

'Every branch needs an Una Smith'

Gazette editor Steve Bax meets a stalwart of the Scottish Branch, Una Smith, to find out more about her remarkable life and career (with thanks to Sheila Jones for additional research).

Members are the lifeblood of any Association, and particularly so in the case of Una Smith from the Scottish Branch, who colleagues say is worth her weight in gold!

"Every Branch needs an Una," says Secretary Sheila Jones, referring to her 80-year-old colleague who retired from the Reserves at the rank of Major and collected her ARRC from the late Queen Elizabeth II.

"Not a month goes by when Una does not inform the Scottish Branch of a military gathering, memorial service or parade, no matter how small, being held for Regular and Reserve personnel or Veterans in the West of Scotland," said Sheila. "This has included online or socially distanced events during the Covid-19 restrictions. When we contact the organisers, the usual response is 'Ah. Major Smith. Lovely lady and always very helpful.'

"We know this but where does she get all her information from? Her friends laugh and say, 'Una knows everyone, and everyone knows Una.'"

Una's life has certainly been a journey. She was born and raised in the countryside community of Lugton, Ayrshire, a small village with a population of 80. Her school was four miles away by train, in the next village. By Una's own admission she was "a bit of a toe rag and a tomboy". In fact, one of her earliest teachers told her father, "Forget it, you'll never make a lady out of her."

This memory was of course in her mind when Una was presented to Her Majesty at Buckingham Palace decades later. If only her father could have been there.

Una's dad worked in the haulage industry and her mother was a stay-at-home secretary. However, nursing was also in the family – Una's grandmother nursed in the First World War and two of her aunts

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were nurses during World War II.

Una recalled: "I think it was looking after people which appealed to me. When you were 12 or 13 you were told the kind of things that girls would do, teaching was the other thing and I never really fancied teaching. Although in nursing I ended up doing quite a bit of it, although one to one."

Having been grammar school educated, Una left at 15 to attend a Pre-Nursing Course; the theory was completed at Irvine Royal Academy and the practical assessments at Ayrshire Central Hospital, Irvine, and a local children's nursery.

From there, she studied for six months as a Fever Nurse at Knightswood Hospital, Glasgow (now closed), before training as a Registered General Nurse at the Western Infirmary, Glasgow (also closed). She qualified in 1963 and to gain her 'hospital badge', was employed there as a Staff Nurse rotating through the specialities of Plastic Surgery, Ophthalmology, and the Operating Theatre.

Lured by the bright lights of London, she trained as a State Registered Midwife completing part one of the course on the Obstetric Unit, the Whittington Hospital, and part two in the community with the Nursing Sisters of Saint John of the Divine, which she says was like working on the set of the BBC period drama 'Call the Midwife'.

In 1965, Una secured a Staff Nurse post at the War Memorial Hospital in Lamblash on the Isle of Arran, 12 miles off the South West coast of Scotland. With a population of 4,500 and linked to the mainland by ferry, Una's nursing duties were multidisciplinary in this busy 30-bedded cottage hospital, particularly during any holiday season. She thoroughly enjoyed the work and within a year was appointed as the Nursing Sister.

It was here that Una met her husband, Jim – his sister, who was also a nurse working with Una, introduced them. His family had been evacuated there from Glasgow during World War Two and never left. Jim worked as a linesman for the Scottish Hydro Electric Board (now Scottish Power) and after their wedding and the birth of twins, was relocated to City of Perth. For 10 years, Una was employed as a Staff Midwife (part time) at Perth Royal Infirmary.

When Jim was promoted in 1978, the family moved to Dumbarton, and Una accepted a 12-month post





as Staff Midwife (part time) at the Vale of Leven Hospital. By then her children were older and it was during this time that she read an advert for 'A Nurse in a Treatment Room' working for three large General Practices on the Southside of Glasgow.

They needed a Registered Nurse with enhanced skills in Primary Care. Una was hired and very quickly formulated systems for what is now known as Chronic Disease Management across the three practices. She took clinical courses and training in everything from the management of Asthma and Type 2 Diabetes to the Menopause and Smoking Cessation. Soon she was running her own clinics.

At 44, Una joined the Territorial Army, following in the footsteps of her father and grandfather who were both in the Ayrshire Yeomanry. She was commissioned into 205 (Scottish) General Hospital RAMC (V) as a Nursing Officer QARANC (V) and later volunteered with 205 to put her skills in the service of the Allied Forces in the first Gulf Conflict in 1991.

Her work began at Saighton Camp, Chester in the immediate pre-deployment phase when she was tasked, with a small team, to ensure that all personnel were immunised with the necessary vaccines. This was a formidable task for a unit of 750 personnel which comprised Territorials from all the mainland UK medical units, individual Reservists, and Regular personnel.

They took over an airport terminal in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, transforming it into a major hospital for the conflict (which mercifully was short). Una was assigned as the Senior Nurse in the Medical Reception Station (MRS).

Una enjoyed her time in the Reserves, particularly teaching clinical skills to Combat Medical Technicians. She was highly regarded in the unit and known as 'Mother' by some of the younger members, as she was a good listener and quietly offering friendly advice when needed. For several years Una proudly led a platoon in the annual Armistice Parade held in Glasgow City Centre.

She was awarded the ARRC in 1991 for services in the Gulf Conflict and earning the Territorial Decoration in 1998. For years after, she supported the annual Cadet Camps for the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders as their Nursing Officer.

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Una been a became a volunteer for SSAFA Glasgow in 1998. As a Case Worker she visits Veterans requesting assistance in their own homes, making formal assessments of their needs before contacting their corps, regiment or service for support if required. She is also the Head Fundraiser for SSAFA Glasgow and describes her role as helping to arrange everything from “Big Brew Ups to standing with a can at Glasgow Central Station”. During lockdown she made regular telephone calls to the veterans which the organisation currently supports.

Una and Jim were married for 53 years before he passed away after a long battle with Alzheimer's disease in 2018. Jim had completed National Service at RAF Valley, Anglesey and had been a staunch supporter of Una's military career and charity work. They were often seen together pushing wheelchair bound veterans in parades and at other military events with Jim proudly wearing his RAF tie.

Shortly after he was diagnosed, they became involved with Alzheimer Scotland, a charity ensuring that nobody suffers alone with dementia and Una continues to support them.

Congratulations Una on a life well lived and thank you for your continuing service.

