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Between Us

The Perley and Rideau Veterans' Health Centre Foundation ♦ OTTAWA, ONTARIO

The Irrepressible Connie Sandilands

By Peter McKinnon

Since moving in to the Perley and Rideau Veterans' Health Centre, Connie Sandilands spends as much time as possible in the arts-and-crafts studio and woodworking shop. Given her background, it comes as no surprise that the 96 year-old likes to stay busy.

Margaret Constance Snyder – known as Connie all her life – came into the world in a farmhouse in Bainsville, Ontario (near Cornwall). As one of seven children to grow up on the family farm during the Depression, Connie learned the value of thrift and hard work.

Her father had served in World War I and kept many of his letters from the front in a special box that was off-limits to the children.

"I remember going into what we called Daddy's Box and taking a peek at the letters," recalls Connie. "I don't think I understood what they were; we were just kids nosing around."

Two of Connie's aunts worked as nurses in the United States. She credits them with inspiring her career choice.

"Visits from my aunts were really special," she says. "They paid attention to us children and were a great deal of fun. I could see that their lives were quite different

from ours on the farm."

At the age of 17, Connie moved to Montreal to train as a nurse at the General Hospital. During her training, the Second World War began and she joined the flood of nurses to enlist in the Royal Canadian Army Medical Corps.

So many trained nurses answered the call, in fact, that Canada called a moratorium after only 10 days. In all, nearly 4,500 Canadian women served as what were then known as nursing sisters. Many of the nurses who couldn't enlist with Canada – because quotas filled so quickly – joined British or American services.

Connie got her first taste of danger on the way to Europe, when a Nazi submarine harassed the hospital ship she was on, in violation of the 1904 Hague Convention.

"I don't remember feeling afraid," recalls Connie. "But we had to travel well off course to get away."



Connie Sandilands in the Perley Rideau arts-and-crafts studio

For the duration of the war, Connie served at Canadian 22nd General Hospital in Bramshott, England. It was a clearing station for wounded soldiers – the last stop before boarding ships bound for Canada.

After the war, Connie continued her nursing career in Montreal, where two of her sisters lived. She soon reunited with John Sandilands, a high-school classmate also recently back from overseas service. John had flown as a navigator on Wellington bombers and survived two crash landings. The two quickly married and began to raise a family – three children in all. John's work as a school principal took the growing family to Simcoe, Ontario and

Malartic, Quebec before they settled just south of Montreal in St. Hubert.

When her youngest son began to attend school, Connie returned to full-time nursing at Royal Victoria Hospital. She and John were dedicated curlers and often competed in out-of-town bonspiels. They were also avid bowlers, bridge players and dancers – Scottish country dancing.



Connie Sandilands with a patient in England, 1944

“Mom has always been tireless,” says eldest daughter Linda Mitchell (née Sandilands). “In her younger days, when she wasn’t knitting or quilting, she’d be cooking, pickling or making preserves. She’s still remarkably active today.”

John and Connie built a

home for their retirement on the St. Lawrence River, near their childhood homes. After surviving several bouts of cancer, John died of the disease at age 70. Connie lived on her own and cherished the arrival of each new family member – today there are five grandchildren and seven great-grandchildren.

In 2015, daughter Linda introduced Connie to a new outlet for her creative energies: Izzy dolls, small woollen figures given to children affected by war and disaster. The dolls are named in honour of Master Corporal Mark Isfeld, a Canadian soldier who served on numerous peacekeeping missions during the early 1990s. As a way to comfort the many children he encountered, he gave them little woollen dolls knitted by his mother, Carol Isfeld. After a land mine in Croatia claimed Mark’s life in 1994, fellow soldiers asked his mother to continue her efforts. Their kindness soon inspired a movement: Canadian soldiers and healthcare workers have given out a total of more than 1.3 million Izzy dolls.

Connie has knit more than 200 Izzy dolls in the last 18 months or so. “It feels good to do this,” she says. “It keeps me active and keeps me contributing.”

After severely injuring her shoulder in a fall, Connie moved into the Perley Rideau in 2016. “I love it here,” she says, “I’m in the



Connie and John Sandilands dressed for Scottish country dancing.

craft studio nearly every day and ride the exercise bike a few times a week. There are also regular concerts, and we all look forward to ice-cream Wednesdays.”

Evidence of Connie’s boundless energy adorns her room: along with her many ceramic pieces, there are small chests of drawers and a magazine rack she made in the woodworking studio (she gifted three others to family members). Tucked into her dresser are several Izzy dolls awaiting final touches.

“I help to finish the dolls she makes and send them off, but I can barely keep up with her,” says daughter Linda with a laugh. “This is such a wonderful place for her.”

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The Perley and Rideau Veterans’ Health Centre is home of 450 residents, including 250 Canadian Veterans, most of whom served in either the Second World War or the Korean War. The Government of Canada provides additional funding for the care of Veterans, but donations to the Perley Rideau Foundation improve their quality of life in direct and significant ways. In May 2017, Veterans Affairs Canada, the province of Ontario, and the Perley and Rideau Veterans’ Health Centre celebrated the announcement of 25 Specialized Veterans beds for Veterans who served in Canada for a minimum of 365 days and are income qualified, as well as to Canadian Armed Forces and Allied Veterans.

We appreciate your support in making a donation at www.perleyrideaufoundation.ca.

The Perley and Rideau Veterans’ Health Centre Foundation | 1750 Russell Road | Ottawa | Ontario | K1G 5Z6
Telephone: 613-526-7173 | Email: foundation@prvhc.com | <http://perleyrideaufoundation.ca>