



# *“It’s Comradeship That Counts!”*

## *How “Our Little Minnesota Nurse” Helped Create the State’s First National Cemetery*

JOHANNES ALLERT

Fort Snelling National  
Cemetery, 2017

Amid the 180,000 headstones in Fort Snelling National Cemetery lies one for a remarkable woman—a veteran of three wars who personified the ethos of a soldier: professionalism, resourcefulness, service above self, and a sense of comradeship unfamiliar to many in the civilian world. Theresa Ericksen was affectionately called “our little

Minnesota nurse” by the soldiers with whom she served. In return, she fondly called the soldiers “her boys.” It was through this bond that Theresa Ericksen became an unlikely catalyst in the creation of the state’s first and largest national cemetery.<sup>1</sup>

Ericksen left few details regarding her youth or personal relationships, preferring instead to share the

aspects of her legacy she considered most relevant: her devotion to nursing, her fight against the tuberculosis epidemic, and, most importantly, her connection to fellow military veterans. “It’s comradeship that counts!” Ericksen often said.<sup>2</sup>

Born into a military family in Oslo, Norway, on June 13, 1867, Theresa Ericksen was orphaned at about





Theresa Ericksen signed her 1930 portrait "The little Minnesota Nurse."

age five or six. She first lived with her aunt and uncle, a sea captain. She claimed in a 1930 interview that as a child she traveled the world with them to ports as far away as Japan and China. Relatives who lived in Minnesota came to visit Ericksen and her grandmother in Norway when she was 11 years old and asked her to return with them to St. Paul to visit for a year. Her grandmother died

before the year was up, and Ericksen stayed in St. Paul.<sup>3</sup>

Doctors Clara Atkinson, Charles Wheaton, and Longstreet Taylor served as mentors who cultivated Ericksen's interest in medicine and public service. After graduating in 1894 from Northwestern Hospital School of Nursing in Minneapolis, Ericksen wasted no time in making her mark. As part of a larger move-

ment within medicine to codify the profession, she, along with seven other nurses, formed in 1898 the Ramsey County Nurses Association, known today as the Minnesota Nurses Association. It was the state's first professional nurses' registry, and the concept quickly spread, first across Minnesota and later nationwide, though not without some resistance. Pushback to credentialed health care came not from the established medical community but from an untrained group Ericksen referred to as "a large number of white-haired, motherly-looking women doing nursing." A decade later she recalled in a 1909 speech: "Some would say 'What can a young girl like this know about taking care of our sick?' My ways seemed strange and new to these dear old family nurses. . . . Many were well meant advices given me on how to be sure and wash babies' eyes with breast milk and comfort their little ones with sugar teats—a thing I don't know yet to make." Ericksen recounted that she stuck to her strict training despite her youthful timidity, lest she "[fall] slave to some of these dear old ladies' wisdom."<sup>4</sup>

As a new citizen of the United States, Ericksen considered herself 100 percent American, so when the United States declared war on Spain in 1898, she readily responded to the army's request for contract nurses. At Sternberg Army Hospital in Chickamauga, Georgia, she was paid \$30 per month tending to members of the Twelfth and Fourteenth Minnesota Volunteer Regiments (state militia; precursors to the National Guard) who were recuperating from typhoid fever and food poisoning contracted in the Philippines. After four months, Ericksen received orders to escort a trainload of sick soldiers home to Minnesota for further treatment. Adhering to the army's ethos of

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Theresa Ericksen with two unidentified veterans of the Spanish-American War at the United States War Veterans Encampment, 1929.

“no man left behind,” she returned to Sternberg by mule-team ambulance to collect any remaining Minnesota soldiers. Private Charles E. Barnes of the Twelfth Minnesota Volunteers later recalled a petite nurse jumping down from the tailgate of a wagon. Striding in to the ward where he lay, she inquired, “Do you have any Minnesota boys here?” Wearing a nightshirt, pants, and a pair of shoes gathered by Ericksen, Barnes quickly departed with her and joined the hospital train. Decades later, while Barnes was listening to an Armistice Day radio program, he heard music played by Fort Snelling’s Third Infantry Regimental Band, which instantly triggered long-forgotten memories and prompted him to write Ericksen a letter of thanks. After reminiscing about military life, he concluded, “May God bless you for the great work you did as you were the one great bright spot in my life.”<sup>5</sup>

