

No.1 CANADIAN GENERAL HOSPITAL ÉTAPLES

Edith Alberta Gallagher (1891-1972)

Shortly after 10:30 p.m. on the brightly moonlit night of May 19, 1918 a German air raid dropped more than 100 bombs on a complex of 10 Canadian and British field hospitals clustered along the rail lines near Étapes, France. At No.1 Canadian General Hospital, there were 139 casualties among staff and patients, 66 of whom were killed. Three nursing sisters died in the attack and five more were wounded, one of latter was Edith Alberta Gallagher of Bathurst Township, Lanark County, Ontario.

Born near the village of Fallbrook, on May 28, 1891, Edith Alberta Gallagher was one of eight daughters and four sons born to Joshua Adams Gallagher (1810-1917) and Margaret Linton (1857-1906). Her grandparents were Thomas Gallagher (1810-1901) and Eleanor Harper-Gallagher (1810-1897), and her great grandparents were 1829 Irish immigrants William Gallagher Sr. (1773-1854) and Alice Welsh (1790-1884) of County Tyrone, Ireland.

After completing her primary and secondary education at Fallbrook and Perth, Gallagher attended Western Hospital Nursing School in Montreal, graduating in the class of 1914. She worked briefly at Dr. W. J. Beatty's¹ Hospital in the northwestern Ontario town of Keewatin (Kenora), but returned to Montreal to enlist, for pay of \$4.10 per day, with the Canadian Army Medical Corps (CAMC) on December 28, 1915. Rather remarkably, her attestation and enlistment papers show that prior to joining the CAMC she had already been enrolled with the Active Militia Army Nursing Corps (ANC). When World War One broke out in September 1914 the ANC comprised fewer than 30 reservists, one of whom was Edith Gallagher.



No.1 Canadian General Hospital after the raid of May 10, 1918

Nursing Sister Gallagher was attached to Canadian Expeditionary Force (CEF) No.6 General Hospital, Laval University, which had just been organized in December 1915, and sailed with her unit on March 23, 1916 aboard the S.S. *Baltic*, reaching Liverpool on April 9th.

¹ Dr. William John Beatty (1868-1930).



Westcliffe Eye & Ear Hospital, Folkstone

Étaples, on the French coast. In October that year she was on 12 days leave in England when her 73-year-old father died Fallbrook.²

By April 14th she was on duty at Westcliffe Eye & Ear Hospital at Folkstone in Kent, where she served for four months. In early August she was sent to France and assigned to No.8 Canadian General Hospital at St. Cloud, on the outskirts of Paris. After five months there, she transferred to No.6 Canadian General Hospital (her original unit) at Troyes. She served with No.6 Hospital from February to September 1917 when she was posted to No.1 Canadian General Hospital in

A total of 3,141 Canadian nurses volunteered their services during the Great War of 1914-1918. They cared for nearly 540,000 soldiers. CAMC nurses like Gallagher were regarded as angels of mercy by the sick and wounded soldiers. In addition to their medical duties, in the imagination of their patients they also stood in for far away mothers, sisters, wives or girlfriends. Nicknamed 'Bluebirds', for their uniform of blue dress, white apron and sheer white veil, the nurses often struggled to maintain their own spirits, as they cared for the broken bodies and shattered minds of their patients. As one response, someone at No.1 General Hospital, composed an anthem.

*No 1 Canadian General Hospital
Nursing Sisters' Theme Song*

*In my sweet little Alice Blue gown,
When I first came to Birmingham town.
I had had a bad trip, in a nasty old ship
And the cold in my billet, just gave me the pip.
We came out to nurse our own troops,
But were greeted with measles and whoops.
Now I'll be a granny, and sit on my fanny,
And keep warm with turpentine stupes³.*

*In my sweet little Alice Blue gown,
When I return to my home town
They will bring out the band, give the girls a big hand,
Being a nurse in the force, I'll be quite renowned.
And I'll never forget all the fun,
That I had, since I joined Number One
I was happy and gay, to have served with MacRae⁴
In my sweet little Alice Blue gown.⁵*

² Her mother had died in 1906 and her father had remarried in 1907 to Sara Maria Draper (b.1868).

³ A hot wet medicated cloth applied externally to stimulate circulation.

⁴ Possibly a reference to Lieutenant Colonel John McCrae (1872-1918) (vs MacRae), author of *In Flanders Fields*, although Lieutenant Colonel McCrae served with No.3 Canadian General Hospital not No.1 Canadian General Hospital.

⁵ Sung to the tune of 'Bless 'em All', a popular war song also called 'The Long and the Short and the Tall and sometimes called 'F**k 'em All', written 1917, words by Fred Godfrey, music by Robert Kewley.

