

BOER WAR NURSE

Mary Ellen 'Minnie' Affleck (1874-1956)

When Nursing Sister Minnie Affleck sailed for home aboard the troop-ship *Roslin Castle* in December 1900, ending her tour of duty in South Africa as one of the first four women to wear the uniform of the Canadian 'Militia Army Medical Nursing Service', she carried with her, tucked between the pages of her diary, a heartfelt poem composed by one of the many hundreds of Boer War wounded she had helped to treat.

*Our noble Sister she is called away,
But we are in hope she may return.
If it is a need, we wish her God Speed,
For we are all left here forlorn.*¹

Born Mary Ellen Affleck, on May 25, 1874, near Middleville², Ontario, Minnie was one of the four daughters and six sons of William Borrowman Affleck (1845-1924) and Sarah Mitchell (1847-1894).³ When her mother died, her father was re-married in 1904 to Mary Rodger (1866-1944), adding two more children to the family.⁴

Education was held in high esteem in the Affleck family. Minnie's sister Marion and her half-sisters Jessie and Amanda also trained as nurses. Her sister Elizabeth was a school teacher, her brother Robert became a lawyer and her brother Garnet a civil engineer.

Minnie's father, William 'Black Bill'⁵ Affleck, was the son of 1820 Lanark Society Settlers Robert Affleck⁶ (1809-1884) and Mary Grant Borrowman (1813-1916). William first attended school when, from age four, he tagged along with older siblings, but received only about six years of formal schooling before he went to work in the lumber camps at age 12. As an adult, however, he returned *"to Middleville School for a period, for special study, when some of his children in attendance were as tall as he"*.⁷ 'Black Bill' also stayed abreast of current events, making it a practice *"to go into Middleville each day at noon to pick up his copy of the Ottawa Evening Citizen"*.⁸ When the Caldwell and McLaren lumber barons fought court actions over the 1884 'Rivers and Streams Act', taking the case all the way to the Privy Council in London, *"One of the witnesses to appear for the Caldwells was William B. Affleck, who travelled to England for this*

¹ Affleck War Diary, quoted in documents held by the City of Vancouver Records and Archives Division.

² On a farm at Lanark Township C-5/L-15(W), Lanark County, Ontario

³ William Affleck and Sarah Mitchell were married in 1863 or 1864. Their children were, Elizabeth Playfair (1869-1953), Robert Grant (1871-1924), John Nelson (1872-1956), Mary Ellen (1874-1956), Jean/Jeannie Whyte (1876-1965), William Lloyd (1878-1940), Marion Hannah (1880-1947), Boyd Campbell (1882-1969), Garnet (b.1884), Clifford Watt (1888-1949).

⁴ Jessie (1906-1988) and Amanda Grey (1908-2004).

⁵ The 'Black Bill' nickname is unexplained. He had reddish blonde hair, not black.

⁶ Affleck is often Auchinleck in Scotland.

⁷ Memoire of Amanda Affleck-Locke

⁸ Ibid.

purpose”.⁹ ‘Black Bill’ spent much of his life working winters as a shanty and drive foreman for the Caldwell Lumber Company, and summers tilling his Lanark Township farm, a short distance south of the village of Middleville. For more than a half century, from 1868 until 1920, he was President of the Lanark Township Agricultural Society.

Minnie’s mother, Sarah Mitchell, described as “*possessed [of] considerable literary ability*” and a woman of “*considerable religious fervour*”¹⁰ also played an important role in encouraging the education of her children, and ensuring their adherence to Congregationalist religious principals and independence. Family legend holds that her death in 1916, at age 103, was attributed to a 10-mile walk, in heavy cold rain, from Middleville to Watson’s Corners to attend a religious revival meeting.

Minnie Affleck received her primary education at Middleville Public school and completed High School studies at Almonte Collegiate. In the early 1890s she worked as a teacher in rural Lanark County public schools at Clayton, Bulloch’s and Lammermoor. By 1896 she had saved enough money to enroll in the nurses’ training program at Kingston General Hospital. Graduating in 1898 at age 24, at the head of her class of nine, she worked for a year in Cleveland, Ohio, and then secured a position on the nursing staff of the Ottawa Children’s Hospital.



Kingston Nursing School Graduating Class 1898, Minnie Affleck, standing far left. (City of Vancouver Archives AM54-S4-2-: CVA 371-198, Major James Kitt Mathews collection).