The American war against the Spanish empire included combat in the Philippine Islands that quickly

morphed into irregular warfare pitting US state militia forces against Philippine nationals seeking independence from all foreign powers. The militia were caught in a quagmire. Soon after returning to St. Paul from Georgia, Ericksen volunteered to care for state militia troops that were still deployed in the Philippines, with the stipulation that she could return to the United States with the regiment when they completed their yearlong tour. She took the oath of allegiance as a US Army nurse at the Presidio of San Francisco in September 1898, becoming the only woman in the Thirteenth Minnesota Regiment. Weeks passed before she finally departed on a cattle boat named the *Morgan City*. For 45 days, Ericksen endured a seasick journey aboard a vessel she described as both “odiferous” and “a rotten old tub full of ptomaine poison.” On hand to greet her in Manila was a welcoming committee from the Thirteenth Minnesota, which escorted her to the regimental hospital.<sup>6</sup>

Her arrival did not sit well with Major General Elwell Otis, commander of the US forces in the region. First, he held a dim view of the state militia system. The volunteers in turn nicknamed the reputed micromanager “Granny” for his overly cautious approach in conducting irregular warfare operations. Second, Otis was absolutely against women serving in any military capacity. Ericksen’s oath of service made her Regular Army, not militia. Otis used his authority to transfer her from the regimental hospital to Ward Six of the First Reserve Hospital. There, Ericksen proudly unfurled a large, hand-sewn Red Cross flag—the universal symbol of relief—she had made back home. Twenty years later, the same flag would accompany her to another war, this one in France.<sup>7</sup>

Deployment in the Philippines held unique challenges. The volunteers battled the terrain, weather, and disease as much as they did the enemy. The region’s heat and humidity made the troops susceptible to cholera, malaria, and typhoid, particularly during the monsoon season. Exacerbating the problem was a shortage of capsules in which to put the quinine used to treat malaria. In its raw state, quinine is extremely bitter, but Ericksen alleviated the problem by baking small quinine-infused cakes.<sup>8</sup>

Irregular warfare typified combat in the Philippines. All service members, including nurses, were fair game. Ericksen recalled when insurgents tried to capture her by sending out a call for medical assistance from a nearby village. The plan failed when Ericksen appeared with an armed escort, forcing the insurgents to withdraw. Most requests for her services were not so hazardous. She once received a special invitation aboard Admiral George Dewey’s flagship, the *USS Olympia*. “We all loved Dewey,”



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she recalled in an undated newspaper interview found in her scrapbooks. "I had a great time on the ship that day, visiting and darning the officer's socks."<sup>9</sup>

When the Thirteenth Minnesota Regiment returned to Minnesota on July 13, 1899, Ericksen remained behind in the Philippines, but not by choice. Otis, who had apparently modified his position toward women serving as army nurses, had extended Ericksen's orders for another year and reassigned her to the Seventeenth Infantry Regiment (Regular Army).

She traveled to Dagupan, a remote outpost in northern Luzon, where a former Jesuit college served as a makeshift hospital. Ericksen recalled that due to the intensity of combat in the region, nurses were required to carry sidearms and used coconuts for target practice. While restraining a fever-wracked patient at Dagupan, she sustained an injury to her knee-cap that would plague her for the rest of her life.<sup>10</sup>

Ericksen returned to the United States upon discharge from active duty in August 1901. In October, she found

employment as a company nurse with the Santa Fe Railroad in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Two years later, Ericksen answered the call to return to the Philippines as an army dietitian for the new hospital in Manila. Whether she was motivated by wanderlust, a desire to be back among comrades, or the opportunity for higher pay remains unknown. Regardless, compared with her previous stint in a remote outpost, life in the cosmopolitan capital had its advantages, including an invitation to a reception for William Taft, the first civilian governor of the Philippines (and future president of the United States, 1909–13). Ericksen hired a Chinese tailor named Song Lee to create a pink silk dress for the occasion. Decades later, she donated this cherished dress to the Minnesota Historical Society.<sup>11</sup>



ABOVE: American Red Cross flag made of faded red and white wool bunting made by Theresa Ericksen. RIGHT: Pink and white piña cloth gown with black velvet binding, designed in the Philippines by Lang Lee, made for Theresa Ericksen of Minnesota to wear at a reception for William Taft, civilian governor of the Philippines. (JASON ONERHEIM/MNHS COLLECTIONS)

