

Zulu War Nurse – Sister Janet Wells

By Adrian Greaves

The profession of nursing, as we know it today, is relatively new. During the early 1870's the concept of young women of good background becoming nurses became more socially acceptable and so training hospitals and the Red Cross began to attract a growing number of dedicated unattached women to nursing who, for the first time, felt they could gain fulfilment by doing something that was both feminine and worthwhile. The Nightingale system discouraged those who had a woolly or sentimental concept of what nursing was about; conditions were austere, working hours long and their training was strict and impartial.

After only a short period of training, one of these fledgling nurses, Janet Wells, aged only eighteen years, was to have a remarkably tough baptism of fire from which she would emerge as one of the nursing heroines of the late Victorian era. Like other young ladies of her class, Janet Wells kept a scrapbook of ephemera, newspaper clippings, photographs, sketches and pressed flowers, which chronicled her life on the battlefields like an illustrated diary. What emerges from the pages of her records and other contemporary material is a life of a young woman whose bravery, stamina and dedication to nursing were readily recognised by her peers and who, at the end of her all-too-short life, was hailed as an early nursing heroine alongside Florence Nightingale. During her nursing career, where she saw action in two wars whilst still a teenager, she would undertake major surgery, care for thousands of wounded, fall in love, and yet retain her gaiety, charm and her high personal level of professionalism. She would mix with soldiers, generals and royalty with equal ease. She became known as an 'angel of mercy' by many whose lives she saved. Hers is a story as unusual as it is dramatic.

Janet was born in 1859 at Maida Vale in North London to a noted musician and his wife, Benjamin and Elizabeth Wells. She was the second of five daughters and three sons. In November 1876, aged seventeen years, she entered the fledgling profession of nursing and joined the Training School of the Evangelical Protestant Deaconess' Institution and Training Hospital as a trainee nurse. She was sent to the Balkans to assist the Russian army medical teams in the 1877/8 Balkan War.

In mid 1879 she returned to England but was immediately requested to go to South Africa where, alone, she was sent more than 200 miles across wild countryside to take control of the most distant British army medical post in Zululand, to care for sick and injured soldiers and Zulus from the savage Anglo Zulu War. Following the peace declaration, she visited many of the famous battlefields, including Rorke's Drift and Isandlwana. She also met and treated King Cetshwayo, then a prisoner of the British at Cape Town. On 28th October 1879 she departed from Cape Town for the return journey to England; her intention was to resume her nursing career.

In 1880 she met Mr George King, an up-and-coming young London journalist who was soon to become the distinguished editor of the Globe magazine. They married 6th May 1882; she later had two daughters, Elsie and Daisy.

Janet Wells was widely recognized for her work; she received the Russian Imperial Order of the Red Cross for assisting the Russians in the Balkans, the South African Campaign medal for her participation in the Zulu War and, on Queen Victoria's command, she was awarded the Royal Red Cross decoration for 'the special devotion and competency which you have displayed in your nursing duties with Her Majesty's Troops'. At the time, the Royal Red Cross was regarded as the nursing equivalent of the Victoria Cross.

In 1901, Queen Victoria died and Sister Janet RRC was invited to the state funeral. Janet died of cancer on the 6th June 1911. She was only 53. Her remarkable untold story is taken from contemporary official records, letters and diaries of soldiers, officers, generals, army medical reports, newspapers and magazines of the time. The personal records and scrapbook of Janet, only discovered in 2003, proved especially useful when putting her story together.

In South Africa.

Her time in South Africa is especially interesting as she was the only nurse to ever get as far as Utrecht in the north of the British controlled area of Natal. In July of 1879 the battle weary British forces at Utrecht had very warmly received Sister Janet and Janet was lodged with the only English family in the nearby hamlet next to the garrison.

The arrival of a pretty nineteen-year-old nurse caused an understandable stir throughout the garrison and the length of the daily sick parade multiplied itself into a column of soldiers with sudden 'headaches' and 'tummy upsets'. She was certainly a most welcome sight for the bored and demoralised patients who filled the wards. Apart from her nursing care and her feminine presence, they loved any little luxury she could obtain for them; sometimes a rare tin of jam, some pipe tobacco or a little butter, which, due to the shortage of supplies, then cost an exorbitant 10s 6d per lb. These she would buy from the trading wagons whenever they came around.

Every Sunday, she accompanied the chaplain at the head of the church parade. There was a church room adjoining White's Stores and she attended the daily services and sang in the choir when her duties allowed. During the evenings she often sat with the seriously ill patients and quietly read requested passages from the bible. The not-so-ill patients would also try to persuade her to sit and read to them, but it was definitely not the passages from the bible they were interested in.