Just a few months after arriving in Ottawa, however, Minnie volunteered to accompany the first contingent of Canadian troops¹¹ sent to reinforce the British Army fighting in South Africa. She was one of just four nurses, from among 190 applicants, recruited to the first ever Canadian ‘Militia Army Medical Nursing Service’.¹² Together with Sarah Forbes (1860-1902) of Liverpool, Nova Scotia, and Elizabeth Russell (b.1879) of Hamilton, Ontario, she would serve under the command of Matron Cecily Jane Georgina Fane Pope (1862-1938) of Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island.

⁹ Ibid. Whether William Affleck actually travelled to London and testified before the Privy Council may be in some question. His testimony may have been given at one or more of the many court cases previously heard in Canada.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ 2nd Battalion Royal Canadian Regiment (RCR).

¹² According to the *Perth Courier*, November 3, 1899, Minnie’s older brother, Robert Grant Affleck (1871-1924), also joined the Army Medical Nursing Service for service in the Boer War. He may have volunteered to do so, in some capacity, but no evidence has been found that he was accepted or ever went to South Africa.

As the newly minted Army Nursing Sisters packed their bags and made their farewells, Matron Pope and Colonel Hubert Neilson (1845-1925), Director General of Medical Staff, hurriedly considered what kind of uniform the new Nursing Service should wear. Their decision was khaki, the same as would be worn, for the first time, by Canadian troops.

The uniform design was left to Pope. She chose a short bicycle skirt, a Russian blonso with shoulder straps and service buttons, brown leather belt and boots, a khaki sailor hat with little red brush, white collar and cuffs, and apron with bib. Initially there was no uniform cap, as the assumption was the women would work under canvas and wear hats. After reaching South Africa, however, Pope obtained permission from the British War Office to adopt the English Army Nursing Service cap or veil.

Much concerned that the war would be over before they could arrive, the troops and their medical staff sailed from Quebec City aboard the *SS Sardinian* on October 29, 1899 and arrived at Cape Town on November 30th. The troops were immediately sent inland but, much to their disappointment, the Nursing Sisters were told they could not serve in field hospitals. Medical Corps doctrine provided for assignment of female nurses to General and Base Hospitals, but no nurses were allowed near the front for fear they be captured or shot by the enemy. Nursing Sister Affleck and her colleagues were ordered to No.1 General Hospital, a 1,000 bed facility at Wynberg, eight miles west of Cape Town.



**Nursing Sister Minnie
Affleck c1900
(worldpress.com)**

The Canadian nurses arrived just in time to deal with the carnage of 'Black Week'. Between December 10th and 17th the British Army had suffered a rapid series of bloody defeats at Stormberg, Magersfontein, Modder River, Colenso, Graspan and Belmont. Nearly 3,000 men had been killed, wounded or captured.

By the time casualties reached base hospitals like Wynberg they had made a long hard journey. Wounded men were carried from the battlefield by stretcher bearers to a dressing-station or field hospital located a short distance from the fighting. From the field hospital they were hauled in wagons to the nearest railway line, transported south to Cape Town, then carried by horse drawn ambulance from the station to the base hospital. The process could take several days. Many died along the way while others arrived in much worse condition than when they had first been wounded; hungry, dehydrated, weak from blood loss and with infections far advanced.

Doctors and nurses faced horrendously long hours, working from early morning until a meal could be served at 10:00 p.m. and then returning to operating room and ward. Including the small Canadian contingent, there were only 44 nurses in all of South Africa, the other 40 being British.¹³ Canadian Matron Georgina Pope recalled the arrival of a casualty convoy as;

... a most pitiful sight, many of the men being stretcher cases, shot through thigh, foot or spine. What struck one most was the wonderful pluck of these poor fellows, who had jolted over the rough veldt in ambulances and then endured the long train journey ... Surgeons, sisters, and orderlies, all worked on regardless of time or hunger until everyone was as comfortable as they could be made. Tommy made the least of all his woes. A drink first, then after his wounds had been attended to, 'a bit of tobacco' for a smoke, and a piece of

¹³ By early 1901 there would be 1,000 nurses caring for the sick and wounded.

paper to 'send a line so they won't be scared at home', were invariably the first requirements.¹⁴