Overwork and an inflamed knee forced Ericksen to return to the United States in 1907. Doctors considered amputation, but when she visited Dr. Arthur Gillette in St. Paul he was motivated to develop his first jointed-steel knee brace, which remedied her problem. Following recovery, Ericksen worked simultaneously as Anoka County's public health and high school nurse. In 1917, the school recognized her efforts to educate the students on the merits of personal hygiene and to implement a school breakfast program that improved overall academic scores.<sup>12</sup>

US entry into World War I in April 1917 mobilized the nation. Though no longer a member of the US Army Nurse Corps, Ericksen still maintained her reserve status with the American Red Cross, which sent her overseas to France in July 1918 and assigned her to a hospital near Château-Thierry. Here Ericksen encountered a new kind of warfare than what she had witnessed in the Philippines. Her initial sight of a soldier missing his jaw, so common in that conflict, momentarily unnerved her. She shared her experiences in letters home to the "Sammy Backers" booster club of Anoka High School: "I was detailed in one of our largest Army Hospitals where from the last drive they had attended to 4,000 wounded with an average of 158 operations a day. Here I would like to describe it to you but had better not. I will confess, however, that the first sight of our [injured] boys made me sick but then I realized their splendid courage and grit combined with patience. I was and am so proud of them." She went on to reassure the students that many soldiers would recover and resume a normal life: "Plastic surgery will do wonders. . . . This new science was started by the French, but developed by our own people and they really can almost make a man over."<sup>13</sup>



*Theresa Ericksen with Joseph B. Thackara, national commander of the Seventeenth US Infantry Veterans, at the Spanish-American War Veterans National Encampment at Columbus, Ohio, on August 23, 1937.*

Amid the chaos, one injured soldier inquired if she had ever served in the Philippines. When she responded affirmatively, he replied, "I thought you were. You were the 'Little Minnesota Nurse.' I was stationed next to your regiment." Ericksen's care transcended ministering to wounds. When asked by army captain Joe McQueen if she would write home to his family if he did not survive his surgery, Ericksen readily consented. He survived the ordeal and, under her

care, recovered. McQueen, who later became chief of Disabled American Veterans, never forgot Ericksen's compassion, and the two remained "ol' buddies."<sup>14</sup>

Following the armistice on November 11, 1918, dignitaries from across the world convened in Paris to discuss peace terms. After Château-Thierry, Ericksen was assigned to another French hospital. She wrote in January 1919 of encountering a luminary in Paris: "France as well





*Theresa Ericksen promoting Christmas Seals in the battle against tuberculosis, approx. 1924.*

as England and now Italy has made much of our President [Woodrow Wilson]—I had the pleasure to sit quite close to him the first Sunday in church after his arrival. His smile carries much weight with the people everywhere.”<sup>15</sup>

Returning home, Ericksen took up what newspaper accounts called her “fourth war”—her crusade against tuberculosis. Since 1907, sales of American Lung Association Christmas Seals funded medical research toward finding a cure for this often-fatal malady, which at the

time was the leading cause of death in the United States, including among veterans. As an example to others, Ericksen, without fail, was the first each year to purchase these seals. Not even wartime deployment deterred her. She occasionally posed as St. Nick in promotional Christmas Seal photos and solicited public donations over the radio.<sup>16</sup>

Since her first assignment in 1898 at Sternberg Army Hospital, Ericksen considered herself a veteran. In 1926, cognizant of her age, physical condition, and limited funds,

Ericksen inquired about taking up residence at the Veterans Home in Minneapolis. Correspondence within the federal bureaucracy reveals the legal discussion concerning the terms “soldier” and “nurse,” concluding the two could indeed be synonymous, provided the nurse could supply the necessary documentation to prove military service. In 1931, Ericksen moved into Cottage 1 at the Minneapolis Veterans Home overlooking the Mississippi River. The same year, she received her state veterans bonus of \$510 (\$7,647.85 in 2017 dollars) for service in the Philippines, yet she was repeatedly denied the state bonus for service in World War I because the Red Cross was never federalized during wartime.<sup>17</sup>

To supplement her income, Ericksen served as superintendent of Pleasant Day Nursery, one of St. Paul’s early day-care facilities supporting working families. Discovering many applicants were in dire straits, she intervened on behalf of the disabled veterans of World War I whose wives were compelled to seek employment. A story in the *St. Paul Pioneer Press* noted of Ericksen, “Once she began steps to obtain compensation for the disabled veteran, and judging from past accomplishments, general headquarters and the whole war department won’t stand in her way.”<sup>18</sup>

