



ICRC

CARE AMID CONFLICT

THE EXCEPTIONAL STORIES
OF FOUR FLORENCE NIGHTINGALE
MEDAL RECIPIENTS








Introduction

There is rarely a dull moment in a nurse's life. A typical day involves monitoring their patients, performing procedures, ensuring prescribed medicines are given on time, calming anxious or angry relatives, and relieving the stress of colleagues in what is often a high-pressure environment. Then there are times when the challenges multiply, such as when violence breaks out or a pandemic disrupts all existing protocols.

At times like these, some nurses display an exceptional humanitarian spirit, setting aside their own fears and quickly adapting their response to ensure that patients continue to receive life-saving treatment with the limited resources available. We bring you the stories of four such nurses – from Australia, Japan, Thailand and Ukraine – who were recently honoured with the prestigious Florence Nightingale Medal.

The medal is awarded to nurses who display exceptional courage and devotion to victims of armed conflict or natural disaster or to those who display exemplary service in the areas of public health and nursing education. Thirteen nurses from the Asia-Pacific region were among the 37 nurses worldwide who received the award in 2023.



Larysa Fedorivna Kysil

Social assistant with Ukrainian Red Cross Society, Toretsk city, Ukraine

Following the escalation of the armed conflict in Ukraine, Larysa Fedorivna Kysil's city – Toretsk in Donetsk region – turned into a battlefield. Constant shelling, no water or gas and intermittent electricity created chaos and fear. Many decided to flee the city, the violence and the destruction. But Larysa chose to stay. A volunteer nurse with the Ukrainian Red Cross Society since 2007, Larysa had been taking care of five tuberculosis patients when the conflict escalated. "I could not give up on them halfway through and flee. This is my city and these are my patients. I am at home here," she says. Larysa gives us an insight into her life and what it means to be a humanitarian health worker in a conflict zone.

How long have you been associated with the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement?

I joined the Ukrainian Red Cross Society in 2007, after retirement. I found out about the Red Cross tuberculosis patients treatment project and decided to join it, becoming a home visiting nurse. I have been a nurse for over 50 years now.

What have been some of your most challenging experiences as a humanitarian worker?

Suffering from the impact of conflict, many people can turn aggressive and resentful even when you are trying to help them. I understand the fear they are constantly experiencing because I live among them. You might just be walking down the street when shelling starts and you don't know whether to lie flat on the ground or lean against a fence. It is very scary and leads to sleepless nights. When dealing with aggressive behaviour, I either stay silent or try to calm them down depending on the situation.

It has also been very challenging to reach my patients in different parts of the city because of the lack of public transport. But I continue to visit even those who have completed their treatment course if I feel they are struggling. I particularly visit elderly women who are lonely, to encourage them and run errands such as buying medicines or groceries. Now I am also thinking of ways to find and store coal for the upcoming winter months.

How do you cope with the challenges?

As a family. My children (a daughter and two sons) and my relatives support me in my work. Recently I asked my son to deliver assistance material by car amid shelling because my patients were in dire need.

What are some of your experiences that have left a lasting impression on you?

I cannot forget the plight of one of my former patients whose husband and mother-in-law were killed by shrapnel while they were on their way back from a hospital. My patient was left without a family. Her house was also damaged amid shelling, heating and water supply were disrupted and the windows were shattered. I tried to console her and help her by taking hot meals for her and paying her phone bills. I also delivered an electric blanket and food items donated by the Ukrainian Red Cross. Sadly, before long, the harsh conditions claimed her life too.

But there are many happy stories too that encourage me. A patient who recently completed his treatment called to tell me that he was going to another city where he had been promised a job and given a hostel room. He thanked me and wished me luck. Another patient who has now recovered calls me every day for a little catch-up.

What do you do to unwind at the end of a long day?

I love gardening and watching plants grow. I used to live in a multi-storey building but now I stay with my daughter in a house that has a small patch of land where I plant a little bit of everything. I grow cabbage, peppers, tomatoes, cucumbers, beets, carrots, zucchini, pumpkins and eggplants. This land feeds us.



