

Mary Bernardine Waldron: WWI Nurse and American Legion Post Commander

Article and photos provided by Bert Wendell, Jr. and Walter B. Wilson, III

Mary Bernardine Waldron was born on May 15, 1877 in Elizabeth City County, VA. Her parents were Richard Conner and Mary S. (Poole) Conner. On January 29, 1896 she married Harry Delmont Waldron at Old Point, VA. She died May 10, 1952 and was buried at the A R Presbyterian Cemetery in Lexington, VA.

The above information is a short summary on Mary's 75 years life. Her back story as a nurse in the US Army Nurse Corps (ANC) during World War I and later becoming a founding member and 1st Commander of the American Legion's Cornelia Thornton Post 110 of Norfolk, VA is so noteworthy.

When Mary joined the ANC in the spring of 1918 at the University of Virginia, she was not given a military rank. She was a nurse whose job was to care for battlefield casualties. She became a member of the US Army's Base Hospital No. 41.

The military component of Base Hospital No. 41, was organized at Camp Sevier, Greenville, S.C., under the command of Major Cabell (later Lieutenant Colonel). On June 18, 1918 the unit travelled to Camp Mills, Long Island, N.Y. and embarked on July 5, 1918, on the ship Scotian, for the war in Europe. They arrived in Paris, France on the 25th of July. They moved to St. Denis where they set up the hospital in buildings of the School of the Legion of Honor.

The unit's nurses mobilized in New York, NY and sailed on the ship Lancashire on July 22nd and arrived in Liverpool, England on August 3rd. They left for Southampton and embarked there for France. They proceeded from Havre to St. Denis, reaching there on August 11th. The unit quickly prepared for the handling of patients.

Mary and her fellow nurses treated thousands of patients from September 1918 to January 28, 1919, when the unit ceased to function as a hospital. Base Hospital No. 41 personnel left for St. Nazaire on April 9th and sailed on the ship Rhindam on April 12th. They reached Newport News, VA on April 25th and proceeded to Camp Stuart. Some of the men were ordered to camps near their homes to be mustered out. Mary and the rest of the unit's personnel proceeded by boat up the James River to City Point and from there by train to Camp Lee, where the unit was demobilized on May 1, 1919.

For her selfless actions and diligent care for battlefield casualties, while in France, Mary was awarded the French Croix de Guerre Medal and the World War I Victory Medal.



Nurse Mary B. Waldron (center in left photo and right in the right photo) in France during World War I (circa: 1918-1919). (Photographs courtesy of Walter B. Wilson)

According to Mary's great grandson, Walter B. Wilson, III, of Huntsville, Al, and his family history, she brought back from France the French Tricolor Flag that was flying over the Palace of Justice of St. Denis, France on Armistice Day, November 11, 1918. Mr. Wilson is working with the University of Virginia School of Nursing and the Bjoring Center for Nursing Historical Inquiry to donate the flag to them to honor Mary's nursing service during World War I. Mr. Wilson is currently working to have the flag restored.

After Mary's return to Virginia from the war, she settled in the Norfolk, VA area. On March 8, 1923, she and eighteen veteran nurses formed the American Legion's Cornelia Thornton Post 110 in Norfolk, VA. She was elected Post Commander and then re-elected for a second term in 1924. During this time, Post 110 members rendered many hours of nursing to those in need, provided clothing and assistance to veterans, and agreed to pay half of the expenses of raising and educating a Virginia girl of four years old, and participated in the Armistice Day Parades.



American Legion hat and armband worn by Mary B. Waldron as the first Commander of Norfolk, VA Post 110 in 1923-1924. (Photography by Fred Kinkin)

According to Wilson, later in her life, Mary B. Waldron, withdrew to a primitive and isolated cabin home in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia to care for and isolate a son who had very special needs.