At No.1 General Hospital, Wynberg, the nurses worked in huts, but on Christmas Day 1899 they moved six miles to the newly established No.3 General Hospital at Rondebosch, a 600 bed unit under canvas. Over the next six months at Rondebosch they contended with hot sultry days, freezing nights, dust and sand when a 'Cape South Easter' blew, mud when the rainy season set in, and plagues of scorpions and snakes. There were, however, compensations. Matron Pope recalled that;

... here at the base we always had good air, plenty of good water, with an abundance of fresh milk, eggs, and ice. The general hospital fare was excellent, and added to this we received daily quantities of fruit and dainties sent by the Red Cross Committee of the Colony, besides any medical comforts from England.¹⁵

Among their duties at Rondebosch the Canadian Sisters managed an enteric fever ward. Typhoid, then known as enteric fever, is transmitted by contaminated water and, through December 1899 and early 1900, the British Army was static on a line at the Modder River and Paardeberg. The South African veldt is semi desert and throughout the conflict the men, as well as thousands of horses and oxen, were dependent upon such shallow, slow moving streams as the Modder. Contaminated with animal and human feces the rivers spread Typhoid through the British ranks with terrifying speed. Of 556,650 men with the British Force, 57,700 contracted Typhoid and 8,225 of them died, compared to 7,590 killed in action.

The Canadian nurses "*eagerly searched out the wearers of the Maple Leaf badge, and deemed it a great privilege to find them our own special patients*".¹⁶ The case load at Rondebosch fluctuated with the ebb and flow of the campaign but Minnie Affleck's diary shows that during February 1,021 cases were admitted, 300 of them on the 17th alone. The caseload at Rondebosch included "*... medical and surgical cases of our own and the Portland Hospital*"¹⁷ ... [yet] *we had but thirty deaths.*¹⁸

The bloodshed of Black Week forced the British to dig in and call for reinforcements. Strengthening the line, with troops and supplies sent from Briton and her Dominions, took more than two months, but when the reinforcements arrived, at the end of February 1900, they brought with them a 2nd Contingent of four more Canadian nursing sisters.¹⁹

¹⁴ Georgina Fane Pope quoted in *Angels or Sisters of Mercy, Canada at War Blog*, <https://canadaatwarblog.wordpress.com/2014/09/26/the-canadian-army-nursing-sisters-in-the-second-south-africana-war-1899-1902/>

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Reminiscences of Service in South Africa During the Boer War, by Georgina Fane Pope (From *The Canadian Nurse* November 1925)

¹⁷ A hospital financed and staffed by private funds but placed under Army command, in this case as an extension to No. 3 General hospital at Rondebosch. Nine such 'private' hospitals were sent from Britain during the Boer War.

¹⁸ Georgina Fane Pope quoted in *Angels or Sisters of Mercy, Canada at War Blog*, <https://canadaatwarblog.wordpress.com/2014/09/26/the-canadian-army-nursing-sisters-in-the-second-south-africana-war-1899-1902/>

¹⁹ 2nd Contingent - Deborah Hurcomb, Montreal; Margaret Clotilde Macdonald, Bailey's Brook, Nova Scotia; Marcella P. Richardson, Regina; Margaret L. Horne, Montreal. There was also a 3rd Contingent - Georgina Pope, Sarah Forbes, Margaret

In early May, No.3 General Hospital at Rondebosch was divided into two units. Half the medical staff, including Sisters Affleck and Russell, were ordered to join the command of Lieutenant Colonel Alfred Keogh (1857-1936) at No. 10 General hospital, Springfontien, in the Orange Free State.²⁰ Because she had recently adopted a stray puppy, which was refused transport, Minnie Affleck applied to remain at Rondebosch but was denied.

At the junction of railway lines from Cape Town, Port Elizabeth and East London, and the line north to Bloemfontein, Springfontien was a major British Army staging area and the location of the largest hospital complex in the theatre. It was comprised of three facilities; Minnie Affleck's No.10 General Hospital of 520 beds, No. 12 General Hospital of 500 beds and the Welsh Hospital of 150 beds²¹. As winter set in on the high veld, conditions at Springfontien proved very difficult. Minnie's diary comments on May 29th that during the previous night medicine froze in the glasses as she carried them to her patients.²²



*Army Medical Nursing Service Sister Minnie Affleck with some of her patients at Springfontien, South Africa, 1900
(LAC photo, C-028733, MIKAN No. 3407158)*

On June 30, 1900 Nursing Sister Affleck was ordered to Pretoria, the Afrikaner capital having fallen to the British three weeks earlier. She reached the city via a special armoured train carrying Lady Nora Henrietta Bews-Roberts (1838-1920) to join her husband, Field Marshal

Macdonald and Deborah Hurcomb, returning for a second tour of duty, joined by Florence Cameron; Eleanor Fortescue, Isle a la Crosse, Saskatchewan; Amy W. Scott, Toronto; Margaret Heggie Smith, Ottawa.