Finally forced into retirement in 1930 by her wartime knee injury, Ericksen channeled her energies into various veterans organizations affiliated with the Spanish-American and Philippine-American Wars. One was the American Veterans of Foreign Service. When this group was reorganized, with others, into the Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) in 1913, Ericksen became a member of Minnesota’s A. R. Patterson VFW Post 7; until 1921, she remained the organization’s only female member. Anoka veteran Arthur Caswell became her sponsor

in the emerging American Legion. She was also a member of the Women's Overseas League.<sup>19</sup>

Ericksen's loyalties remained with her comrades, the only family she knew. This loyalty was displayed through modest actions, such as bringing cake and candles to regimental reunions. She was also capable of grander gestures. For example, from fellow veterans she met in the Philippines, Ericksen commissioned five wooden gavels crafted from remnants of wood salvaged from the Spanish flagship *Reina Cristina*, sunk by Admiral Dewey in Manila Harbor in 1898. She later presented the gavels as symbols of comradeship to the branches of the Thirteenth Minnesota Regimental Association: Puget Sound, Seattle, Northern California, and Southern California. As for the fifth gavel, which remained in Minnesota, Ericksen, as a lifelong member of the Minnesota Historical

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Society, left strict instructions that the last remaining veteran of her beloved Thirteenth Regiment donate it to the Minnesota State Archives.<sup>20</sup>

Ericksen frequently attended nationwide veterans events as a delegate, catching the attention of reporters who went so far as to compare her to Florence Nightingale and the martyred British nurse Edith Cavell, who was captured and executed by German troops during World War I. Between conventions, Ericksen visited with comrades residing at the Veterans Home. Quite literally by accident, a fall on the ice during one such visit, on January 2, 1935, initiated a series of events that culminated in the establishment of Fort Snelling National Cemetery.<sup>21</sup>

Doctors determined that Ericksen's injury required surgery and long-term rehabilitation. F. W. Pederson, commandant of the Veterans Home and comrade from the Thirteenth Minnesota Regiment, suggested she recuperate in a warmer climate, preferably California. Mindful of her age and condition, Pederson broached the subject of mortality. If she died unexpectedly, where did she wish to be buried? Erickson answered, "In the old post cemetery at Fort Snelling." Pederson knew federal regulations limited burial to active-duty soldiers who died while stationed at the post, but he was confident he could navigate the bureaucracy by petitioning Congressman (later US Senator) Ernest

*One of the five gavels Ericksen commissioned as a gesture of comradeship with fellow veterans she met in the Philippines.*  
(JASON ONERHEIM/MNHS COLLECTIONS)



Lundeen. Lundeen was a staunch isolationist and Anglophobe, one of the few members of Congress who voted against US involvement in World War I, but he had fought in the Spanish-American War and remained a firm supporter of veterans.<sup>22</sup>

Although representatives of the War Department declined Erickson's

request, they suggested an alternative: burial at one of the national military cemeteries. There was no such cemetery in Minnesota. This sparked an idea Pederson shared in an April 20, 1935, letter to Lundeen (whom he addressed as "my dear comrade") "regarding the request of Theresa Ericksen, our little Minnesota

Nurse, who wanted to secure her last resting place in the Post Cemetery at Fort Snelling." Pederson conveyed Ericksen's disappointment, adding that while the idea of burial at Arlington National Cemetery appealed to her, Ericksen was "so thoroughly a Minnesota veteran that she will want to be buried in Minnesota and

## More meaningful than medals

By the 1930s, Ericksen's frequent appearances in the press had caught the eye of many veterans of the Philippine-American War. Frequently, she received letters in which veterans not only expressed their gratitude for her service and comradeship but also shared their personal thoughts. In a 1930s newspaper interview, she said the letters meant more to her than the medals and citations she received. "We were all so far away from home and went through such times that we were all brought very close together. . . . You can't imagine how much fun it is to hear from them all again."<sup>1</sup>

A representative sample:<sup>2</sup>

I have been fighting to conquer a set of shattered nerves that, by all odds, are supposed to belong to a woman. I can hide them so successfully before the others, but not so much from myself. —C. E. Barnes<sup>3</sup>

