

Nursing Career Memoires of Agnes (Bardal) Comack Class of 1943

By Agnes (Bardal) Comack

Agnes (Bardal) Comack graduated from the Winnipeg General Hospital School of Nursing in 1943. She lives in Winnipeg, MB and will celebrate the 75th Anniversary of her graduation from the diploma nursing program in 2018.

In this article Agnes presents the highlights of her nursing career, both as a WW II Nursing Sister and a civilian. Agnes includes a letter she wrote to her father in 1944 while nursing in Quebec; it provides poignant insight into that experience.

Class of 1943 – Winnipeg General Hospital



Field Marshall Bernard Montgomery visits Deer Lodge in 1946



I graduated in 1943 and began Nursing in Military Hospitals. This was the highlight of my nursing career. When the boys were all together, they could laugh and make jokes. I loved making them laugh despite their awful injuries. I spent over 6 months in Vancouver at Shaughnessy Military Hospital and the Convalescent Hospital which was known at Hycroft and was the home of Gen McRea (from WW1) who donated it for that purpose.

When DVA needed nurses in Quebec, my pal Ruthie Thompson and I volunteered to transfer to Ste

Anne de Bellevue, north of Montreal, where we were until the war ended. After the war ended, I asked for a transfer back to Deer Lodge, which was all Military in those days, because I was hoping my brother Neil would be alive and able to return from Hong Kong where he was with the Wpg Grenadiers a P.O.W. for over 3.5 years.

At Deer Lodge, I was posted to Officers ward and that's where I met my husband Hugh who had just come home after almost 6 years overseas. We were married Sept 11, 1946.

I nursed a cubicle of six Paraplegics in Deer Lodge. The Government expected them to wind up being cared for by their parents but they started the

Paraplegic Assoc. They couldn't go out in their wheelchairs and get over the high curbs etc. That all changed because of them - wide doors to bathrooms and hand controlled cars are examples.

Later, when daughter Margret was born and we'd bought a house in East Kildonan, I worked at the WGH blood bank which they had before the Red Cross blood bank. As I had more kids, I did private duty nursing and then part time work at the Maternity Pavilion for 8 years before Alyson (our 4th) was born in 1960. I was happy then to stay home. I was 39 when Alyson was born and was tired of trying to look after my kids and having to work night and evening duty- it was exhausting. Hugh was CO of the Queen's own Cameron Highlanders then so our life was busier than ever.

Now I sit in a Senior's Residence and write stories. I still volunteer once a week, 10 AM to 2 PM, at Deer Lodge selling 50/50 tickets to raise money for the Foundation.

The thing about it is, young people [today](#) look at old veterans. They can't visualize the young fellows that they were. I remember sitting on the street car in 1940 and thinking, "There are no young fellows, they've all gone to war."

I have attached a letter that I wrote to my father in 1944 (Pabbi is Icelandic for Pappa).

A Wartime Letter

Dear Pabbi,

I received your letter today with the pictures and I'm sure glad to have them. I'm gradually getting used to this place. There are so many French nurses, orderlies and patients, Thompson and I felt quite out of place for a while because when they get together they always talk French so you are automatically cut out of the conversation.

Ruth Thompson is the girl I came out here with. I don't know if you ever met her. We trained together and we certainly get along fine. She has a good sense of humour so we have a pretty good time together. Luckily we are both working on the same ward. It's all T.B. but we decided as long as we keep fat and healthy we won't be in any danger of getting it.

It's surprising the number of young fellows we have here. Practically all of them are back from England. Most are in their early 20's and a few are just 19. I guess they got it in the dampness in England, having poor food and being tired all the time.

They are good kids though and we sure have to try to keep them cheerful. It doesn't take long for them to get fed up lying around here waiting for the day they get out. A few of them have been in as long as four years so it's not very easy for them to keep being happy about it all.

This week they are starting to operate on them, removing ribs. When they are finished, eighteen of them will have a permanently collapsed lung. Most of the cases are Pulmonary T.B. but we have about six young French kids with T.B. spines. They have to stay flat on their backs in body casts for about a year or more. But they are about the nicest kids on the ward. They always

manage to have their own good time. One has a violin and plays old time music and French songs. He sure is good. Another has a ukulele so they do alright.

We have a couple of Veterans who are dying and two young fellows who hemorrhage every so often. We also have a German Prisoner of War and are getting another one tomorrow A.M. The one we have now is really a good fellow. He's about 48 so I don't think he's much of a Nazi or he wouldn't get along with us so well. There are a lot of Germans in this hospital because of the Camp in Sherbrooke. Evidently, the younger fellows are the ones who are really nasty. They are the ones who have been born and brought up as Nazi but the older fellows are more broad minded, I think.

*Agnes with patients from the Royal Navy at
Shaughnessy Hospital in Vancouver (1945)*



A good many of the patients here are mental cases. A lot from the last war are still trying to figure out who they are and where they came from. Evidently there are many more mental cases from this war than from the last one. I've seen a lot of boys from here and in Vancouver a bundle of nerves. Some were off torpedoed ships and some from the battle areas. One, we just got from England in the last convoy who has T.B., is all nerves. He's from the south part of England where the Robot bombs are. He just jumps around all day long and all night he has nightmares about his wife who he left

over there. Evidently, we have no idea how bad those bombs are.

The boys from the battle areas are really a sorry sight. Some that just came back were shell shocked. One fellow was saying practically all of his outfit were shell shocked. They were under siege in Italy and the guns had been going for days so their brains had become accustomed to the noise but suddenly the guns all stopped at once and the sudden quiet was almost more than they could stand.

However not all of them are like that. The majority are really quite cheerful. In one block they have all the convalescent patients. Most of them are amputation cases. Well, it almost brings a lump to your throat to see all these young kids coming over to the dining room on their crutches. Yet, they're all so cheerful. They crack jokes and laugh about their stumps. One guy was telling me, coming back on the boat, they used to play games and stuff to keep them amused. One big event was a race- the left legged kids against the right legged kids. Well, it's kind of nice to see how well they are able to take it.

Last Thursday, Ruth and I biked to Bildfell's in Lachine. It's about 15 miles away towards

Montreal. Brosi and his wife weren't at home but Mrs Bildfell Sr. was there and believe me I sure was glad to see an Icelander again and to drink some good coffee for a change. Brosi has a lovely home right on the waterfront. It's Lake St Louis, where the Ottawa river empties into the St Lawrence. It sure is a swell spot. You can see all the boats going down the two rivers and so many people around have their own sail boats and motor boats. Mrs Bildfell says she always thinks that is just the place for A.S.B. You'd have the time of your life living there by the water. There is a big RCAF station right there so the big planes in Ferry Command go right over their house.

We really haven't seen much of Montreal yet. Evidently it's not a very safe place for women to be wandering alone but when Alan Finnbogason and some of the kids get down here we'll be able to see more of it.

I'm on duty 12mn. to 8 am. and there are trains flying through here about every hour but the fellows sleep through it all. Well it's almost 4 am so I guess I'd better get back to work. I think after 6 months here we'd better transfer back to Deer Lodge. I hope your finger will be better soon so you can drop me a line some time.

Love,
Agnes

