

## HERITAGE CIRCLE

### **Janette Robinson, 'You'll Make A Lovely Sergeant' – The First World War experience of Flora Sandes**

Janette Robinson presented the fascinating and unique story of Flora Sandes to the April meeting of the Heritage Circle at Rickinghall Village Hall. Flora Sandes was the only western woman to fight in the front line in World War I. Janette became 'engrossed' in the story of Flora Sandes while working as an archivist in Wickham Market and has conducted painstaking research into her life.

Flora came from a privileged background. She was born, the daughter of a vicar, in Yorkshire in 1876. The family moved to Marlesford in Suffolk in 1886 and later went to Thornton Heath, near London. While growing up, she engaged in riding, hunting and shooting with her brothers. She was educated at home by governesses, before attending a Swiss finishing school where she learned French and German. After this, Flora trained as a secretary but in her spare time she studied first aid.

When war broke out in August 1914, Flora wanted to become involved. She tried to join the Red Cross as a nurse but was rejected as she lacked formal qualifications. Undaunted, Flora, aged 38, joined the Serbian Red Cross and within weeks was at a hospital at Kragujevac, near the front line. The conditions in the hospital were appalling. Two doctors, five orderlies and eight nurses cared for 1,200 badly wounded men. There were no anaesthetics and they had no running water. Flora then worked in a hospital at Valjevo where the overcrowded conditions caused a typhus epidemic. She worked tirelessly in the hospital caring for the sick and the wounded, and undertaking minor surgical operations. She recounted amputating a soldier's toes with a pair of scissors! Inevitably, Flora contracted typhus, and later hepatitis, but managed to survive.

The war went badly for Serbia and the army was forced to retreat across the mountains to Adriatic Sea where it was evacuated to Corfu. During this terrible retreat in the rain and snow of November 1914, Flora enlisted in the Serbian army as a private. She saw action with the rear guard. Other soldiers were inspired by her bravery and no longer saw her as a woman. She was promoted and gained honours over the next two years. A brief return to England in 1916 allowed her to raise funds for Serbia and to write her first autobiography. On her return, Flora was involved in severe fighting with the Bulgarians. She was seriously wounded by a grenade, sustaining 24 wounds which were operated on without an anaesthetic. She was awarded the Karadorde's Star, the highest military honour in Serbia, and promoted to the rank of Sergeant Major. The international press publicised Flora's achievements and she became a role model for other women. She undertook further fundraising for Serbia and she gained fame in Britain. During 1918, after a further return to Serbia, Flora became ill with Spanish flu. This epidemic killed many millions across Europe but Flora managed to recover. In 1919 she was commissioned as an officer in the Serb army but was demobilised in 1922. She came to live in Suffolk but could not settle. She tried to earn money through a second autobiography but there was little interest in stories about a war that people wanted to forget. Flora lived briefly in Paris before going to Belgrade. She was still there in 1941 when the Germans invaded Yugoslavia. Despite being imprisoned for a short time, she was able to survive until liberation by the Communist partisans.

In 1946 Flora finally came back to live in Lower Hacheston, Suffolk until her death in 1956 at the age of 80. She had shown bravery and resilience throughout her life, dedicating herself to the service of Serbia and its army despite enormous personal cost. She was featured in a Serbian film in 2006 and has been commemorated in a Serbian stamp but she has been largely ignored in Britain. There is a small plaque to her in Marlesford Church and a pub named after her in Thornton Heath but this is scant recognition for such a remarkable woman.

The next meeting of the Heritage Circle will be at 7.30pm on Wednesday 25 May 2016 at The Village Hall, Rickinghall IP221HD. Annie May will be speaking about the Burston Strike School. Further information about the Heritage Circle is available on its website, [www.heritagecircle.onesuffolk.net](http://www.heritagecircle.onesuffolk.net).

Gerry Gurhy