I want you to know that us old fellows realize now we owe a lot to those devoted nurses who served and suffered in the islands as we did; we were a lot of unmannerly young devils in those days but if you looked deep enough you would have found that most of us had a heart. —Charles A. Johnson<sup>4</sup>

I have never forgotten you and know I never will. This from a kind of a rough and ready sort of fellow which you had to be in order to soldier and survive under those conditions existing at the time. I have said many a prayer for you. I often think about you and I hope God will guard over you and protect you and grant you tribute. —Bernard Brennan<sup>5</sup>

Other letters displayed concern with making ends meet. Budget cuts brought on by the Great Depression exacerbated the problem. One veteran lamented, "Well, the 'Big Bad Wolf' got me at last. I received notice of cut in pension from \$60 to \$30, effective October 1, 1933."<sup>6</sup> Despite changes in Washington's political leadership in 1933, the pension cutbacks continued. Sandwiched between the veterans of the Civil War and World War I, the all-volunteer force known as the Boys of '98 felt forgotten. Another excerpt from Charles A. Johnson's letter to Ericksen read:

History has treated us shabbily by almost ignoring the insurrection, yet as a matter of fact American soldiers were never called upon to perform a more difficult and heart-breaking job; and as if [Philippine independence leader] Aguinaldo did not give us trouble enough, we now have the economy. —Charles A. Johnson<sup>7</sup>

Amid mounting political pressure as he faced reelection, President Franklin Roosevelt eventually signed a bill in 1935 that restored veterans' pensions, including for service in the Spanish-American and Philippine-American Wars. Still, the political posturing and doublespeak left one to opine:

Strange that the President should admit that the Spanish War Veterans were entitled to restoration of their pensions, after he had taken a rigid stand against the arguments that he now is using in favor of them, and in so doing using the very arguments that were presumed by the legislative committee of the U.S.W.V. [United States War Veterans] in the arguments before pension committees of both houses of congress and before the President himself. —James Koll<sup>8</sup>

These letters sent to Ericksen and preserved in her archives shed light on a group of veterans who quickly faded from view. Many of their comments reveal similar difficulties encountered by current veterans.

### Notes

1. Theresa Ericksen Papers, P1260, scrapbook, c. 1899–1936, Minnesota Historical Society (MNHS).
2. Following letters to Theresa Ericksen, Theresa Ericksen Papers, P1260, correspondence, MNHS.
3. From C. E. Barnes, Nov. 27, 1931.
4. From Charles Johnson, Nov. 18, 1934.
5. From Bernard Brennan, Jan. 6, 1930.
6. From James Koll, Oct. 1, 1933.
7. From Charles Johnson, Nov. 18, 1934.
8. From James Koll, Aug. 15, 1935.



we will find a place for her." Then he put forth his idea: "This brings up another thought, and that is why not have a National Cemetery in the State of Minnesota[?]"<sup>23</sup>

Pederson went on to suggest that a cemetery for veterans and their spouses from the five-state region could be located west of Minneapolis near the Minnesota River. Omitted was mention of the financial benefits of infusing federal funds into a depressed state economy and of transferring costs for military burials from the state to the federal budget. Pederson concluded, "We no doubt, could get the entire backing of different service organizations for a project of this kind." Pederson later met

with Lundeen and other state representatives in Washington, DC, at his personal expense. As predicted, veterans service organizations rallied to the cause. This was the first instance where public pressure resulted in congressional approval in securing a specific location for a national cemetery. A bill (S.4268) authorizing the secretary of war to set aside land near Fort Snelling was submitted on June 6, 1936, and the legislation was signed into law in 1937.<sup>24</sup>

A national cemetery committee made up of veterans, including Erickson, was formed. The chairman was John E. Soper. Like Erickson, Soper emigrated to the United States at a young age. During World War I, he

distinguished himself while serving as a combat surgeon attached to Minnesota's 151st Artillery Regiment. Press reports conveyed his vision to create a "Northwest Arlington" national cemetery, complete with a chapel and an amphitheater.<sup>25</sup>

