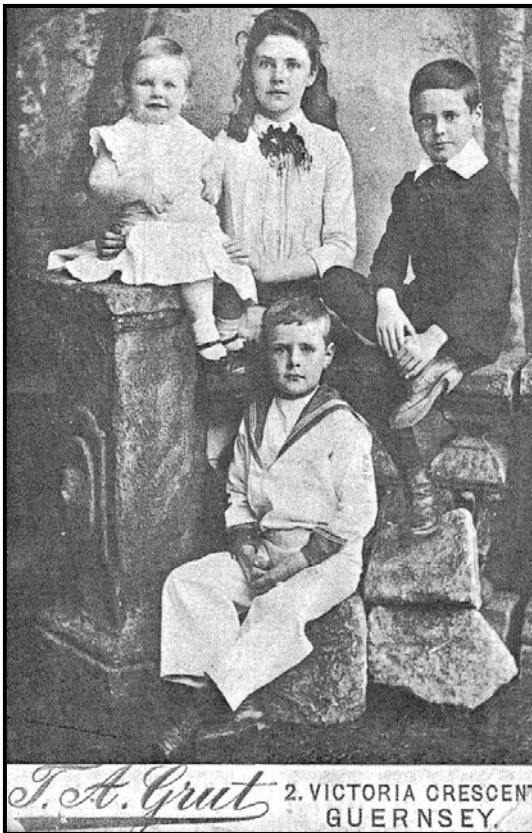


## Nurse Violetta Thurston, MM

A quick glance through the Ladies' College Magazine for the years of the Great War yields some interesting stories. Alongside reports of marriages of past pupils and successes of netball and lacrosse teams in inter island matches are contributions from and about women who made significant contributions to the war effort. One worthy of mention is Nurse Violetta Thurston, who became the one of the most high profile nurses in the Great War. From the earliest days of the war she wrote long letters to various publications, which were published week by week. She received many honours throughout her lengthy career, which spanned three wars. However contradictory reports leave many areas of her eventful life unclear.

Anne or Anna Violet Thurstan or Thurston was born in February 1879 or 1881, in Hastings, Sussex, the daughter of Dr. Edward Paget Thurstan (official records and her own accounts vary on the details here). She gave different accounts of where she spent her childhood, including Cornwall and the Canary Islands, but reproduced below is a photograph of her as a young girl with her brothers, taken by Gruts of Guernsey<sup>1</sup>.



The 1891 census has her living as a boarder in Paignton, Devon, while her father was in Australia. School records confirm that she was educated at the Ladies College in Guernsey, as do letters that she wrote to the school magazine during the war years, but she also went to school in Germany. In 1898 at the age of 19 she started work at a Home for the Incurables in London, then moved to the East London Hospital for Children, Shadwell, at that time using the name Violet Thurstan. In 1900 she moved again, to work at the Fever Hospital in Guernsey before applying to train as a nurse at the London Hospital in Whitechapel. She was for some time Secretary of the National Union of Trained Nurses in the early days of her career, and was passionate about training and education for nurses. She wrote in *The British Journal of Nursing* of 7 December 1912 that nurses needed to work together

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<sup>1</sup> With thanks to Melissa Hardie, The Hypatia Trust, Cornwall.

to “...lift our profession to a higher plane, to secure for the coming generation of nurses more education, better training, fuller opportunities than we had ourselves”.

In 1907 she started a course of study with the University of St Andrew's in Scotland which led to her being awarded the “Lady Literate in Arts” Diploma in 1914. She studied French, Geography, Fine Art, Physiology and English. In 1910 she moved to London, and in 1913 she joined Westminster 146 VAD British Red Cross Service. At the outbreak of war she was called to London to help at the Red Cross centre in Vincent Square<sup>2</sup>. In September 1914, at the age of 35, she was invited by the St John Ambulance brigade to lead a party of nurses to Brussels, where they would work with the Belgian Red Cross. Soon after her arrival the Belgian Government decided to offer no resistance to the advancing German troops, who then occupied the city. Most of the staff were evacuated, but she was one of a small number of nurses who remained there. Here she was one of three who accepted an appeal from the Burgomaster of Charleroi to help both French and German wounded. She described the conditions there - lack of food, equipment and trained medical staff - in graphic detail in her book<sup>3</sup>. She also mentions how the Belgians were waiting, expecting to be freed by the British, and how she worried about her two brothers in the Navy who were involved in the battles in the North Sea.

