

PWY YDW I'N MEDDWL
OEDDWN I?

1914

WHO DO
I THINK I WAS?

1918

Barbara Turner, Dowlais Visual Art Group

Nursing at the Front

I attended Dowlais School until I was twelve years old then applied to be a pupil teacher. The reason I wanted to do this is because I had every intention of becoming a nurse but had to be eighteen for that.

One evening after my 18th birthday I went along to Merthyr General Hospital and asked to speak to the matron. I explained to her I wanted to train to be a nurse and asked her advice on how to go about it. She was very abrupt and tried to put me off. "My dear", she said, "It's not a case of mopping brows and doling out tablets". I told her I realised that but was determined. I was willing to get stuck in, emptying bed pans, cleaning wounds, changing beds and so on.

The following week I went back, as determined as ever. "Very well", she said. "Be here at 6am on Monday morning. Be prepared for anything".

I arrived at the gate the same time as another girl the following Monday. She was as nervous as I was, and equally determined. Her name was Ann and we were to become lifelong friends. It was hard work at first. We were provided with a uniform and were shown the sluice room, the linen cupboard, the room where all the dressings were kept. We spent endless hours rolling bandages and changing bloody bedding.



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Gradually we were 'allowed' to change bedpans, provide cups of tea and help the 'proper' nurses tend to injuries.

Ann and I really took to it. Luckily the hospital was close enough so I could go home every evening. We were both worried about the soldiers fighting overseas as my father and brother were both at the front. Ann's father had been killed early on in the war, but she was still worried about our soldiers being injured. What sort of care were they having?

After we'd finished training we asked the matron how we could go about working in the field hospital in France. She said she'd look into it for us and would let us know. We didn't think for one minute that she would but she surprised us soon after, saying she'd make arrangements for us to go, if we were still serious about doing it.

My mum was not pleased at all. What with my dad and brother already in the middle of the war, she didn't want me involved either.

Soon after, matron told us there would be a troupe ship leaving Dover taking soldiers over to France and we were to join four other nurses going over also.

We were so excited, we'd never even left Merthyr before, yet here we now were going 'abroad'. The crossing to Calais was horrendous. The sea was so rough! We nurses were sharing a small cabin and what with the sea sickness and the diarrhoea, we could hear hundreds of soldiers being sick and moaning too!

We arrived at Calais and were bundled into lorries with dozens of soldiers and started the journey to Ettaple in Northern France. We were dropped at the casualty clearing station at the field hospital.

What an experience. Nothing we'd imagined was anything like this.

The stench, the mud, the flies, the endless rain. It was a miserable place for us – those poor soldiers. There were outbreaks of typhoid, measles, diphtheria, that's without the injuries, lost limbs and head wounds.

The hospital was basically big tents, an operating room, rows and rows of beds.

Our tents were across the muddy field. It was hard keeping ourselves and our uniforms clean and the basic hygiene in the main ward was hard to maintain.

Well, I've been here over 6 months now and have seen sights I never thought I'd see. I will never ever forget them. In bed at night I can still hear the cries of the young soldiers crying for their mothers, screaming when they have limbs removed. Not a pleasant experience for the boys...or for us.

At long last the war is over and I am back home in Merthyr. I returned to the General Hospital to apply to work there as a nurse, now that I know I want to continue my career.

That's one thing the war gave to me.