

wars who gave their lives for others



The unveiling of the nurses memorial, June 4, 2018

go.”

Dr Cecelia Amin, President of the Royal College of Nursing, explained the contribution made by all nurses during and since the two conflicts. The Royal College of Nursing and the Florence Nightingale Foundation are among the appeal’s official partners and its recent royal patron is the **Countess of Wessex** who joined other patrons at the event, such as **Lord Julian Fellowes** (writer of the screenplay for the film *Gosford Park* and TV series *Downton Abbey*); his wife **Lady Fellowes** also attended, whose grandmother was a VAD nurse.

Strict security surrounded the private event. Some 300 invited guests and representatives from various medical groups rubbed shoulders with attachés from numerous Commonwealth countries including Canada, New Zealand and Australia.

Ceremony

After the arrival of the Countess of Wessex the ceremony was opened with a welcome by **Cannon Michael Rawson**, Sub Dean and Pastor of Southwark Cathedral.

Alison Pearce led those gathered in singing Henry **Francis Lyte’s** hymn *Praise, my Soul, the King of Heaven*. The Bidding explained why everyone was attending to remember, “nurses who freely gave their lives in two World Wars in the service of others for whom they cared. We give thanks for their skill, generosity and

bravery in bringing healing and wholeness to our broken world.”

Sonja Curtis, one of the trustees, took to the rostrum to expound on the Nursing Memorial; she was followed by Lord **Felton** who described the work of the Extreme Nursing Award Scheme which trains medical staff for, “vital, life-saving support in extreme situations at home and overseas.”

The Reading from Matthew 5:1-12 was read by **Group Captain Sonia Phythian**, Allied Rapid Reaction Force and PMRAFNS, who was followed by **Diana Scougall** reading the poem *Night Duty* by **Eva Dobell**. Dobell was born in Gloucestershire and was a VAD nurse in the Great War.

Eunice Drewry, dressed in a VAD uniform followed, reading extracts from letters home by nurses and patients sent to their loved ones. Cannon Michael Rawson then dedicated the memorial, walking around it reciting, “In memory of all who are commemorated here, we anoint this memorial with the oil of healing, thanking God for the work of their hands.”

The *Kohima Epitaph*, familiar to those who attend Armistice and Anzac commemorations, was read out by **WO1 J.A. Sessions** of the Queen Alexandra’s Royal Army Nursing Corps. Since 2003 QARANC has had as its Colonel-in-chief the Countess of Wessex.

Everyone stood for the Last Post. After Reveille was sounded by the

bugler, everyone recited the Lord’s Prayer which was followed by another prayer, a blessing and Alison Pearce again taking to the rostrum to lead those attending in singing the National Anthem. The staff and organisers at the NMA deserve a special mention for their involvement in the event.

Introduced

The formalities over with, Sophie, Countess of Wessex was introduced to two Second World War nurses, **Margaret Brealey**, and **Ethel Lote** aged 97 from Aldridge, West Midlands. Ethel had been a teenager at the outbreak of World War II, and began work as a nurse at Burntwood Military Hospital, near Cannock. Ethel initially dealt with civilian casualties mainly from Birmingham but on 26th May, 1940, the wards were cleared and they were advised to prepare for casualties – the first convoys of injured soldiers from Dunkirk. She explained, “They were still in their uniforms, just how they had been picked up from the beaches. We had the first 100 patients. It was terrible, I’d just started training as a nurse, to see these men and their injuries, a lot of them were burned or had shrapnel wounds.”

Ethel recounted afterwards: “Early on the morning of May 27th, 1940, we could see a strange sight slowly coming up the hill towards the hospital. It was a convoy of assorted vehicles entering the main gates. The

men were quickly transferred to the different wards. They were a pitiful sight. Their uniforms had to be cut from their bodies, as many of them were covered with the mud, blood and sand from the beaches of Dunkirk. There were many different injuries, but they were all absolutely exhausted. This was our introduction to the horrors of war, and over the years the plight of the casualties became even worse.”

Entertainment

She also recounted lighter moments: “Every Wednesday evening in the Psychiatric Hospital there was entertainment provided by some of their patients, and usually a film. Some of us nurses decided to perform on stage, so we produced a number of plays. Once, we performed the can-can, to the amusement of everyone in the audience. We were allowed to take some of our patients from the Military Hospital, either in wheelchairs or on crutches, although the evenings were often interrupted by the sirens sounding an air raid warning, so we quickly had to get back to our wards.

“There were also dances held in the Psychiatric Hospital, which we were allowed to attend if we were not on duty.”

Ethel was accompanied at the event by her son **Derek**. Ethel’s mother **Ellen Cross** had been a VAD in the Great War.

A wreath was placed to remember **Nurse Edith Cavell**, who the Germans



Ethel Lote was a nurse in WWII

executed by firing squad in the Great War for helping some 200 Allied prisoners to escape. There is a statue to Cavell adjacent to the National Gallery in London and the railway carriage that brought her body and subsequently that of the Unknown Warrior back to Britain was on show at the Severn Valley Railway station in Arley during June and early July.

Sophie, Countess of Wessex, was introduced to others attending including Cannon Michael Rawson,

whom she thanked for officiating at the event, and also Georgie Welch and Nick Johnson, who had collaborated in the sculpture. Georgie and Nick explained that they wanted to create an all-encompassing representation of appreciation for nurses from across the world who gave medical comfort to the injured in two world wars.

Once everyone had gone, there was time for a moment for reflection. In the tranquillity of solitude, the only sounds were the

birds in the trees and the stream running just beyond this serene corner of the National Memorial Arboretum.

As former nurse Margaret Brealey explained, looking and pointing to this poignant memorial when interviewed, “we’ve got memorials for the men and now we have one for the nurses. They are all here.”

Remembered finally, the nurses who unswervingly answered the call in two world wars and gave their all.