

100 today

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A woman who must surely qualify as New Zealand's oldest registered nurse - and one of its most distinguished - celebrated her 100th birthday today.



She is Mrs Elizabeth Nelson, a resident of Duart Hospital, Havelock North. Mrs Nelson was born Elizabeth McBride <sup>Goldsmith</sup> at Waipawa on December 28, 1876.

Mrs Nelson, who has a remarkable memory, recalls that as a child of seven her one wish was to be a nurse - and that she pestered her parents to allow her to become one.

The opportunity came when an American, Dr Caro, set up a practice in Napier and advertised for a receptionist-nurse. Mrs Nelson got the job and a remarkable career of nursing began.



Her training with Dr Caro, both at his surgery and at the private hospital he set up in what is now Tiffen Park, was comprehensive and included such things as physiotherapy and minor surgery.

When compulsory registration was introduced for nurses in 1902 Mrs Nelson underwent her State training at Wellington Hospital and passed with honours. She remained in Wellington and for a time was in charge of the theatre nursing staff.



She went overseas as a matron during the First World War and made seven trips to and from New Zealand during that war on troop transports and hospital ships.

Mrs Nelson had some remarkable adventures during her war service, and these are probably best summed up by a detailed description of one of the voyages she recalls vividly. This was on the troop transport Rotorua, which was torpedoed by the Germans on its next trip.

"I remember that trip particularly vividly because we stopped at Jamaica, which was a country I had always longed to visit. The people were wonderful to the five New Zealand nurses on board.



"But before we left Kingston we heard that the entire Atlantic Ocean had been cleared of ships by the Germans and that we were not to proceed with our crossing.

"Instead, we crept up the American coast to Halifax, passing close enough to wave to New York on the way. When we reached Halifax it was a scene of complete devastation. Two ammunition ships had collided and parts of the town had been blown to smithereens.

"They had only just dried their tears after this disaster when there was a second explosion which almost flattened the rest of the town. It wiped out a school and all the teachers and pupils."



"One of the soldiers who was going back to the war said to me: ' France was bad enough, but this is worse'."

Mrs Nelson, while horrified by the devastation of Halifax, *recalls she was entranced* by the splendour of the Canadian countryside.

"The maple trees, some of them only inches high, the flowers, and the wild strawberries ... it was beautiful."

The Rotorua spent two weeks in port, being camouflaged, before creeping out of port under cover of a thick fog.



"We could not see a thing and thought we were on our own. Then the fog cleared and we found we were in a convoy of 24 American ships and escorted by a huge man of war."

While the convoy offered solace for Mrs Nelson and her fellow nurses, that relief was to be short-lived when an influenza epidemic raged through the ship, striking both troops and crew.

"Fortunately, the troops were ill first and enough of them had recovered to help run the ship when the crew were sick," Mrs Nelson recalls.



Eventually the Rotorua reached Liverpool and Mrs Nelson and her fellow nursing sisters were sent to Brighton to recover from the effects of the 'flu and their weariness after long hours of caring for others.

Mrs Nelson returned to New Zealand in 1919 aboard the troop ship Tahiti and spent a number of years nursing her ailing mother in Napier. Later she opened her own nursing home in the city.

Following the Hawke's Bay earthquake in 1931 Mrs Nelson spent three months as matron of a relief hospital set up in the grounds of the Palmerston North showgrounds for people evacuated from Hawke's Bay.



She married the late Mr George Nelson in 1937. Mr Nelson, a son of the founder of the Tomoana freezing works, William Nelson, was a well-known Napier identity, being the man responsible for the reclamation of the area known as Napier South.

He was an expert on soil conservation, river control and land reclamation and the names Nelson Crescent and George's Drive recall his contribution to the development of Napier.

Mr Nelson died in 1964, aged 93. His home and gardens at "Keirunga", Havelock North, were deeded to the Havelock North Borough Council.