

Sister Janet

By Adrian Greaves

The Red Cross sister sails over the Main
On a mission of mercy, no greed of gain
Leaves Father and Mother and dearest friends
To succour the wounded the dying to tend.

Strong in her faith this sister so brave
Fears no danger wherever there's life to save
And when that's past hope she cheers their last breath
With the glorious promise of life after death.

This Red Cross sister has powerful friends
Who vie with each other to further her ends
So when war and pestilence ravage the land
True charity comes from the Stafford House Band.

Benjamin Wells A.R.A.M 1879 (1)

Sister Janet was born in 1859, the second daughter of Benjamin Wells, member of the Royal Academy of Music, a noted flautist and friend of the British Royal Family. From an early age, the young Janet became fascinated by the tales of Florence Nightingale and at the age of seventeen, she joined the Protestant Deaconesses Institution to study 'the arduous routine of nurse to the sick and wounded in war'.⁽²⁾ During her training, war broke out between Russia and Turkey and in December 1887, she was selected, now aged eighteen, to accompany the party of nine British nurses sent by the Institution to Bulgaria.

The Sisters proceeded to snow-bound Bucharest and, under orders from the Russian National Red Cross Society, joined the army of Cesaewitch. The nurses travelled overland in rough carts and crossed the Danube by a bridge of boats, only to discover the town of Sistova devastated by typhus. Within the week half the nurses contracted the disease. Sister Janet was not affected but, as a consequence, found herself working long hours looking after her colleagues and some 200 seriously wounded soldiers in atrocious conditions. The nurses even resorted to sleeping in recently dug graves to escape the severe snowstorms and the attention of marauding bandits. Apart from tending soldiers suffering the ravages of a brutal war, they also had to contend with rats; one nurse received a severe bite to her face while sleeping on a hut floor. There were no fresh rations and starving wild dogs were also problematic; the nurses regularly had to use their daggers to protect the severely wounded from being eaten alive by the animals.⁽³⁾

Little mercy was shown anyone 'on the wrong side' and Sister Janet recalled having to witness the summary execution of wounded prisoners. When news of the nurses' plight reached the British press, the question most frequently asked was "what would be their fate if captured by the savage Cossack or brutal Bashi Bazook"?

After a time, the nurses found their position rendered doubly hard, caused by the attitude of the British Government to the struggle. Though permitted to carry on with their work, they became prisoners of the Russians but were released on cessation of hostilities.

They returned home to a short respite before the Zulu War took the British by surprise. At the request of the Duke of Sutherland, Chairman of the Stafford House South African Aid Committee,⁽⁴⁾ and with the approval of the military authorities, Sister Janet and six nurses set off for Zululand, most with less than 24 hours notice. On the evening of the 12th February 1879, the party, under the command of Dr. Stoker, departed from Paddington Station and proceeded to Dartmouth, sailing in the 'Dublin Castle' at noon the following day.

On arrival at Durban, the nurses were appointed to various military hospitals. Due to her experience, and now aged just 21 years, Sister Janet was appointed to take charge of the Base Field Hospital at Utrecht that supported Sir Evelyn Wood's column. Sisters Ruth and Elizabeth were assigned to the hospital at Durban, Mary and Annette went to Pietermaritzburg and Edith and Emma went to Ladysmith. Sister Janet's journey involved arduous travel in mail carts, covering the 217 miles to Utrecht in five days over badly rutted roads; in one incident, the cart overturned leaving Sister Janet with a dislocated arm and associated bruising.

At Utrecht, Sister Janet quickly settled into her role and wrote home "*it was a delightful experience to nurse the English soldiers*" after her experience in the Russo-Turkish war. She described the 'hospital' as "a collection of good huts outside the laager, and a range of tents inside the walls".⁽⁵⁾ She not only had the care of the base hospital but frequently had to ride out to the outlying camps to attend the wounded. On one occasion,

she and her guide eluded a Zulu scouting party by hiding overnight in the bush. By the 6th September, the last of the wounded from Ulundi were fit enough to be transferred to Newcastle and this ended Sister Janet's work in the field. The move to Newcastle included fifty wounded and sick soldiers along with four cases of typhoid.