Eventually when the German patients were repatriated and the French wounded were taken to Germany as prisoners of war, Nurse Thurstan returned to Brussels, but an order came through soon afterwards saying that all private hospitals and ambulance stations were to be closed and the wounded were not to be looked after by English nurses, who were all to be sent to Liège. Some ended up back in Brussels after various changes of orders, but eventually they were all ordered to leave, and escorted out of the city on to trains which took them to Hamburg in Germany. They were eventually released in Denmark, where they were welcomed by the nurses of Copenhagen and given a break from their previous hardships. Here she read of illness and hardship in what was called “the Belgium of Russia” – Poland, and decided that her duty lay there. After vaccinations against typhoid, and lots of formalities she and three other nurses gained permission to work with the Russian Red Cross. However to reach the front she had to travel overland through Lapland and Sweden, because the normal sea journey was considered to be too dangerous.

She then went by train to Petrograd and from there directly to Warsaw. Here the English nursing sisters were sent to different hospitals, to work with Russian Red Cross nurses, so that they would learn the language more quickly. Her first job there was in a dressing station, but as the Germans advanced on the Russian front she transferred from the hospital service to a Flying Column led by Prince and Princess Volkonsky, which was supposed to “go anywhere and do anything

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<sup>2</sup> Thurstan, V.A. (1915) *Field Hospital and Flying Column*, London, G.P. Putnam's Sons.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 25-26

at any time of the day or night"<sup>4</sup>. She was sent to take charge of a temporary military hospital in Lodz, in Poland, a town under constant bombardment. The town housed about 18,000 wounded at this stage, and the makeshift hospital was bitterly cold, and food, heating, lighting and equipment were in short supply. When Lodz was evacuated she narrowly escaped becoming a German prisoner for the second time, but moved on to work at the Grand Duchess Cyril's hospital and ambulance train based in Warsaw and Skiernevice. The ambulance train then moved down the railway to Zyradow and Radzivilow, to temporary dressing stations very near to the trenches. Here she spent Christmas 1914 where she notes that the dinner menu was Gravy Soup, Roast Horse and boiled Potatoes.<sup>5</sup>

Early in 1915, she was dressing a wounded soldier when a shell burst near by, and a piece of shrapnel made a gash in one leg. This incident resulted in her being awarded the Royal Cross of St. George, For Bravery", 4th class. described as "the highest honour a grateful Government could bestow"<sup>6</sup>. She was presented with it by the Tsar of Russia on July 22 1915, and was the first nurse to receive this award. It was during enforced idleness as a result of septic poisoning of the wound and a slow convalescence that she wrote "*The People who Run*"<sup>7</sup> about the refugees of war.

She then went back to England, where her next task was to travel around the country lecturing for Lord Derby's appeal to men to enlist voluntarily and avoid conscription. But on 4 November 1916 she was at the front again, this time as matron of a Red Cross hospital of 1,200 beds, at La Panne, in Belgium, the L'Hopital de l'Ocean, where she stayed until July 1917. This and her earlier bravery resulted in her later being awarded the Order of la Reine Elisabeth of Belgium.



This was an order instituted on 15 September 1915, awarded to Belgians and foreigners for wartime services. It has an image of Queen Elisabeth of the Belgians on the obverse, while the reverse depicts a veiled woman symbolising sacrifice and submission to duty and humanity.

Eventually, the British authorities decided to put women in the first line of receiving hospitals, and Miss Thurstan was chosen for one based at Rouen, the 15th Corps Main Dressing Station. Here the main wards were housed in a farmhouse and its outbuildings, while the staff were housed in tents. One night while the ambulances were away collecting wounded under cover of darkness, a German plane dropped a bomb on the farmhouse, killing a Priest and

<sup>4</sup> *Field Hospital and Flying Column, being the journal of an English nursing sister in Belgium & Russia*, New York: Putnam's, 1915, p.126.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, p. 170.

<sup>6</sup> *British Journal of Nursing*, March 1937, p.79

<sup>7</sup> *People Who Run*, New York: Putnam's, 1915.

wounding an orderly . He was rushed to the first-aid tent outside, then the plane dropped another bomb, bringing down the entire structure. Miss Thurston was knocked down by the falling roof, but recovered enough to help the stretcher-bearers carrying wounded away, over fields of sugar-beet, in pouring rain, to the next line ambulance. This action won her the Military Medal. The *London Gazette* of 19 November 1917 states that, "His Majesty the King has been graciously pleased to approve of the award of the Military Medal for bravery in the Field to the undermentioned Ladies, Non-Commissioned-Officers and Men:.. Nursing Sister Violetta Thurstan, British Red Cross Society."



