

## **Biog 5 Margaret and Kate Carruthers, MM, Territorial Forces Nursing Service**

### **Morag Cross 24 December 2013**

#### **\*\*\*5.1**

The Military Medal was created in April 1916, and from June that year was the only gallantry award open to both men and women, '*for bravery and devotion under fire*'. Glaswegian Kate Carruthers of the Territorial Forces Nursing Service, was among the earliest women to receive the award, for her actions during an enemy bombing raid in France, on the night of 15 November, 1916. [*The Times*, 28 June 1916, p5].

Considerable confusion about Kate Carruthers originated with the *Glasgow Herald*, which wrongly described her as coming from Dublin, and as being the very first female recipient ever to be awarded the Military Medal (actually ambulance driver Lady Dorothe Feilding). Her citation was even published under the wrong name, while the army held an enquiry into the matter. Kate was probably accustomed to being mistaken for someone else, because at her own military medical examination her twin sister's name Margaret was scored out, suggesting that the girls were identical. [Sources: *Glasgow Herald*, 8 Jan 1917, p11; 'Carruthers, Kate', 'Miss C Carruthers', 'Carruthers, Catherine M', *British Army WWI Medal Rolls Index Cards, 1914-1920*, Online Resources, at [www.ancestry.co.uk](http://www.ancestry.co.uk); 'Carruthers, Kate', *Service Record*, Ref WO 399/10292, National Archives, at [www.nationalarchives.gov.uk](http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk)].

#### **\*\*\*5.2**

Kate and Margaret Carruthers were born in Partick, Glasgow in May 1887, with Kate being the elder by 5 minutes. As their English father was a ship's surveyor and marine engineer for the Board of Trade, the family frequently moved around the country due to his work commitments. However, by 1895 the Carruthers had returned to Langside, Glasgow, an expanding suburb for the upwardly-mobile working classes. [Sources: Statutory Register of Births, at [www.scotlandspople.gov.uk](http://www.scotlandspople.gov.uk); Census 1901 at [www.ancestry.co.uk](http://www.ancestry.co.uk); Census 1911 at [www.scotlandspople.gov.uk](http://www.scotlandspople.gov.uk); Irish Census 1911, at [www.census.nationalarchives.ie](http://www.census.nationalarchives.ie)].

#### **\*\*\*5.3**

Kate and Margaret's brother had been suffering from a brain tumour for over a year before he died in 1907, aged only 22. Whether or not this influenced the girls' choice of career, both Kate and Margaret trained as nurses at Glasgow Royal Infirmary, while their parents moved to Dundonald, Belfast, following their father's posting to the city's shipyards around 1907. Margaret was living in the Royal Infirmary nurses' home in 1911, while Kate was working at Dublin's Rotunda Hospital. [Sources: *Glasgow Post Office Directories 1890-1910*; Census 1901 at [www.ancestry.co.uk](http://www.ancestry.co.uk); Census 1911, Statutory Register of Deaths, at [www.scotlandspople.gov.uk](http://www.scotlandspople.gov.uk); Irish Census 1911, at [www.census.nationalarchives.ie](http://www.census.nationalarchives.ie)].

#### **\*\*\*5.4**

In October 1913, both sisters had enrolled in the Territorial Force Nursing Service (TFNS), an auxiliary service formed in 1908 to support the new part-time local military reserve units (later the 'Territorial

Army'). The TFNS used '*civilian nurses who continued to work in their usual capacity, but had undertaken to be mobilised*' during wartime. Just as regulations were professionalising nursing and ensuring high standards of patient care, so too, military nursing units were selective in their intakes. To qualify, the Carruthers sisters would have completed 3 years' approved training, and have had impeccable personal records. Between 1914 and 1918, 8,140 women had joined the TFNS, of whom 2,280 served overseas (there were over 21,000 in the two other similar military nursing services). [Sources: Sue Light (Nursing Historian), *The Military Nursing Services*, [Online Resource], at [www.scarletfinders.co.uk](http://www.scarletfinders.co.uk); 'Carruthers, Kate', *Service Record*, Ref WO 399/10292, National Archives, at [www.nationalarchives.gov.uk](http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk)].