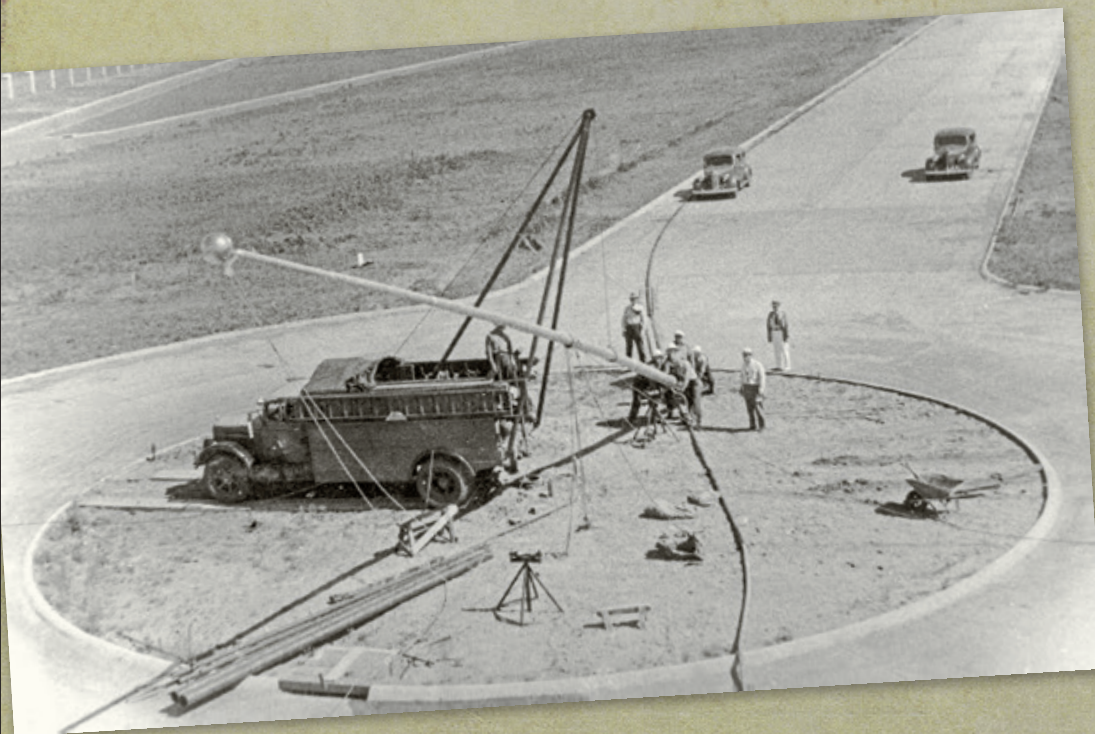
As cemetery construction progressed, Erickson made plans to "get her house in order." Her directives were straightforward. Upon her death, she requested that her assets be divided among her beloved veterans associations and that she be buried in her Army Nurse Corps uniform. She did not specify a tombstone inscription. Meanwhile, on November 11, 1936, Erickson received statewide attention when the Minnesota Public Health Association recognized her 30-year crusade against tuberculosis. The association's distinguished-service medal, presented by Drs. Charles and William Mayo, marked the first time a woman ever received the medallion.<sup>26</sup>

Fort Snelling National Cemetery was officially dedicated on July 14, 1939. Among those in attendance was Theresa Erickson, proudly wearing her military uniform adorned with awards. In the months that followed the official opening, the remains of 680 soldiers buried at Fort Snelling who served from 1820 to 1939 were disinterred and relocated there. In March 1940, Erickson reunited for a final time with remaining comrades of the Thirteenth Minnesota Regiment at a reunion held in California. In her last known interview, conducted by the *Los Angeles Times*, she expressed regret at America's involvement in World War I and cautioned against future foreign entanglements. She nonetheless reaffirmed

*Chairman of the Fort Snelling National Cemetery committee, Dr. John Soper (second from right), hoped to create a "Northwest Arlington," a dream never fully realized.*







## Fort Snelling National Cemetery is dedicated

TOP: Crew raising the flag on July 13, 1939, one day before the opening dedication ceremonies.

MIDDLE: Ericksen on dedication day.

BOTTOM: Surrounded by officers and dignitaries, from left, J. J. Beran, George Mouller, G. B. Hodges, John H. Harris.