Miki Takahara

IFRC Health Coordinator, Damascus, Syria

Miki Takahara's grandparents always taught her that she should be someone who supports people when she grows up. To young Miki, nurses seemed to fulfill that role well. The nurses who helped her brother recover after an accident proved this. They were the nicest people she had ever met and she wanted to be like them.

So, when it was time for Miki to choose a career, she decided to join the Red Cross Nursing School. Miki shares that her career as a humanitarian worker, spanning 18 relief operations in 12 countries including Afghanistan and Sudan, began there. On completing her studies, she joined as a nurse at Himeji Red Cross Hospital in 1987. However, she went to Canada to try her hand at something completely different for a few years. Miki took on the job of a tour coordinator for Japanese and American tourists. "A gentleman noticed that I was a people's person and nudged me to continue being a nurse," she says about what brought her back to nursing.

Miki has faced a range of challenges as a humanitarian worker, from language to culture. She jokes that being associated with the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement has often placed her in challenging situations. But what has kept her going? "I don't know," she says lightheartedly and adds, "You have got to find joy in your everyday life. I enjoy meeting new people and being in new places."

As someone with vast experience in the nursing profession, she says there are many incidents that have impacted her, even making her question things at times.

One such incident that is clear in her memory is from when she was working in an ICRC hospital in Kenya. A young boy of about eight years was brought in with bullet wounds. He had been involved in a gunfight. Both Miki and the local nurse told the boy not to use guns and not to fight. But he looked Miki in the eye and said, "If someone is shooting at me and my family, wouldn't I fight back?" Miki was struck by the question. She says it made her realize that we all must do our best to understand people and the situation in front of us, even if we don't always agree on everything.

Chatting with colleagues and admiring nature's wonders – the sunsets and greenery – is how she unwinds. When asked how she would describe the feeling of helping people in conflict, Miki says, "I'm never satisfied. I'm constantly asking myself – 'Did I do enough?', 'Can I do better?', 'How can I do better?' and so on."

Miki's hard work and humility led to her being nominated for the Florence Nightingale honour by Kanae Komada, director of nursing at Himeji Red Cross Hospital. Talking about Miki's unassuming ways and simplicity, Komada says, "We worked on her nomination for the award without her knowledge. When she was finally told about it because we needed some information from her, Miki very reluctantly complied. That's just classic Miki. Another signature thing about her is that she rarely travels with a suitcase to any of her missions. I think even when she headed to Syria earlier this year, she carried only a rucksack. She just likes to keep things simple."

Miki's humility shines through as she talks about receiving the award and says, "Someone more worthy deserves this."

For Miki, being a nurse is not just a profession.

It is who she is.



Shalaosri Sangiam

Director of nursing, King Chulalongkorn Memorial Hospital, Bangkok, Thailand

Working as a nurse since 1987, Shalaosri Sangiam knows first-hand what it is to go over and above the call of duty. While her work is very challenging, she takes pride in being someone that people can count on in their time of need. Overjoyed at being honoured with the Florence Nightingale Medal, Sangiam shares some of her experiences.

How did you get into nursing?

My mother was diagnosed with cancer when I was in high school. As I saw her go through intense suffering, all I wanted to do was somehow help and relieve her pain. That led me to nursing. I studied at the Srisavarindhira Thai Red Cross Institute of Nursing and in 1987 joined the King Chulalongkorn Memorial Hospital, which is run by the Thai Red Cross Society.

What have been some of your most challenging experiences as a humanitarian worker?

Two incidents stand out in my memory. The first one was during the political unrest in 2010. We had to keep parts of the hospital closed because it was near one of the assembly points of the protesters. Weapons were being used in the protests and the whole situation had become dangerous for the patients as well as hospital staff. But some of our patients, such as those undergoing chemotherapy or dialysis, needed critical treatment daily. We had to quickly adapt and set up an all-in-one clinic on the ground floor of our 13-floor OPD building. We set it up so that patients could meet the doctor, undergo the required procedures and return home without any delays. Though we were under great pressure, we focused on our patients' health and safety.

