

Canadian Women of Valour Challenge:
Matron MARGARET FRASER, Nursing Sister

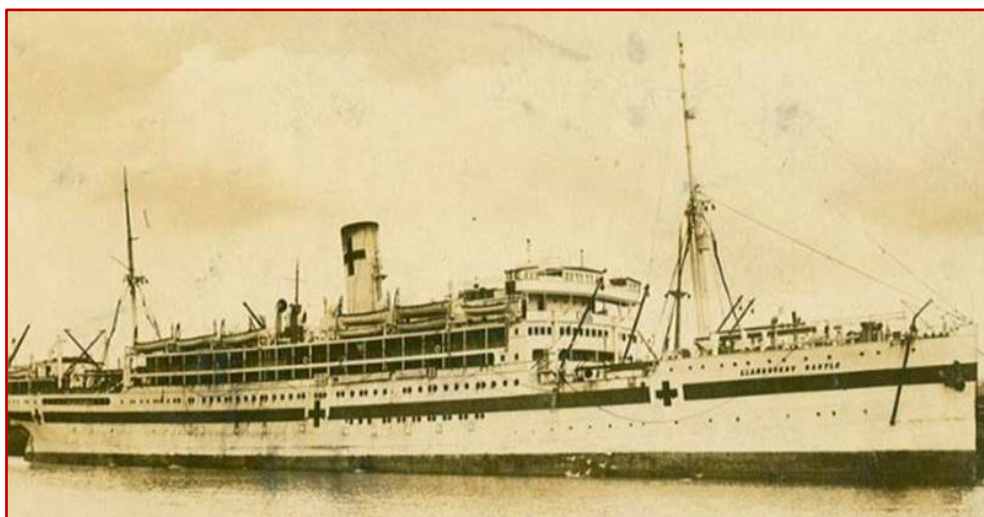
Matron Margaret Fraser from New Glasgow, Nova Scotia, was a nursing sister working aboard the Canadian hospital ship *HMHS Llandovery Castle* when it was torpedoed and sunk by the German **U-Boat U-86** on June 27, 1918. The loss of the ship and of the 234 people on board would have been enough to have many Canadians up-in-arms, but once it was learned that *U-86* surfaced from the depths to shoot at those in the remaining lifeboats, the event became a rallying cry for Canadian troops.

Matron Margaret Marjory Fraser - she was known as "Pearl" to many of her peers - was the daughter of Nova Scotia's then Lieutenant Governor. Within 2 months of the beginning of the First World War, 30-year-old Fraser had enlisted with the Canadian Army Medical Corps (September 28, 1914), and before the end of October she was serving in England, and then quickly thereafter in France as part of the No.2 Canadian Stationary Hospital (CSH).



Matron Margaret Marjory "Pearl" Fraser.
 (Credit: FWW Veterans of Guysborough County)

During the War's middle years, Fraser's ability, not only as a nurse but also as a leader, was recognized by her superiors. This resulted in her being transferred to the King's Red Cross Special Hospital in England in July 1917 and promoted to the rank of *Matron*, a title that she retained even as she was assigned to HMCS Llandovery Castle in March 1918. The title *Matron* was a term taken from the British system that ranked nurses and was relatively equivalent to the rank of *Major* in the fighting forces. A *Matron* is recognized as being the senior nurse or head of the nursing staff. Put simply, Matron Fraser was the boss.



HMHS Llandovery Castle. (Credit: [Nova Scotia Archives](https://www.novascotia.ca/archives/), date unknown).

To learn more about HMCS Llandovery Castle, please visit Valour Canada's website "[The Case of Llandovery Castle: Was Justice Served?](https://valourcanada.ca/the-case-of-llandovery-castle-was-justice-served/)"

The sequence of events on that fateful June day in 1918:

Llandovery Castle was returning to Britain after having dropped off hundreds of injured soldiers in Halifax when it was torpedoed by German U-boat 86. As the hospital ship quickly sank, some of the crew managed to board lifeboats. Matron Fraser was one of them, but her lifeboat, like most of the others, was drawn into the whirlpool created by the sinking ship. In her last moments, Matron Fraser



said to the man beside her, Sergeant Arthur Knight who survived the event to tell this tale, "Sergeant, do you think there is any hope for us?" Knight replied, "No", and later wrote in his diary that the last he saw of Nursing Sister Fraser was as she was thrown over the side of the lifeboat as they entered the whirlpool.

“The ‘Llandoverly Castle’ Lifeboat Murders”: an artistic representation of the aftermath of the hospital ship’s sinking. (Credit: [Imperial War Museum](#))

Most often we think of the soldiers directly involved in the fight at the front and how they must have suffered, but we should never forget the tens and hundreds of thousands who served behind the scenes and who were also impacted and deeply scarred by war. Nurses were among those who were not at the front lines, but their part was not an easy job by any means. As exposure to the tragedy of war increased, many, especially medical personnel, began to suffer post-traumatic stress. It is important to remember that Canadian Nursing Sisters played a critical role during the First World War. Almost 3,000 served, and of those, 61 died.

Margaret's youngest brother (James) died in battle just months before the Llandovery Castle was sunk, and yet Matron Fraser did not give up hope for a soon end to the war. Matron Fraser is buried at the [Halifax Memorial](#) in Point Pleasant Park, Halifax, Nova Scotia.

For more information, please see:

- ["Remembering Acting Matron Margaret Marjorie \(Pearl\) Fraser"](#) (FWW Veterans of Guysborough County).
- [Canadian Great War Project](#) – a series of articles that describe the sinking of HMHS Llandovery Castle.
- ["Caregiving on the Front"](#) - an extensive article describing the experience of our WWI military nurses (LAC).

Key Vocabulary:

U-boat: a German submarine. U-boat is short form for the German word, unterseeboot, aka under sea boat

Insomnia: an ongoing inability to sleep