

Gertrude  
Giltinan  
(1881-1919)

By  
Alice Low

Credit:  
Imperial War Museums



Gertrude Mary Giltinan, born in 1881, lived in Cork, Ireland with her parents and 6 siblings.

In September 1918, she joined the Other Empire Force as a Voluntary Aid Detachment on the Joint War Committee and worked at the 2nd General Hospital in Manchester. By the end of the war, this hospital had become the largest military hospital in the UK with a total of 25,000 beds and, overall, 3,575 VADs were employed throughout the war's duration.

A month after Gertrude signed up as a VAD, the influenza pandemic had reached an acute stage in Manchester. Mortuaries were full, and undertakers could not keep pace with orders resulting in up to a fortnight elapsing between day of death and burial and presenting an even greater public health risk. James Niven, Manchester's Medical Officer of Health at the time, was credited for his quarantine rules and closure of schools and businesses in order to stop the spread of the flu, resulting in lowered casualty rates compared to other areas of the UK. Despite this, Gertrude died on the 19th November 1919 aged 38, from Spanish flu and subsequent pneumonia, which she contracted while nursing her patients.

Hannah Maud  
Cottingham  
(1886-1918)

By  
Leah Jones

Credit:  
Imperial War Museums



Hannah Maud Cottingham died on 27th October 1918 aged 31, after contracting Spanish Influenza while on duty.

Her death certificate states that it took her four days to succumb to the virus, having contracted influenza and bronchopneumonia.

Born in December 1886 in Downpatrick, Northern Ireland, Hannah came from a comfortable home life. She started her nurse training aged 24 at Meath Hospital, Dublin. By 1911, the census gives her occupation as 'hospital nurse'.

With the outbreak of WWI, Hannah enrolled in 1915 as a nurse for the Joint War Committee- a combined operation of the British Red Cross and the Order of St John. She was stationed at the Baltic and Corn Exchange, the No.8 British Red Cross Hospital based in northern France. Within her first months Hannah had nursed through the Battle of Loos, and poisonous gas had started to be used on the battlefield - an indication of the pressured conditions she was nursing in.

At the time of her death she was serving as Sister in Charge at 'The Beeches Hospital', Berkhamsted, Hertfordshire. This was a reputable role, being responsible for overseeing the ward staff and ensuring the patient's well being. As a testament of respect the local military unit had for her, the Inns of Court O.T.C erected her tombstone. She was also posthumously awarded the 1914-1915 Star, a war medal granted to British nurses who served overseas. Hannah had made the ultimate sacrifice far from home to a profession she had devoted her life to.

# NURSING DURING WW1 AND THE 1918 INFLUENZA PANDEMIC



This booklet is part of a volunteer research project generously funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund. Our project volunteers have chosen aspects of nursing during the First World War and the 1918 Influenza Pandemic to research and write about.

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# VOLUNTEER NURSING DURING WW1

By Catherine Debray

Nurses serving in voluntary aid detachments or “VADs” as they became known played a crucial role in the care of soldiers during World War One.

Originally set up in 1909, their foundation was a response to difficulties finding sufficient nursing staff during the Boer War. Their numbers grew steadily, and in total 70,000 to 100,000 individuals served as VADs during World War One.

The nature of VAD work was physically and mentally exhausting, and for most recruits a completely new experience. Those who joined the VADs had to be aged between 19 and 50 years old, and for many it was their first time away from home. The voluntary nature of the work meant many who served were well-educated women from comfortable family backgrounds. This contrasted somewhat with the background of the professionally trained nurses who, at least initially, often resented working alongside their amateur colleagues.

Recruits received basic training in nursing and first aid, and thereafter were generally tasked with basic nursing jobs in the many makeshift military and Red Cross hospitals that sprang up during the war, each housing between 10 and 100 patients.

In addition, many VADs fulfilled other important wartime needs such as housing and caring for the relatives of the wounded who arrived in France, at hostels such as the Hotel des Anglais in Le Touquet. Other significant roles included running the British Red Cross invalid kitchens in Italy and ferrying the critically ill across Northern France as ambulance drivers. The role of a VAD, as one contemporary commented was “...bound to be decided for more by the measure of her capacity than by the rule of seniority or red tape”.

## Dame Maud McCarthy (1859-1949)

By Panagiotis  
Poimenidis



Credit:  
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The expertise of trained nurses played a central role during the First World War, as they mentored and worked alongside VAD nurses, both at home in Britain and in field hospitals on the Western Front.

Matron Maud McCarthy was born in Sydney, Australia in 1859, she trained as a nurse at the London Hospital, Whitechapel in 1891, where she is recorded as having an ‘exceptionally nice disposition’. After working as a military nurse during the Boer War, Maud was involved with their formation of the Queen Alexandra Imperial Military Nursing Service (QAIMNS), and worked as Matron at a number of eminent military hospitals.

With the outbreak of World War One in August 1914, she was one of the first senior military nurses to sail for France with the British Expeditionary Force, alongside her personal assistant nurse Isabelle Barbier. Based in Abbeville, as matron-in-chief, Maud was in charge of the nursing service from the Channel to the Mediterranean, upon her arrival in France she was responsible for just 516 nurses, by the end of the war there were over 6000 in her care. Matron McCarthy oversaw the nursing of thousands of casualties in the years 1914-18, including many victims of the Spanish flu pandemic. After the war Maud was matron-in-chief of the Territorial Army Nursing Service until her retirement in 1925, she died in 1949 at the age of 89.

## Vera Brittain (1893-1970)

By  
Lisa Bull



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Vera Brittain voiced the widespread shock and discontent caused by the Great War through her memoir, *Testament of Youth* published in 1933.

Vera provided one of the first female accounts of the war and highlighted women’s active role.

Vera faced a variety of experiences during the war. She began as a Voluntary Aid Detachment Nurse (VAD) in June 1915 at the Devonshire Hospital, then subsequently the First London General. From September 1916, she spent a year at St. Georges Hospital in Malta, but it was her time in Étaples from August 1917 which truly defined her war experience. She herself may have been an early survivor of Spanish flu, while working at Étaples, and went on to help care for many patients during the pandemic.

By August 1917, Vera had lost her fiancé Roland Leighton in December 1915, her close friends Geoffrey Thurlow and Victor Richardson in April and June 1917 respectively and lastly her brother Edward in June 1918. These experiences of loss profoundly changed Vera’s perspective of the war, once enthusiastic to play her part, she began to see war as futile. It was not until the war affected her personally, that she rebelled against patriarchy. Vera later wrote that “naïve idealism... had been both the virtue and the fatal weakness of her generation”.