Marking 100 years of military nursing

Motivations for becoming a military nurse may have changed little over 100 years, argues Lieutenant Colonel Lee Turner.

By co-editor Anne Manchester

Preparing for the various commemorative events marking both the centenary of World War I and the formation of the New Zealand Army Nursing Service (NZANS) has been occupying Lieutenant Colonel Lee Turner’s attention for quite some time.

Turner has been director of nursing services for the New Zealand Defence Force for just over two years. He joined the defence force in 2003 as a nursing officer in the forward surgical team, having worked in both general and military nursing in the United Kingdom, particularly in intensive care. He is excited to be nursing director at this historically significant time.

The Royal New Zealand Nursing Corps (RNZNC), as it has been called since 1953, works across all three defence forces (army, navy and air force) but is sponsored by the army. About 30 nurses work full-time in the forces, around 12 in the reservists, with another 30 civilian nurses employed in military services around the country, eg in primary health care. Nurses who join the forces complete the joint initial officer training, requiring a fairly high fitness level, then return to their service of choice to complete specialist officer training. They train alongside other specialist personnel like doctors, dentists and lawyers. Turner says the nursing service is always evolving, with a proposal now being put forward to form a clinical mental health team.

"Back when Hester Maclean served as the NZANS’s first matron-in-chief a century ago, nurses deployed with the forces had to be single and were stood down once they married," Turner said. “Military nurses today are a much more diverse group and more representative of society at large. If you bring the right skills with you, you are welcomed. Thirty per cent of nurses are male, a rather different profile from the wider nursing population.”

Opportunities for nurses in the forces include acquiring full prescribing rights and being able to specialise in emergency, operating theatres, post-operative and intensive care. Captain Katie Smith, based in Linton, is hoping to gain nurse practitioner status – the first for a military nurse – later this year.

Most nurses join the defence forces with similar motivations to those that inspired nurses a century ago, Turner believes – a desire to care for New Zealand’s own military personnel and wanting a different sort of life, with opportunities for travel and adventure.

Turner has had a number of overseas postings throughout his military nursing career, including to Kosovo, Afghanistan and Northern Ireland. In 2005, he went with a defence health team to help provide humanitarian aid to Banda Aceh after the devastation of the 2004 Boxing Day tsunami. The New Zealanders joined an Australian team, forming an Anzac Hospital.

"Wherever troops from New Zealand are deployed, the health needs of the force are assessed and the appropriate team is provided," Turner said. “Nurses have been engaged with every major conflict New Zealand has ever been involved with over the last 100 years. For this latest deployment to Iraq, for example, we are again providing health support, including a nurse, and will be joining an Australian health team.”

The two-year deployment to help combat Islamic State involves 143 troops and is expected to begin next month.

Largely strategic role

Turner’s own role, based at Defence Headquarters in Wellington, is largely strategic, providing senior nursing input to policy and governance. Traditionally, a nurse appointed to this role serves between three and five years, then retires from the forces, “a slightly harsh reality,” Turner admits.

However, as chair of Nurse Executives of New Zealand’s central region, he also has his finger on the pulse of the world of nursing outside the forces. “Being part of this wider network of nursing leaders helps me understand what’s happening in nursing nationally.”

Deciding what were the most significant dates on which to celebrate the formation of the RNZNC has been a challenge, he said. The formation of the NZANS was approved by Cabinet on January 11, 1915. On April 6 that year, 100 nurses were officially enlisted in the NZANS, with the first 50, escorted by Maclean, sailing from New Zealand on April 8. Should commemorations be focused round International Nurses day (IND) on May 12 or on the RNZNC Corps day on March 27?

In the end, the RNZNC will hold its own 100th commemorative service at the Carillon in the National War Memorial Park on July 17 – “a rather random date”, Turner says. Turner had hoped the RNZNC’s Colonel-in-Chief, Anne, the Princess Royal, would have been able to attend, but this was not to be. However, at press time, a proposed first visit by Prince Harry to New Zealand next month could include a meeting with the RNZNC. “Perhaps Prince Harry will bring a message from his aunt,” Turner said.

Another major focus for the year will be the Marquette commemorative service on October 23 in Christchurch (see adjoining page). This day might also see the launching of a centenary history of the RNZNC, written by Hawke’s Bay historian Sherayl MacNabb. This is an update on one she and David Corbett published in 1990 to mark the 75th anniversary of the RNZNC.

“Sherayl is a former New Zealand navy employee. As with the first book, she is writing and publishing this in her own time and at her own expense. Her knowledge is phenomenal. We regard her as our corps historian and feel very lucky to have her,” Turner said. *