

“You’ll make a lovely Sergeant” The WW1 experience of Flora Sandes  
Janette Robinson

For our well attended March meeting we were joined by Janette Robinson who told us the story of Flora Sandes who grew up in Marlesford, Suffolk and became the only western woman to join a WW1 army not disguised as a man and fight on the front line.

Flora was born in 1876 in Yorkshire and then moved with her family to Marlesford, her father becoming the rector. Flora and her brothers and sisters spent a privileged childhood with Flora riding, hunting and shooting and later going on to finishing school in Switzerland when she became fluent in French and German. On her return to Britain Flora brought an old French racing car and in 1908 gained a mechanical qualification becoming a pioneer in car ownership and competition. Flora then decided that taking a secretarial qualification using the new typewriters would allow her to travel and work around the world.



In her spare time Flora trained with the First Aid Nursing Yeomanry (FANY), founded in 1907 as an all women mounted paramilitary organisation, learning first aid, horsemanship, signalling and drill. However, she left FANY in 1910, joining the Women's Sick and Wounded Convoy Corps that saw service in Serbia and Bulgaria in 1912 during the First Balkan War. At the age of 38 when she heard that Britain was at war Flora approached the Red Cross hospital but was rejected due to a lack of practical experience. Flora was not used to rejection and being keen to play an active part in the war when she heard that Mabel Grouitch the American wife of a Serbian minister was recruiting volunteer nurses she was quick to join. In August 1914 Flora with a group of 36 women left England for Serbia to aid the humanitarian crisis there. Following a difficult journey to Serbia on her first day Flora was caring for 140 patients and was quickly involved in supporting and then undertaking surgical procedures. After 3 months Flora returned to Britain to raise funds for the Serbs and on her return nursed through a Typhus epidemic. However, Flora was keen to get to the front and eventually joined the ambulance of the Second Regiment at Babuna Pass and during the Great Retreat through Albania, when she could no longer make herself useful as a nurse she was enlisted into the army as a private by General Vasić and quickly advanced to the rank of corporal. In 1916 during a Serbian advance Flora was seriously wounded by a grenade and had to undergo several surgeries to remove

shrapnel subsequently receiving the highest decoration of the Serbian Military, the Order of the Karadorde's Star and also being promoted to the rank of sergeant major. In 1916 Flora also published her autobiography based on her letters and diaries to help her raise funds for the Serbian Army. Unable to continue fighting due to her injury she spent the remainder of the war running a hospital, but in 1919 a special Act of Parliament was passed in Serbia that made her the Serbian Army's first female commissioned officer and she was finally demobilised in October 1922.

In 1927 at the age of 51 Flora married the 38 year old Yuri Yudenitch, a former Russian White army officer who she had met during the war. The couple lived for a time in France but then returned to Serbia and settled in Belgrade. Among other jobs Flora operated the first taxi cab in the town. Flora also published a second autobiography and lectured extensively on her wartime experiences around the world wearing her military uniform while delivering her lectures. Janette passed round a copy of a postcard of Flora in her uniform that she had found after several years of searching and had eventually purchased for £50.

Flora's military service was not at an end though as during the Second World War, when Germany launched its attack on Yugoslavia in April 1941 Flora and Yuri were recalled to military service and briefly interned by the Germans, before being released on parole. However, sadly Yuri fell ill and died in hospital in September 1941. Having received an exit visa at the end of the war at the age of 69 Flora returned to England and spent the last years of her life in Suffolk living at Lower Hacheston and died at the Ipswich Hospital in 1956.

Janette explained that whilst Flora Sandes was largely unknown in Britain she was commemorated with a memorial plaque in St Andrew's Church in Marlesford where she had grown up and had been included in a 2015 Serbian commemorative set of stamps recognising 6 British women who had served during WW1.