



**SUPPLY
LINE**

Mary Adelaide “Addie” Cooney

Royal Canadian Army Medical Corps

Addie was 31 when she joined the military. She was a registered nurse who worked in hospitals all over Europe. In 1943, she survived the sinking of a ship transporting nurses to Italy.



Nursing Sister Mary Adelaide Cooney in a nurse's work dress uniform.
George Metcalf Archival Collection
Canadian War Museum 20130046-025

Early Years

Addie was born on April 10, 1909 in York, Ontario, just north of Toronto. A registered nurse, she enlisted with the Royal Canadian Army Medical Corps, and served with the

No. 14 Canadian General Hospital. Her unit, based in Montréal, Quebec, went on active duty in June 1940.

Sinking of the *SS Santa Elena*

In 1942, No. 14 Canadian General Hospital – equipped with the staff and equipment to handle 1,200 patients at a time – travelled to England. In October 1943, the hospital unit left for Italy, where Allied soldiers were engaged in fierce combat. Cooney was one of 98 nurses who boarded the *SS Santa Elena* in Liverpool.

The *Santa Elena* was part of a large **convoy** heading to Italy. The nurses had just finished their evening meal on November 6, when the German air force fired on the convoy. The nurses prepared to evacuate, scrambling into lifeboats as the rear of the ship was hit with a torpedo. Four sailors were killed.

Two American ships picked up the nurses. While boarding the rescue ship, Addie had to climb an 18-metre rope net draped over the side of the ship.

This was no easy task. A fellow nursing sister, Ethel Rowell, remembered that “with each swell of the ocean, we were told when the boat goes up, grab a hold of the scramble net. [...] The lifeboat came up high, and we grabbed onto that scramble net and I hung onto [...] as tight as a spider could hang onto his web.” The badly damaged *Santa Elena* sank the following day.

The staff of No. 14 regrouped, setting up in Caserta, Italy. After four months in Caserta, Addie was posted to a Casualty Clearing Station, where she was put in charge of surgical nursing. She assisted with soldiers wounded in the Italian Campaign, with surgery sometimes performed 24 hours a day.

Throughout 1945, Mary was posted to various locations including Italy, France and Belgium. When the war in Europe officially ended on 8 May 1945, she was in the Netherlands, having worked at hospitals in Arnhem and Apeldoorn.

Remembrance and Recognition

Addie’s outstanding service was recognized with the Royal Red Cross Second Class. In 1949, she married Emery James Robertson, a former sergeant with the Carleton and York Regiment, who had been wounded during the **Italian Campaign**.

After temporarily leaving nursing to raise a daughter, Addie became Operating Supervisor at the Grand Falls General Hospital in New Brunswick. She died in 1994, and her photographs, uniforms, and medals are now part of the Canadian War Museum collection.

Vocabulary

Convoy

A group of ships or motor vehicles that travel together to support and protect each other. Convoys often have armed escorts to help provide protection.

Italian Campaign:

Allied military operations in and around Italy from July 1943 to May 1945. Canadian forces took part starting with the 10 July 1943 landings in Sicily. Almost all of them were moved from Italy to Northwest Europe in early 1945.