Despite the defeat of the Zulus at Ulundi some weeks before, the hospital was still full of soldiers suffering from battle wounds and general sickness. There were also many soldiers who had been in the hospital for a considerable time. Either they were grievously injured or seriously ill from a variety of medical conditions. These men had been fighting during the hot summer months, which are also the rainy season, so the troops had to endure both rainstorms and blistering heat; dehydration and heat exhaustion also badly affected the unsuitably clothed men. Heavy serge jackets and trousers in dark colours severely hampered those working in high temperatures and it would be many years before lightweight tropical kit would be issued for hot climates. Blisters caused by marching in heavy steel-shod boots affected the efficiency of just about every soldier, except, of course, the officers, who had their uniforms and boots specially made for them at considerable personal expense. Blisters frequently became infected and Janet and her orderlies regularly de-roofed the blisters and cleansed and dressed the suppurating sores with salt. They often said that if they had a shilling for every pair of feet treated for blisters they would be able to retire to a mansion by the sea. The soldiers were highly amused by Janet's cure for the fungal disease that seriously affected their feet, a scourge that afflicted soldiers in any hot climate. She instructed them to urinate in their boots each evening, then let the boots dry out overnight. Janet knew urine contained the agent that would kill off the fungus; to the soldiers it was a miracle cure.

Marching through torrential rainstorms, wading across swollen streams and sleeping in wet clothes led to an enormous increase in the number of soldiers suffering from rheumatism, for which there was no treatment; then the sufferer was crippled. Many of the ordinary soldiers had infections in childhood that had damaged their joints. Eventually they were unable to soldier on and were discharged as medically unfit. Janet felt desperately sorry for these poor fellows who were in constant and severe pain, often worsened by debilitating fever. Gently she applied cold compresses to the red-hot swollen joints and fevered foreheads to try to ease their pain and lower their fever before they were shipped back to England.

The average British soldier was not a physically impressive specimen when initially recruited. In spite of the 1874 reforms that had been introduced by Edward Cardwell, the Secretary for War, to improve conditions by reducing the enlistment period to six years in the hope of attracting a higher calibre of recruit, the standard continued to fall. The average height for a soldier was 5 feet 8 inches in 1870, which dropped to 5 feet 4 inches by the outbreak of the Zulu War in 1879. The stunted growth and poor physical condition of many of these men usually resulted from a deprived and miserable environment; their condition left them prey to catching the many diseases that were rife in the tropics. Common day-to-day illnesses that afflicted the British soldier included influenza, while not usually a killer, it frequently developed into pneumonia, which was often fatal. The only treatment available for bacterial or viral pneumonia was excellent nursing care. As much nourishment as it was possible to obtain or to persuade the patient to take was one remedy of the time as a proper diet could improve resistance to the infection along with tepid sponging and application of cold compresses to reduce the fever, eucalyptus inhalations and massaging the patient's back would also help to relieve congested lungs. A native plant, the *khathazo* was used as it was found to be useful in treating both influenza and pneumonia by acting as an expectorant that eased the lung congestion causing the breathing problems.

Local remedies could treat many other complaints and Janet was always prepared to try them on her patients. Severe sunburn was effectively treated by a generous application of the juice of the local aloe plant. These strange, almost cacti like plants grow in profusion all over the area. Janet was very interested in local remedies.

Janet not only had to look after the camp hospital, but was also required to ride out to the outlying camps, often inside Zululand, to attend the sick and wounded. The 80th (Staffordshire) Regiment were the

unit who had been based at Luneberg to the north of Utrecht and had taken part in the advance on Ulundi. They had left behind some scattered detachments to keep an eye on the more militant Zulu clans. The area was still the most sensitive in Zululand with the Zulu Prince Mblini still defiant and threatening revenge; another chief, Manyanyoba, continued to be a threat to Utrecht and its surrounding area.

Sporadic outbreaks of fighting continued with bands of rebellious warriors attacking patrols. On one occasion a guide with one of these patrols raced into the hospital with the news that a marauding band had attacked the patrol and there were several severe casualties who had taken refuge in a cave near the Ntombe River. Unfortunately no doctors were available to go with her, so Janet packed a medical kit and, with an orderly and an armed escort, set out to help the casualties. Several anxious faces greeted them as they rode up to the cave. Dismounting from her horse, Janet hurried to aid the injured men. Most of the wounds fortunately were superficial and although they had bled profusely the injuries were not immediately life threatening. The orderly cleansed and dressed their wounds whilst Janet dealt with the one severely injured soldier. A few hours later a relief party with a cart arrived from the hospital and Janet was able to transfer her wounded soldiers to the safety of the hospital.