The other incident was during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic, when we had to keep our staff motivated to continue working despite the very limited resources and the risk of getting infected ourselves. My team supported one another all throughout that period and did not let their fears stop them from caring for patients.

No matter how hard things get, people should be able to count on us and our support.

What kept you going despite the challenges?

Her Royal Highness Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn, the executive vice-president of the Thai Red Cross Society, had once said that we should be people that others can depend on. Those words have become a motto for me. No matter how hard things get, people should be able to count on us and our support. I have even used these words as a vision statement for the nursing department once I became the director.

What do you do to unwind at the end of a long day?

I love gardening. Watering my plants and digging up my garden relaxes me. It helps me forget all my fatigue.





Yvette Spero

Registered nurse, Australian Red Cross

She has firmly stood her ground against people threatening her with weapons and conducted awareness sessions for soldiers at check points. She has set up emergency triage in remote places and helped conduct open heart surgeries in places that had limited resources.

From setting up mobile medical clinics in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, to nursing in the time of diphtheria, cholera, meningitis and COVID-19, Australia-based Yvette

Spero has covered a lot of ground as a humanitarian worker. But the 64-year-old didn't want to be a nurse. "I always saw nursing as a typical female profession. My mother kept telling me that I would be great as a nurse."

Yvette wanted to be a lawyer but undertook a Bachelor of Arts degree on her schoolteacher's advice. She then changed direction to become a teacher for those with intellectual and physical disabilities. "Because I worked with people of different intellectual and physical abilities, there was a lot of medical and hands-on care involved. And I thought I might as well just listen to what my mother is saying and be a nurse."

By the time she finally began her nursing career she was in her mid-20s and had three young children. With a master's degree in public health and international health under her belt, Yvette set out to make a difference in the world. But she didn't see herself as a typical nurse. "Sorry, Florence," she quips. "Well, I am still a nurse, but I also see myself as a public health and population health professional. What we do makes a difference to the individual, but it also makes a difference to the larger population and that's really my focus these days."

While Yvette sees her primary impact being in the field of public health and population health, she can also be hands-on when needed. "That is what ends up happening often," she explains.

It took Yvette many years to reach an organization whose work she genuinely believes in. "I really believe in humanitarian work and the work of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement," she explains.

Though she doesn't have a legal background, she has a keen understanding of international humanitarian law (IHL) and its impact. "The fact is, I was able to go where I could go and do what I could do in certain places only because of IHL. I'm a big promoter of IHL and humanitarian principles," she says.

This intensive care anaesthetic nurse is all about creating sustainable options. "I look at the long-term picture from a developmental background where the idea is to support and then handover responsibility to locals," she says.

Yvette is looking ahead to saving more lives. "I've been working for many years and I'm happy that I still have the energy and the brain is still functioning," she jokes, adding that she would have been in Sudan right now, but her mission was unfortunately cancelled because of various constraints.

Advice to future humanitarians:

Listen to your staff. They know the context and often have lived through the same experiences as the people you are trying to help. Never criticize the people you're working with. Be kind to yourself, take it step by step and give yourself a break.

De-escalate volatile situations:

I have trained health-care workers to work with people who are experiencing heightened anxiety or anger. You should find ways to diffuse or de-escalate the situation to protect yourself, your patients and everybody around.






Hosted at the New Delhi Regional Delegation, the Delhi RCC works with delegations in the Asia-Pacific to build on the ICRC's positioning and acceptance in the region. We provide strategic communication advice and services in various regions. Our scope of work often extends to global support, especially in the areas of digital marketing, graphic designing, web development and language services. We work in close coordination with other RCCs as well as our counterparts in the region and headquarters to ensure fruitful collaborations.



Regional Communication Centre, Delhi (Asia-Pacific)
International Committee of the Red Cross

A-49, Vasant Marg, Vasant Vihar,
New Delhi, Delhi 110057
T +91 11 4221 1000
www.icrc.org
© ICRC
October 2023

Find Us:

-  [Facebook](#)
-  [LinkedIn](#)
-  [Twitter](#)
-  [Instagram](#)
-  [TikTok](#)