### \*\*\*5.5

Kate and Margaret were both called up on 13 August 1914, and worked at the 4th Scottish General Hospital, Stobhill. Margaret joined the British Expeditionary Force at Boulogne in May, 1915, thereafter spending two months on night duty, in charge of a surgical division, before transferring to Hospital Ship Stad Antwerpen (a former Belgian cross-channel ferry). She was promoted to Sister in 1916, her conduct being '*thoroughly satisfactory*', and she was sent to Camiers, near Etaples. The Channel coast here saw '*immense concentrations*' of medical facilities, being accessible to the main battlefields, yet remote from attack. '*In 1917, 100,000 troops were camped among the sand dunes and the eleven general, one stationary, four Red Cross hospitals and a convalescent depot [here] could deal with 22,000*' patients. Margaret ended the war at Varennes, in the Somme district. [Sources: 'Carruthers, Margaret', *Service Record*, Ref WO 399/10293, National Archives, at [www.nationalarchives.gov.uk](http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk); 'Etaples Military Cemetery', *Commonwealth War Graves Commission*, at [www.cwgc.org](http://www.cwgc.org); 'Base Hospitals in France ...', *The Long Long Trail*, at [www.1914-1918.net](http://www.1914-1918.net)].

### \*\*\*5.6

Kate Carruthers arrived in France on Christmas Day, 1914, and was nursing at No 56 (also called 1/1 South Midland) Casualty Clearing Station (CCS), when it was raided by enemy aircraft. Maud McCarthy, the Matron in Chief, France and Flanders, noted:

' 15.11.16

*1/1 South Midland CCS at Edgehill had been heavily bombed – and there were certain casualties amongst the patients and R.A.M.C. staff – one Sister was wounded in the leg, not serious.*

17.11.16

*Miss K. Carruthers, TFNS who was wounded slightly in the leg ... has been recommended for the Military Medal.*

18.11.16

*Letters received from ... 1/1 South Midland [CCS] ... relating the damage done when the camp was bombed during the early hours of the 15<sup>th</sup> – 3 killed and 1 wounded ... Tents and huts badly damaged. Sister Carruthers had been evacuated to the Base.*

[Sources: October 1916, *War Diary, Matron-in-Chief, France and Flanders*, National Archives WO95/3989, transcription by Sue Light, at [www.scarletfinders.co.uk](http://www.scarletfinders.co.uk); 'Carruthers, Kate', *Service Record*, Ref WO 399/10292, and 'Carruthers, Catherine M', Medal Card WO372/23/88596, National Archives, at [www.nationalarchives.gov.uk](http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk)].

### \*\*\*5.7

The *British Journal of Nursing* proudly recorded considerably more detail: '*Hearty congratulations to Miss Kate Carruthers ... awarded the Military Medal, a decoration highly prized by nurses [for] devotion to duty under fire. Now that the Royal Red Cross is awarded to clerical workers and others [not] on active service, it has largely lost the significance it bore [in the 19th century] when it was given to nurses but rarely ... on November 15th [1916] [Miss Carruthers] was working at a [CCS] when it was bombed ... one bomb struck the camp .. Most of [her patients] were instantly killed, and she herself was wounded in the head and legs; nevertheless, though suffering much, she remained on duty until relieved twenty-four hours later, attending to the surviving patients ... She was mentioned in despatches [25 Nov 1916] by the Commander in Chief [Gen Haig] for her bravery.*' [Source: *British Journal of Nursing*, 20 January 1917, p40].

### \*\*\*5.8

The Military Medal was instituted in March 1916, '*for immediate recognition to ... men who had done well at a critical moment*' because '*recommendations for honours ... were constantly ignored*', as those few medals then existing were for rarer and more extreme acts of courage. On 8 May, 1916, senior courtier Sir F E G Ponsonby wrote: '*His Majesty [George V] has quite decided ... [to entitle] women to the Military Medal. The King says we shall have to give women rewards for bravery and at present we have absolutely nothing to give.*' Maj-Gen Sir F Robb cautioned '*We shall have to word the warrant [medal entitlement] very carefully or we shall have a lot of adventurous ladies leaving England in order to obtain one!*' On 8 June, Ponsonby emphasised: '*The King ... thinks that civilian males should not be eligible ... but he sees no objection to females who have rendered conspicuous services under fire being granted it ... [there] is no danger of the Germans interpreting this into an encouragement to women to fight against [them].*' [Sources: *The Times*, 25 Feb 1916, p10; Correspondence between Sir F E G Ponsonby, Privy Purse, Sir F Robb, Military Secretary, 14 April - 8 June 1916, *Military Medal File, Awards to Women*, WO32/4959, National Archives, transcribed by Sue Light, personal communication].