Some years before, Janet had ridden a horse in London but riding for miles over open veldt on an army horse, regardless of the attempt by the stables to find her the most docile mount, bore little resemblance to a gentle trot round the rides in the park near her home. On one occasion, when she was on her rounds of the scattered camps, Janet and her guide were late returning to camp when they realized a party of possibly hostile Zulus were resting between them and the camp; unnoticed by the Zulus, Janet and her guide were forced to hide in the bush. Shades of Vardin she later recalled, as *kinjal* in hand, and wrapped in her long warm cloak, she and the guide curled up in a donga, (a dry, deep river bed) which in the dry winter season was full of rough scrub and large rocks. By the following dawn the Zulus had already moved away and Janet and her guide were able to continue on their rounds.

The area was finally made safe when men of Colonel Baker Russell's Flying Column attacked the Zulu chief Manyanyoba's caves overlooking the Ntombe River. Lieutenant Henry Curling wrote home describing this final act of the Zulu War:

There is a small tribe here living in some caves that overlook the road, who will not submit. They have continued to fire on everybody passing by and have prevented any small parties from moving about. The first day we came here we surrounded their caves and summoned them to surrender. 8 of them came out with their arms and gave themselves up. Unfortunately, some of our own men were fired upon from another cave and our own niggers immediately assegaied the prisoners. The others then refused to come out.

Large fires were lit at the mouth of the cave to smoke them out, but without avail. We have been here 3 days and they will not give in so, as we are to move tomorrow and this nest of vipers cannot be left here, the caves are to be blown up with gun cotton. We are expecting to hear the explosion every minute. It seems cruel but must be done.

With her cheerful efficiency, Sister Janet became a firm favourite amongst her patients and she was generally and affectionately referred to as 'Little Sister'. She also enjoyed attending the officers mess for dinner and was filled with pride and pleasure as every officer rose to his feet as she entered. In fact it took no time at all for the pretty young nurse to overcome any resentment that may have lingered about civilians being foisted on the military.

During the period of the Zulu War, as Sister Janet quickly discovered, venereal disease turned out to be as large a threat as the enemy, directly or indirectly causing more soldiers to seek medical assistance than any other ailment, although most of the severe cases were recorded as 'fevers'. For the troops, there was little or no official sex education and curiously, even the word 'syphilis' was banned from British newspapers until 1920. In June 1879, of the 300 cases being treated at the Durban military hospital, most patients suffered from malaria, dysentery or venereal disease. It can hardly be surprising that soldiers were syphilis's best friends. A soldier far from home, particularly one facing possible death from an assegai or typhus, rarely bothered about sexual convention and accepted syphilis as the 'merry disease'. September 1879's *The Lancet* records that:

Syphilis had been landed (at Cape Town and Durban) from the troopships, the disease having been contracted previously to the men leaving England

The *Daily Telegraph's* correspondent took up another Utrecht story when it reported, no doubt to the delight of Sister Janet's family back in England:

After the parade of Sept. 11, of the 24th Regiment, at which the Commander-in-Chief affixed the Victoria Cross to the breasts of Major Bromhead and Private Jones for their share in the defence of Rorke's Drift, his Excellency visited the hospital, and made a minute examination of the condition of the patients, at the close of which, he expressed his satisfaction to the medical officers (Somerford and Fitzmaurice) in charge, and exchanged a few words with Sister Janet of the Stafford House Committee, whose care and attention to the sick are well worthy of notice, and have been gratefully appreciated by those among whom she has been ministering.

Wolseley was not just being encouragingly polite when he praised Sister Janet, for she had become something of a local celebrity in a region conspicuously lacking in females – particularly those young and pretty. Her no-nonsense dedication coupled with her strong religious principals gained her much respect and there were no instances of her being propositioned or molested. When Wolseley planned a campaign against the intransigent Swazi chief, Sekhukhune, who remained a threat on the Transvaal frontier, he especially asked Sister Janet to travel to Standerton and accompany the expedition. In the event, the weather intervened and the expedition was postponed until the end of the year.

Surrounded by death and sickness, Janet's life of hardship was not without its lighter moments. During the negotiations to persuade Sekhukhune to surrender, one of the conditions the intransigent Zulu chief insisted on was that he should be given a white wife. As Janet was the only white woman in the area, the rumour gained momentum that she was the chief's intended wife. For some time, she could not fathom why so many ordinary Zulu people lined her route to see her as she travelled through the towns and villages of the region. It became a standing joke amongst her colleagues and officers and she was thereafter named *Mrs. Sekhukhune*.

Sister Janet's work was not yet complete. She then volunteered to visit the small British outpost at Rorke's Drift, scene of the now famous battle; the fort was on her route back to Durban and no doctor had visited the reduced Rorke's Drift garrison for many weeks.

To be continued in Journal 18.....

The Royal Red Cross. History of Janet Wells' Decoration

Parliamentary Papers

1. 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

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.

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

Further information from ;

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

The decoration... 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 June 26 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 recent war (Zulu War of 1879) has proved beyond question that women are 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.