²⁰ About 90 miles south of Bloemfontein.

²¹ Another of the nine privately funded hospitals, like the Portland Hospital at Rondebosch.

²² Springfontien was also home to a concentration camp that held nearly 3,000 Boer women and children, more than 700 of whom died there of hunger and disease.

Frederick Sleigh Roberts (1842-1914), 1st Earl Roberts, Commander-in-Chief of British Forces in South Africa.²³ As Lord Roberts was at the station to greet his wife and daughters, Minnie and her fellow Canadian nurses had the opportunity of being formally introduced to the British Commander. During her stay at Pretoria, Minnie also formed a close personal friendship with Colonel Robert Baden-Powell (1857-1951), hero of the siege of Mafeking and future founder of the Boy Scouts movement.

At Pretoria, Affleck and the others were assigned to the Royal Army Medical Corps (RAMC) Hospital set up in the Palace of Justice where, a week later, they were joined by three sisters of the 2nd Canadian Contingent.²⁴

Although some Boer Commandos continued to fight last-ditch guerrilla actions, by September 1900, the British were nominally in control of both Afrikaner republics.²⁵ The Canadian nursing team continued to serve at Pretoria until November 3rd, when they were ordered home. Before sailing, however, they were granted 10 days leave, providing Minnie Affleck the opportunity to visit Natal, with stops at Ladysmith, Spion Kop, Colenso, Chieveley, Pietermaritzburg and Durban. She had been scheduled to embark for home with the Royal Canadian Regiment but was delayed when the Pretoria-Durban railway line was cut by a Boer Commando. She missed her intended ship, *HMT Idaho*, and remained in South Africa for an additional month, taking the opportunity to see even more of the country, including a trip to Johannesburg and a visit down a gold mine.

Her tour of Natal and the Transvaal were only some of the sight-seeing jaunts she took during her time in South Africa. While at Rondebosch she trekked on foot to visit Table Mountain and other sites around the Cape. When transferred from Springfontien to Pretoria her train was delayed at Bloemfontein, so she hiked across the veld. She toured the city of Pretoria by bicycle and ventured far into the surrounding countryside by horse and buggy.



Minnie Affleck, Pretoria, April 1900 (City of Vancouver Archives, AM54-S4-2-: CVA 371-1978, Major James Kitt Mathews collection).

Minnie finally boarded the S.S. *Roslin Castle* at Cape Town on December 13, 1900. She found the ship loaded with wounded and sick soldiers and her diary records almost daily burial services at sea as the vessel steamed for home. The ship docked at Halifax on January 8, 1901 and on January 11th Minnie reached Perth. According to a lengthy page-one report in the *Perth Courier*, her home-coming was a major event. Met at the Perth railway station by a large cheering crowd and the band of the 42nd Regiment, she was paraded on sleighs through the town,

²³ Roberts had defeated the Afrikaner Republics with a brutal scorched earth campaign that included the mass burning of Boer farmsteads and the invention of 'Concentration Camps' to incarcerate the resulting thousands of homeless women and children, over 26,000 of whom died from disease and malnutrition while in British hands.

²⁴ The fourth member of the 2nd nursing contingent having been invalided out.

²⁵ The Orange Free State and the Transvaal Republic.

