

Flora Sandes

About 80,000 women were employed during World War I as nurses and orderlies at field hospitals. These were usually some distance away from the fighting. Only very few women entered active service in armies. Flora Sandes is one such example.

The daughter of a clergyman, Flora Sandes grew up in the small Yorkshire town of Poppleton. She became a nurse and worked for the St John Ambulance and later worked for the First Aid Nursing Yeomanry (FANY) in Britain.



Sergeant Major Flora Sandes wears her Serbian army uniform and medals to pose for a photo.

BORN: 22. 01. 1876

NATIONALITY: English

PROFESSION: Nurse-turned-soldier in the Serbian Army

DIED: 1955 (date unknown)

When World War I began, Sandes was 38. She volunteered immediately for an ambulance unit in Serbia that was run by the Red Cross. In 1915, the Serbian army retreated through the Albanian mountains from the armies of Austria-Hungary and Bulgaria. Sandes became separated from her unit and was caught up in battle with a unit of the Serbian Second Infantry Regiment. Picking up a weapon to defend herself, she impressed the company commander, Colonel Militch and became a regular soldier in the regiment.

Sandes was promoted to corporal and then sergeant. She could drive, ride a horse well, shoot and speak four languages. Fearless in battle, the male soldiers trusted her and she was promoted to lead a unit, often engaging in hand-to-hand fighting. In August 1916, the Serbian Army were advancing towards Monastir (now Bitola in Macedonia) when she was wounded by an enemy grenade. While she was recovering from her wounds, she was awarded Serbia's highest wartime medal, the Karageorge (the equivalent of Britain's Victoria Cross). Sandes returned to England, but Serbia was still in her mind. She raised money to help the Serbian people and wrote a book about her experiences called *An Englishwoman-Sergeant in the Serbian Army*.



American female nurses carry gas masks with them as they walk through trenches in France. More than 1,500 female nurses from the United States served in the forces during World War.

As soon as she could, Sandes returned to Serbia. She remained in the Serbian Army after the war ended. In June 1919, a special Act of Parliament in Serbia was passed to make Sandes the first woman to be commissioned as an officer in the Serbian Army. When Flora Sandes retired with the rank of captain, she toured Britain, France, Canada and Australia, giving talks about her life.

At the age of 64, Sandes returned to serve in the Serbian forces – this time in World War II. She was captured in uniform by the Germans and taken to a military prison hospital. She managed to escape wearing women's clothes that somebody had smuggled into prison for her. In the 1940s, Sandes left Serbia and returned to England where she lived until her death in 1955.



Women at war

Flora Sandes was one of a few of women who fought openly alongside male soldiers. Many others disguised themselves as men. In 1914, Dorothy Lawrence managed to trick her way into serving in the British Expeditionary Force, but she lasted only ten days before being discovered. Russian Olga Krasilnikov was more successful. Disguised as a man, she fought in over 15 battles in Poland and was awarded the Russian Cross of St. George medal. Another Russian, Maria Bochkareva, formed the first all-women's fighting unit in 1917. The First Russian Women's Battalion of Death contained around 300 female soldiers.