

CROIX DE GUERRE

Lillian Gibson Spence (1885-1965)

In 1919 the French Government awarded the Croix de Guerre, one of its most prestigious honors, to Nursing Sister Lillian Gibson Spence for services to France during the First World War¹. From May 1917 until October 1918 Spence had cared for the wounded of the French Army at Hôpital Militaire VR. 76 near Paris.

Born at Lanark Village on November 3, 1885, Lillian was the daughter of James Spence (1851-1908)² and Jane Russell McDougall (1855-1897); the eldest of five children.³ After attending local elementary and secondary schools, Spence trained as a nurse at Greenwich General Hospital and the Women's Hospital of New York in the United States.

When war broke out in Europe in the summer of 1914 Harold J. Reckitt, an English Quaker, undertook to create and fund a hospital in support French and allied armies fighting in France. He secured the assistance of Dr. Lewis A. Conner, Professor of Medicine at Cornell University, Ithaca, New York, who undertook to recruit staff and make arrangements with the American Red Cross for medical and surgical supplies. Dr. Foster Kennedy, also an American, was appointed first Commandant. Within a few months this trans-Atlantic partnership had equipped and staffed a 50 bed facility, but when it was offered to the French, and then to Italy, Belgium and Britain, there were no takers. The French were concerned about the neutrality of American Staff⁴, there were uncertainties in Italy about which side the country might in the end support, Belgium had been overrun by German armies and the British regarded the Reckitt hospital as too small to be viable.

Meanwhile Lady Antoinette Johnstone, wife of Sir Alan Johnstone, British Minister at The Hague, had put together a small 36 bed hospital, fully equipped by the American Red Cross with all tents, supplies & equipment. Faced with the same economy of scale challenges, she proposed combining her effort with that of Reckitt. Their combined 100 bed Reckitt-Johnstone Foundation hospital was organized under the Anglo-French Department of the British Red Cross, with Reckitt also providing ambulances and other transport.



WW1 Croix de Guerre

¹ *American Journal of Nursing*, April 1919.

² When Jane Russell McDougall died in 1897, she left five children under the age of 12. James Spence was remarried in 1898 to Jane Greenley (1839-1904).

³ Lillian Gibson (1885-1945), Thomas (b.1888), Sarah (b.1889), Elizabeth (b.1891) and Anne.

⁴ The United States being officially neutral, but with a large ethnic German population.



Hôpital Militaire VR. 76, Ris-Orangis, Seine-et-Oise

However, on making a new offer of the enlarged unit, they found the British Army had in the meantime instituted a policy of accepting no further private hospitals. As the first staff of doctors and nurses arrived in England from the U.S. in June 1915, a second offer was made to the French. Paris again raised concerns over the neutrality of American citizens but finally accepted and assigned the Reckitt-Johnstone team to quarters in the former Marist Fathers College at Ris-Orangis, Seine-et-Oise, on the banks of the Seine, 25 kilometers from Paris on the road to Fontainebleau. Renovation began August 14, 1915 and the hospital opened on September 26th with the first casualties arriving that night.

Placed under overall command of the French Army, at Marist College the Reckitt-Johnstone hospital became Hôpital Militaire VR.⁵ 76. Non-medical staff was supplied by the French 22nd Regiment; men too old or infirm for active service. The medical staff of about 350 were mostly British and American. The physicians and trained nurses were chiefly American, and lay staff and orderlies were mostly British, but the team included men and women from France, Italy, Russia, Netherlands, Norway, Luxembourg, Philippines, Canada, Australia and New Zealand.

Apparently recruited by Cornell's Dr. Lewis Conner, through the American Red Cross, from May 6, 1917, the Hôpital Militaire VR. 76 staff included Canadian Nursing Sister Lillian Gibson Spence. A year later the *Perth Courier* published a letter home from the battlefield.

⁵ Hôpital Militaire VR. 76 was an army annex to Hôpital Versailles for which VR. was the military abbreviation.