*Violetta Thurstan on the occasion of receiving the Military Medal<sup>8</sup>*

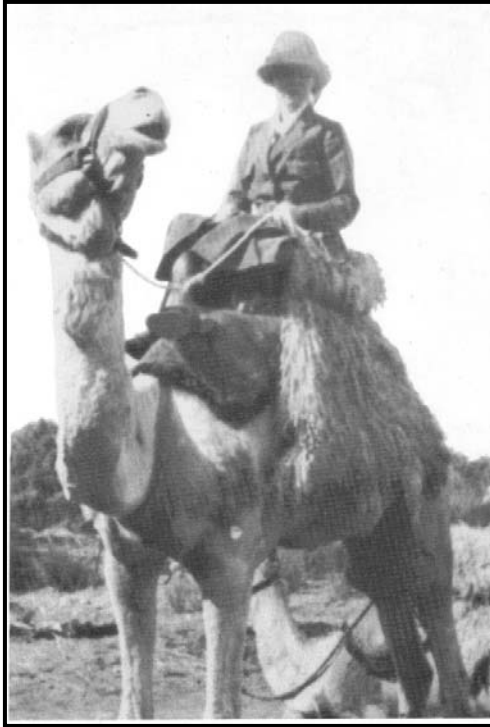
During her convalescence from the wounds received in this action, she wrote a technical book teaching the main differences between nursing in war and peace, and *The Hounds of War Unleashed. A Nurse's account of life on the Eastern Front during the 1914-1918 war.* However she soon returned to nursing, and from December 1917 to June 1918 she worked with the Scottish Women's Hospital in Macedonia as Matron of the Ostrovo Hospital.

The day after the Armistice was signed, on 12 November 1918, she enlisted in the WRAF and was promoted on 28 February 1919 to be Deputy Assistant Commandant, with grade of Administrator. On demobilisation she was appointed Director of Bedouin Industries, in charge of some Arab refugee camps. Here she supervised Arab women carpet making, creating natural dyes for their use. Her success in this area is shown by the fact that her carpets won the "Grand Prix d'Honneur at Beyrout, as well as medals at Alexandria and Cairo. This led to

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<sup>8</sup> With thanks to Melissa Hardie, The Hypatia Trust, Cornwall

her work in the 1930s as an organiser of Arts and Crafts, and her books on dyeing and weaving, which include *A Short History of Decorative Textiles and Tapestries*, (1934) *Weaving Patterns Of Yesterday And Today*, and *The Use of Vegetable Dyes for Beginners* (1930) are still available and considered to be standard texts on the subject. One of her designs was (and may still be) on permanent exhibition in the Victoria and Albert Museum. She has also assisted



in restoring the tapestries in Winchester Cathedral. The photograph ( left) shows her in her Bedouin days in the 1920s.

In 1937, when she was 55 or 58, according to some sources she was offered the job of supervisor of the Universities Ambulance, under Sir George Young, during the Spanish Civil War. Others<sup>9</sup> state that she was in Almeria at the time of the siege, where she “ quietly set about releasing prisoners”. Whichever is correct, when the siege was lifted she was declared persona non grata and expelled from Spain. She went back to England , and when war was declared in 1939 she joined the WRNS as a First Officer with responsibilities for “educational duties”. She was by this time in her early sixties, but stated on her forms to the Ministry of Defence that she was 47! She then worked with Naval Intelligence in

Falmouth, at the Contraband Control Base, helping with the inspection of ships, where her knowledge of languages came in useful. She also set up Chess and Craft clubs and continued with her own craft work throughout the war years. After the Armistice she did another 8 months as Education Officer on HMS Cochrane II before asking to be released. She was now 65.

After the second World War she applied to the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Association and was posted to Cairo then Italy, Austria and Serbia to work on the Catholic Relief Programme. This involved rehabilitation of people displaced as a result of the war. However she was perceived by some as rather autocratic and difficult and after some problems moved back to Cornwall in the early 1950s. Here she set about organising groups of spinners and weavers, entering various shows and competitions, and weaving a map of Cornwall among other items. She also wrote and published novels including *The Foolish Virgin* in 1966 and *Stormy Petrel* (1967), plus non fiction on a variety of topics such as *Trees and Shrubs in Cornwall*. She also gave talks to various groups and clubs in the South West, and broadcast on the BBC’s *Women’s Hour* in 1968. She gave

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<sup>9</sup> Somerfield, M and Bellingham. A( 1993), *Violetta Thurstan – A Celebration*, Penzance, Jamieson Library.

her her last talk, on *My Life among the Bedouins*, at the age of 97. She died on 13 April 1978 at Penryn, near Falmouth in Cornwall, and her obituary noted that "Her fragile appearance masked an indomitable spirit". She was buried with the full rites of the Catholic Church, and all of her military medals were buried with her. These were listed as the Military Medal, the Order of St George (Russia), the Ordre de la Reine Elisabeth (Belgium), the Mons Star with clasp and roses, the Allied medal, Companion of the Vatican, the British War Medal, and the Victory medal.

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