... the sidewalks were crowded, and the schoolboys furnished no small part of the general cheering ... The procession proceeded to Lanark [where] the good patriotic village overflowed with thanksgiving and praise. The cadets met the procession at the toll gate and led the way, where the streets were beautifully decorated, the walks crowded, and the air ringing with shouts of welcome ... The beautiful evergreen arch on the bridge across the Clyde bore the words 'Welcome Minnie'. [At Middleville] a large banner floated across the main street bearing the words 'Welcome Home'. Many were the expressions of appreciation as the nurse passed through the village ... An enthusiastic company joined a torch-light procession and escorted the nurse from her home to the town hall, where [she] was brought into the hall amidst much cheering. Speakers eulogized her excellent work. [She was presented with a memorial certificate and] a solid gold watch and chain as a token of the appreciation of her fellow citizens. At the close of the program the sleigh was brought to the door, and the band, headed by a torch-light procession, conducted her home.²⁶

On census day, March 31, 1901, Minnie Affleck was still in Lanark Township, staying at the family home with her father, two sisters and three brothers, her occupation recorded as 'trained nurse'. But she was only on leave. In August the Militia Medical Corps posted her to Military District No. 11, Vancouver. There, on September 30th, she was decorated with the Queen's South African War Medal²⁷, presented by HRH the Duke of Cornwall and York, the future King Edward V²⁸, as part of the official opening of Beatty Street Drill Hall. According to a *Vancouver Daily Province* report on the ceremony, Minnie also received "a sympathetic smile from the Duchess,²⁹ who always appeared particularly pleased at the recognition of merit in members of her own sex".



Minnie Affleck's South African War Medal, with clasps for Rondebosch, Springfontien and Pretoria, her uniform pins and shoulder flash, and the gold watch presented by her Middleville friends and neighbors. (City of Vancouver Archives, AM54-S4-2-: CVA 371-1990, Major James Kitt Mathews collection).

In November 1912, shortly before her retirement from the Army Medical Corps the following year, Minnie married Irish-born Adolphus Wolfe (1881-1856), a Vancouver furniture dealer whom she had met as a patient in her care. They became the parents of two children William Affleck Wolfe (1914-1933) and Sheila Jean Lazerte Wolfe (1920-1970).

Throughout the remainder of her life Minnie Affleck-Wolfe continued to take an active interest in the affairs of the Boer War Veterans Association, of which she was a member at Branch No. 1 in Vancouver. She also travelled extensively in the United States and visited Mexico.

²⁶ *Perth Courier*, January 18, 1901.

²⁷ Queen Victoria died on January 22, 1901, so those who served in South Africa after January 1, 1901 received the Kings South African Medal. Officially nurses were not entitled to receive clasps as they were classified as 'non-combatant'. Nevertheless, Minnie Affleck's medal included three clasps.

²⁸ The Duke of Cornwall and York became Edward V in 1910.

²⁹ The future Queen Mary.

Mary Ellen 'Minnie' Affleck-Wolfe suffered a stroke in 1951 and died, aged 82 years, at Vancouver in 1956. She was buried in Burnaby Heritage Cemetery, Burnaby, British Columbia.

Slipped into the pages of her war diary Nursing Sister Affleck kept a poem written by one of her soldier patients. Its author is identified only by the initials 'W.C.' He was no Lord Byron, his grammar dodgy and his spelling occasionally phonetic, but the ode he penned to Minnie Affleck was heartfelt and apparently treasured by the recipient.

Dedicated to our Brave Sister Affleck

*We have some noble sisters,
That is a credit to our land,
These are ever aiding Tommy
With a helping, soothing hand.*

*"Tommy, you may rest yourself,
And in the course of a few days
I shall have the bullet extracted,
When supplied with the Exrais"³⁰*

*Our Tommies does their duty
So manly and so brave,
While the gallant sisters are entrusted
With so many lives to save.*

*Then comes our heroick Sister Affleck,
Who has proved to one and all
A lady to her calling,
And her virtues surpass all.*

*Our doctor is a skilful man,
Both generous and kind,
True, but yet he has neglected
Some things he should do.*

*She deserves our congratulations,
And is held in admiration
By the wounded, sick and dying
That have come from Senekal.*

*For instance, there comes a patient
With a bullet in his calf - -
The way in which he is treated
It would raily make you laugh.*

*Our noble Sister she is called away,
But we are in hope she may return.
If it is a need we wish her God Speed,
For we are all left here forlorn.*

With the compliments of M.C. and all of us. Sister, I hope you will excuse the bad spelling and bad righting.³¹

The reference to Senekal, location of a skirmish on the Sand River during the Battle of Biddulphsberg, and to Nurse Affleck being "called away" indicates that the poem must have been written at No.3 General Hospital, Rondebosch, in May 1900.

- Ron W. Shaw (2016)

³⁰ X-Rays

³¹ City of Vancouver Archives, 503-F-3 / Folder-13