Many of the wounded from Rorke's Drift and some survivors from Isandlwana had passed through her care. Sister Janet also treated the few wounded Zulus who managed to reach the hospital; the most noted case was reported in the Daily Telegraph on the 3rd October 1879. The paper related that a wounded Zulu, named 'Pashongo', was admitted to the care of Sister Janet having suffered serious bullet wounds to a knee. The Zulu was reported to have won the hearts of those who attended him by his cheerfulness, patience and natural manner. The Telegraph quoted a memorandum from Sister Janet to the Surgeon-General Ross in which she observed that "the Zulu had so gained the goodwill of the hospital orderlies that they would come in twenty times a day to turn and ease him and to lift him up in their arms to give him ease. Every effort was made to save his life, but it was necessary to amputate the leg and the operation was followed by blood poisoning, of which he died, a better man than many a so-called Christian".

On the 11th September 1879, Sister Janet attended the parade for the presentation by Sir Garnet Wolseley of Victoria Crosses to Major Bromhead and Pte. Jones of the 24th Regiment. After the parade, Sister Janet was personally complimented by the Commander-in-Chief on the manner in which she had nursed the wounded. He then requested that she accompany the Army's Sekhukhune expedition. At Landman's Drift she briefly attended Captain Hardy before he died of his wounds. The press popularly estimated that some 3,200 soldiers passed through her hands. (6)

In October 1879, Sister Janet visited Isandlwana, Rorke's Drift and Fugitives' Drift. At Isandlwana she collected numerous paper souvenirs scattered about the battlefield including a soldier's identification papers, part of a bible and similar pieces. At the two Drifts, she collected herbs and wild flowers that she carefully pressed into her scrapbook.

In a memorandum from Surgeon Major Fitzmaurice A.M.D., Senior Medical Officer at Utrecht, to Stafford House, Sister Janet came in for special praise. He wrote, "Miss Wells proved herself to be a thoroughly accomplished nurse; her attention to her duties and kindness to the sick and wounded under her care has been most praiseworthy, and she carries with her on leaving this station the gratitude alike of patients and staff". (7)

On her arrival home, Queen Victoria presented her with the Royal Red Cross to complement her South Africa medal; the citation read, "for special devotion and competency displayed in nursing duties with Her Majesty's troops". The Russian government had, in the meantime, awarded her the Imperial Order of the Red Cross of Russia.

The Chairman of the Stafford House Committee, the Duke of Sutherland K.G. issued a report to the British Government, with the approval of the Royal family. He wrote,

In conclusion, the Committee trust that the work which has been recorded in this report may finally remove any prejudice that may still exist with regard to the employment of trained female nurses in military hospitals during war-time; and they venture to hope that, should England again be unfortunately called to arms, no time will be lost in organising committees similar to the one which has now closed its work, and that no intimation given on the part of government officials that such assistance is not required will be listened to by the public, or any effort relaxed to mitigate the aid of private efforts the suffering of our soldiers during war.

SUTHERLAND

After the Zulu War, Sister Janet held the post of Superintendent of the hospital at Newcastle-upon-Tyne. In 1882, she married Mr. George King, editor of the popular *Sphere* journal. She died at Purley in June 1911 and was buried at the nearby Brandon Hill Cemetery; her passing was reported throughout the land in both the national and regional newspapers.

References.

- (1) Original poem from Nurse Janet's scrapbook – hand-written by her father.
- (2) *Ladies' Field* March 26th 1904.
- (3) *The Daily Chronicle* June 10th 1911.
- (4) The Stafford House South African Aid Committee. Patrons H.R.H. The Prince of Wales and H.R.H. Prince Leopold KG. Patronesses, H.R.H.'s Princess of Wales, Princess Christian, Duchess of Edinburgh, Duchess of Connaught, Duchess of Cambridge, Grand Duchess of Mecklenburg-Strelitz and Princess Mary, Duchess of Teck.
- (5) *Stafford House Committee Report* para. 28.
- (6) *News of the World* June 11th 1911.
- (7) *The Chronicle* June 10th 1911.