Having returned from leave in England, Nursing Sister Edith Gallagher was on duty at No.1 Canadian General Hospital Étaples on the night of May 19, 1918, when the 'maroon', an air raid warning device using Morse code, sounded the alarm "*Huns over the lines*". All lights were immediately extinguished, and the complex of hospitals along the rail line waited, "*in an eerie silence, for the first crash*"⁶ of falling bombs. Nursing Sister Elsie Dorothy Collis (1886-1986) of Victoria, BC, recorded an eye-witness account of the attack in her journal.

... Had a terrible raid from 10:30 p.m. to 12:30 a.m. Was a beautiful night, as light as day. Before I left for supper, I heard distant guns and thought nothing of it. Had just got to the kitchen door when bombs began to drop. There were several in the mess quarters and that set the row of huts on fire. Two dropped outside the club, another outside our new quarters, the whole place was wrecked ...

Poor little 'Bob' was buried, she had a fractured femur, a huge wound in the other leg and several smaller ones. Miss McDonald was killed. She had a small wound, but it must have severed the femoral artery as she died of haemorrhage almost immediately. Wounded were taken to G ward. Several bombs dropped on the officers' lines. One on top of Hill-60 killed one MO [Medical Orderly].

There were about six of us on the kitchen floor. It was dreadful. We could see the fires through the window, hear the men shouting and calling ... hear bombs dropping, the guns would all stop until the machine came within range. All one could hear was their continual buzzing – then the guns again, then the bombs. The windows all fell in, dishes kept breaking, the plaster walls fell in ... We were sure the next one would hit us.

When there was a lull we hurried back to the wards. One badly wounded man was brought to hut X dying. Several of the hill wards were hit, one destroyed. Where the men slept a number were killed and nearly as many wounded. The OR was very busy the rest of the night.⁷

That night at Étaples, in a raid lasting over two hours, 15 Gotha bombers⁸ dropped 116 explosive and incendiary bombs, followed by machine gun strafing, that inflicted 840 casualties among staff, patients and civilians. No.1 Canadian General Hospital, with all of its 1,024 beds occupied, suffered 139 of those casualties, including 66 killed. When the nurses quarters took a direct hit, three nursing sisters died; Katherine Macdonald (b.1886) from Brantford, who was killed instantly, and Gladys 'Bob' Wake (b.1883) from Esquimalt and Margaret Lowe (b.1888) from Winnipeg, who were so seriously wounded that they died within a few days. Five other nurses were wounded, among them Edith Gallagher, struck in the face by shrapnel causing injury to her eye. Miraculously the wound was not serious; her sight was saved, and she fully recovered after treatment.

⁶ *Our Bit: Memories of War Service by a Canadian Nursing Sister*, by Mable B. Clint (1934).

⁷ Imperial War Museum film of the attack aftermath can be seen at <https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/1060022723> .

⁸ The twin engine Gotha was the only true heavy bomber of WW1. Designed primarily for night bombing it carried 14 X 25 Kilogram (60 lb.) bombs which, using the Goerz bombsite, could be dropped with considerable accuracy.

The three women killed at Étaples that night were the first Canadian Army nurses to die as the result of direct enemy action, and Edith Gallagher of Bathurst Township, Lanark County, was one of the first five Canadian nurses ever wounded by enemy fire. Before WW1 ended six months later, another 18 Canadian nurses died and scores more were wounded.⁹ Many more Canadian nurses would be killed and wounded in conflicts to come.



Funeral of Canadian Nursing Sister Margaret Lowe (1888-1918), killed in the air raid of May 19, 1918 on No.1 Canadian General Hospital, Étaples

On her return to duty Gallagher was attached to a new unit, No.3 Canadian General Hospital at Boulogne, a few miles north of Étaples, where she worked until after the Armistice ended hostilities in November 1918.¹⁰ Returning

to England in March 1919 her final weeks of overseas duty were spent at No.15 Canadian General Hospital, also known as the Duchess of Connaught's Red Cross Hospital, in Cliveden, Buckinghamshire. She embarked for Canada on the SS *Laplant* on April 3rd and landed at Halifax on April 10th.

Nursing Sister Edith Gallagher was discharged on demobilization effective April 17th at Ottawa. In August 1919 she was honored at a ceremony in Keewatin when she was awarded the British War and Victory Medals. Her military service is commemorated on two war memorial plaques at Keewatin (Kenora).

Later that year she returned to work at her alma mater, Western Hospital in Montreal, which became part of Montreal General Hospital in 1924. She later moved to Vancouver, then to Seattle, Washington. She married a man named Powers and lived in San Pablo, Sonoma County, California. She died in Sonoma County on December 9, 1972, at age 81.

- Ron W. Shaw (2014)

⁹ During WW1 2,504 Canadian nurses served overseas. In addition to the 21 combat deaths, another 46 nurses died of illness or accident and others died after the Armistice from conditions attributable to their service.

¹⁰ Shortly after the attack of May 19th, No.1 Canadian General Hospital was moved to a safer location near Trouville.