### \*\*\*5.9

From 21 June 1916, the Military Medal could '*be awarded to women who have shown bravery and devotion [to duty] under fire*'. *The Times* further commented that '*It is curious to note how few are the rewards for public service or decorations of any sort hitherto conferred upon women*'. [Source: *The Times*, 28 June 1916, p5].

### \*\*\*5.10

Kate was 'gazetted' (her awards officially listed in the *London Gazette*) on 4 January 1917 as '*Carruthers, Miss C, Staff Nurse*', for Sir Douglas Haig's 'Mention in Despatches', and again on 6 January as '*Staff Nurse Catherine M Carruthers*' for the Military Medal. Her exasperated father, now living in Rathmines, Dublin wrote to the War Office '*I wish respectfully to ask if you can ... make arrangements for the Christian name of my daughter to be corrected ... Kate Carruthers ... as it will probably be put on the medal*'. Ironically, Frank Carruthers himself dated his correspondence as January 1916, instead of 1917. By now, the War Office was involved and Kate was unfortunately being referred to as '*K M Carruthers*'. Consequently, three different medal records were created for her. [Supplements, *London Gazette*, 4 Jan 1917, p250; 6 Jan 1917, p343; 'Carruthers, Kate', *Service Record*, Ref WO 399/10292, Medal Card, WO 372/23/6767; 'Carruthers, Catherine M', Medal Card

WO372/23/88596; 'Carruthers, C', Medal Card, WO 372/24/70639, National Archives, at [www.nationalarchives.gov.uk](http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk)].

\*\*\*5.11

Kate attended her investiture at Buckingham Palace in February 1917 ('*wear alpaca or serge dresses and the small shoulder capes, no aprons, and white kid gloves*'). Two months later, her remaining brother, Lt William Carruthers (ex-Royal Irish Rifles), 154th Field Company, The Royal Engineers, was killed during the Arras offensive, and like his older sibling, was aged only 22 (his birthplace is wrongly given as 'Belfast' rather than England, in *Ireland's Memorial Records* volume). [Source: 'Carruthers, Kate', *Service Record*, Ref WO 399/10292, National Archives, at [www.nationalarchives.gov.uk](http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk); 'Casualty Details: Carruthers, William, 24/04/1917', *Commonwealth War Graves Commission*, at [www.cwgc.org](http://www.cwgc.org); Census 1901 at [www.ancestry.co.uk](http://www.ancestry.co.uk); Irish Census 1911, at [www.census.nationalarchives.ie](http://www.census.nationalarchives.ie); 'The Field Companies RE', 'The 37th Division in 1914-1918', 'The Arras Offensive: ... the Scarpe, 23-24 April 1917', *The Long, Long Trail*, at [www.1914-1918.net](http://www.1914-1918.net); Irish National War Memorial Committee, 1923, *Ireland's Memorial Records 1914-1918*, Dublin, Vol 2, p9, and UK, *Soldiers Died in the Great War, 1914-1919* [Online Resources], at [www.ancestry.co.uk](http://www.ancestry.co.uk)].

\*\*\*5.12

Despite the view that it had become 'devalued', Kate received the Royal Red Cross in 1919, by which time several thousand Military Medals had been given to men. However, only 55 were ever awarded to military nurses during the war (out of 135 given to women in total). She had a notable post-war career active in nursing professional bodies, working to improve standards and conditions of service. She and her sister retired together to Largs (the McIlroy doctor sisters lived nearby, see their story), where first Margaret, and then Kate died in 1969. [Sources: *Supplement, Edinburgh Gazette*, 5 June 1919, p1874; Sue Light, 'Military Medals Awarded to ... the Territorial Nursing Service', [Online Resource], at [www.scarletfinders.co.uk](http://www.scarletfinders.co.uk); *British Journal of Nursing*, Dec 1928, p318; Nov 1929, p307; Dec 1929, p334; Statutory Register of Deaths, at [www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk](http://www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk)].