having on the arms thereof the words, *Faith, Hope, Charity*, with the date of the institution of the decoration; there centre having thereon in relief the Royal and Imperial Effigy. On the reverse thereof the Royal and Imperial Cipher and Crown shall be shown in relief on the centre.

The Second Class shall consist of a Cross which shall be of the same size and form as in the First Class, but shall be of frosted silver and shall have superimposed thereon a Maltese Cross enamelled red not exceeding half its dimensions, the centre having thereon in relief the Royal and Imperial Effigy. The reverse shall have on the arms thereof the words *Faith, Hope, Charity*, and the date of the institution of the original decoration, and shall bear in the centre in relief the Royal and Imperial Cipher and Crown.

The Cross in either class shall be attached to a dark blue ribbon and edged red, of one inch in width, tied in a bow and worn on the left shoulder.

The First Lord of the Admiralty, as well as the Secretary of State for War, is empowered to recommend for the decoration any members of the Nursing Services or other personas engaged in nursing duties, whether subjects or foreign persons, for special devotion and competency with the Army in the field or in the naval and military hospitals. The awards in the first class are not to exceed 2 per cent, and in the second class 5 per cent, of the total establishment of nurses, save in exceptional circumstances. Recipients of the First Class will be designated 'Members of the Royal Red Cross' and will be entitled to the letters RRC following their names. And recipients of the Second Class will be designated 'Associates of the Royal red Cross', and will be entitled to the letters ARRC following their names.

Honorary membership and associateship may be conferred on Royal or other ladies for cause shown.

During the reign of King George V the words *or Our Air Force in the field* were added to the Royal Warrant. The decoration was conferred exclusively on women until 1976, when men became eligible, with posthumous awards permitted from 1979.