

A MISERICORDIA HEROINE: AGNES WIGHTMAN WILKIE



Barbara Paterson, Chair, Misericordia Heritage Planning & Policy Committee



On Remembrance Day, we remember those brave men and women who died serving in the armed forces in various wars. One of those brave souls was a Misericordia School of Nursing alumnus, Agnes Wilkie.

Agnes' story is one of compassion, commitment and courage.

Agnes was admitted to Misericordia School of Nursing "as a pupil nurse" in 1924. She graduated in 1927, receiving the Dr. James McKenty gold medal for the highest grades in theory. After graduation, she worked as a supervisor in the Operating Room at Misericordia for a year and then as a private duty nurse in Winnipeg.

In January 1942, Agnes volunteered to serve in the Royal Canadian Navy as a Nursing Sister. She was stationed at the naval hospital in St. John's Newfoundland and served as Assistant Matron. Her commander referred to her as possessing "a keen sense of her responsibilities" and "tact, personality and ability beyond measure."

In October 1942, Agnes was returning to the hospital from her first shore leave, a visit to her parents in Carman, Manitoba. She was with another naval officer, her friend Margaret Brooke, a dietitian. They

had travelled on the train from Winnipeg. They boarded the ship S. S. Caribou in the evening of October 13, 1942 to ferry from North Sydney, Nova Scotia to Newfoundland. The Caribou held 191 passengers, a crew of 46, as well as an assortment of rail cars, livestock and cargo.

Shortly after 3 a.m., the Caribou was torn apart by a torpedo launched by a German U-boat. The ship's boilers exploded from the force of the torpedo. Margaret later wrote her brother, "When the torpedo struck I was thrown across the room right on top of Agnes. I knew what had happened, but for a second couldn't do anything. She (Agnes) jumped up and grabbed the flashlight and climbed up for our life belts."

The ship sank in less than five minutes. There was utter chaos; horrifying sounds of the ship's structures being ripped apart, terrified passengers screaming and crying, and the bellows of cows who were drowning. The boiler explosions launched passengers from the ship's deck into the sea. Few were wearing life jackets. Only two of the lifeboats, and about a dozen rafts, were launched into the dark ocean waters. Agnes and Margaret never made it to the ship's deck; they forced their jammed cabin door open and fell into the sea.

Agnes and Margaret clung onto a piece of the ship that was floating in the water. Then they spotted an overturned lifeboat. A dozen people were clasping the ropes at the side of the lifeboat. Margaret and Agnes swam to the boat and joined them.

For more than five hours, Agnes and Margaret and the others clung to the ropes on the lifeboat.

There were no rescue boats on the horizon. The people on the lifeboat were freezing. Waves from the frigid sea continually crashed over the lifeboat passengers. Some people slipped into the sea, never to be seen again.

The surviving passengers later recalled that Agnes helped to keep them calm. She told them she was optimistic that they would be rescued. She led them in singing hymns such as Nearer My God to Thee.

At 5:10 a.m., Agnes developed hypothermia and became unconscious. Margaret held onto Agnes' comatose body as long as she could. Eventually, Margaret could hold on no longer. Agnes' body slipped into the open sea. At daybreak, Margaret and two men were left on the lifeboat.

Agnes Wilkie died at the age of 38. She was the only nurse in all three Canadian services – navy, air force and army – killed by enemy action in WWII. Her body was interred with full naval honours in Mount Pleasant Cemetery in St. John's Newfoundland. A monument in her honour was placed in the cemetery of Carman, Manitoba, a photograph of Wilkie was hung in all Canadian Naval Hospitals and her name was given to a nurses' residence in Halifax. In 1953, the Agnes Wilkie Memorial Medal for General Proficiency was presented for the first time to a graduate of Misericordia School of Nursing by Dr. Jack McKenty. Dr McKenty had been an intern when Agnes was a student and he remembered her as a fine person and an excellent nurse. In 1957, Wilkie Lake in Manitoba was named in honour of Agnes.

Margaret Brooke was one of 100 people who survived the sinking of the Caribou. She received the Order of the British Empire for her heroic efforts to save Agnes. The Royal Canadian Navy named one of its Arctic patrol vessels the HMCS Margaret Brooke, in her honour. After the war, Margaret returned to university and received a doctoral degree in paleontology. She died at the age of 100.

The Heritage Room (MERC-313) contains several artifacts about Agnes Wilkie and other Misericordia alumni war heroes. If you wish to learn more about them or to see the historical documents please contact Barbara Paterson at bapaterson@tru.ca or 204-381-6286.