Just a year ago today since I entered service in the Hospital Militaire, VR. 76 and yet I cannot believe it to be so quickly go the days in France. The time spent here has been most absorbingly interesting and the experiences never to be forgotten.

Our hospital services only the French wounded. Since the spring drive began we have worked at top speed. Faster than we could care for them the ambulance bore the poor shattered wreckage of the war up the hill. With seven surgeons operating and thirty nurses serving we seemed to never reach an end. Some of the wounded were more than three days en route to us and arrived in frightful condition; caked with mud from the trenches, horrible wounds, pitiful wan faces. When the trains of wounded come in at the clearing station, ten miles away, it is heart breaking to see it. Coach after coach, cattle car after cattle car with great lines of stretchers. The severe cases too ill to go further are taken off to our hospital.



Hôpital Militaire VR. 76

Yesterday a young wounded soldier with tetanus was brought in and when the old village Cure bent over him, between spasms he gasped out that he had been praying, praying Bonne Vierge⁶ to send him a message and take care of him.

This morning was a red-letter day for a boy of 18 the nurses call 'Babe', [he] had lost two limbs and the sight of one eye but never his courage. Today his new American legs arrived and when they were strapped on his joy was beyond expression. Proudly he engaged each nurse for a walk and when night came we actually had to beg him to retire so anxious was he to practice.

⁶ To Mary, the 'Good Virgin'.

We had great excitement Friday night when enemy airplanes tried to fly over Paris but were vigorously attacked by the French. Nurses off duty were all called and as we sat in the darkness ready in case of need, we watched two fighting planes swept by searchlights and listened to the explosions of the shells. An aviator was brought in who had fallen. We sewed up several bad gashes and put three stitches in each eye lid but beyond that he had only a few scratches and bruises.

I often recall with pleasure my happy days in America but while the war lasts, there is opportunity for service here and I feel I must remain in France.⁷

Hôpital Militaire VR. 76 closed in September 1918 and its staff and resources were transferred to Juilly Hospital in Paris. As the move got underway a Captain Lawrence of U.S. 57th Engineers came to ask help with an outbreak of influenza⁸ in his camp. Hospital Militaire VR. 76 established a small emergency tent hospital (4 tents, 16 cots, blankets, sheets, pillows, hot water bottles, etc.) Two doctors were assigned to this temporary establishment and Harold Reckitt ...

... asked for volunteers from the nurses, preference being given to members of the American staff. The nurses who eventually went were: Misses Metcalf, Spence, Cowan, McFadden, Lyall, Currie, Threlkeld, Dewar, Lyons and Mrs. Cross ... Towards the end of October the nurses were surprised to receive a visit from Captain Lawrence and his brother officers. They came on a formal errand to make a presentation to each nurse of a gold wrist watch, blue enameled, and engraved with the nurse's name and the grateful thanks of the men of the 57th Engineers.

Following her stint at the 57th Engineers' camp, Spence resigned her position in October 1918. On January 30, 1919, returning from France via Liverpool, Nursing Sister Spence came down the gang plank of the SS *Megantic* at Portland, Maine, among a large contingent of returning American and Canadian war nurses.

She resumed work as a civilian nurse in New York City, living there until 1930 when she moved to Greenwich, Connecticut, where she continued to work as a nurse. She retired in 1956, at the age of 71 years, and went to live with her sister Ann (Mrs. Ernest Weaver) at Toledo, Ohio. She did not marry.

Over the years Spence maintained a connection with France, making return visits in 1926 and 1934.

Lillian Gibson Spence died at Toledo, Ohio, aged 80, on July 17, 1965. Her ashes were returned to Canada and buried in her home village of Lanark.

- Ron W. Shaw (2014)

⁷ *Perth Courier*, August 30, 1918

⁸ The 'Spanish Flu' (H1N1) pandemic of 1918-1920.