### PROGRAM

*Dedication Exercises held at Fort Snelling  
National Cemetery*

*Friday, July 14, 1939*



#### IN MEMORIAM

*All that they had they gave - they gave  
In sure and single faith;  
There can no knowledge reach their grave  
To make them grudge their death,  
Save only if they understood  
That after all was done,  
We, the redeemed denied their blood,  
And mocked the gains it won.*

*— Rudyard Kipling.*



her devotion to alleviating suffering caused by man's inhumanity to man, which, the reporter concluded, was "the only kind of fight she likes."<sup>27</sup> Gradually, Ericksen faded from the public spotlight. Amid the clash of another world conflict, Theresa Ericksen died on August 31, 1943. She was 75 years old.<sup>28</sup>

Present at her funeral on September 2, 1943, were representatives from the American Red Cross, along with members of state nursing and health organizations. Ericksen's comrades paid her tribute by playing taps over her grave. Charles Barnes, the forgotten soldier whom she retrieved from her first military deployment at Sternberg Army Hospital, offered to publish a booklet honoring her memory, but no copies are known to exist. While her death was widely reported, only the *Anoka Union* and *Anoka Herald* alluded to her role in establishing the national cemetery. Anoka's American Legion Post 102 created a nursing scholarship in Theresa Ericksen's name that still exists.<sup>29</sup>

John Soper's dream of a "Northwest Arlington" national cemetery never fully materialized. Neither the chapel nor the amphitheater were completed. He died on March 24, 1956, at the age of 89 and is buried in the Distinguished Service Section of Fort Snelling National Cemetery. Nearby lie the remains of Senator Ernest Lundeen, who was killed in an airplane crash on August 31, 1940. He was the state's first politician buried there. Ironically, Ericksen's staunch advocate, F. W. Pederson, is absent, preferring instead interment at Minneapolis's Lakewood Cemetery. He died on his 75th birthday, September 13, 1948.<sup>30</sup>

Philip Carney, who was involved with the restoration of a plaque honoring Spanish-American veterans at Fort Snelling National Cemetery, recalled in 2004 that in his youth,



Theresa Ericksen's headstone in Fort Snelling National Cemetery.

Theresa Ericksen was a frequent guest at his parents' home for Sunday dinner. During those visits, he recalled, Ericksen expressed her simple desire for burial alongside her comrades.<sup>31</sup> She got her wish. Ericksen's grave is in Fort Snelling National Cemetery's section A, block 11, number 1884. Crowned by a Balkan cross, her stone reads:

Theresa Ericksen  
—  
Minnesota  
—  
Nurse  
Army Nurse Corps  
August 31, 1943

The grassroots effort calling for a national cemetery, a chain of events that began with Theresa Erickson's wish to be buried in a military cemetery in her home state, was the first of its kind in the nation. Seventy-three years after her death, representatives from the Department of Veterans Affairs and the Department of the Interior publicly acknowledged Ericksen's role as the cemetery's catalyst. The occasion was an official ceremony held on August 25, 2016, to mark Fort Snelling National Cemetery's addition to the National Register of Historic Places. Sometimes the bonds of comradeship can yield big results. ▣

## Notes

The author wishes to thank the archival staffs at the Minnesota Historical Society and the Anoka County Historical Society; John Knapp, deputy director of Fort Snelling National Cemetery; and journalist Cathy Wurzer for their assistance in telling this story.

1. Number of graves: Fort Snelling National Cemetery, Historic Fort Snelling website, <http://www.historicfortsnelling.org/history/military-history/fort-snelling-national-cemetery>. "A Real Service Record," *Foreign Service Magazine* (Feb. 1922), Theresa Ericksen Papers, P1260, scrapbook, c. 1899–1936 (hereafter, Ericksen scrapbook), Minnesota Historical Society (hereafter, MNHS). This sense of comradeship is not limited to men, as evidenced in two separate accounts involving army nurses from World War I: Donna Ovind Weiss, *Lamp for a Soldier: The Caring Story of a Nurse in World War I* (Bismarck: North Dakota State Nurses' Association, 1976), 14; Shari Lynn Wigle, *Pride of America, We're With You: The Letters of Grace Anderson U.S. Army Nurse Corps, World War I* (Rockville, MD: Seaboard Press, 2007), 142.

2. "A Real Service Record."

3. "Viking Nurse Heard Guns Roar in Two Wars," *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, Aug. 24, 1930, 5; Theresa Ericksen, autobiographical typescript, Dec. 1939, 1, Minnesota Nurses Association Fourth District Records, 1898–1974, MNHS (hereafter, Nurses Assn. records).

4. Ericksen autobiographical typescript; "A Proud Legacy," Theresa Ericksen, 1904–40, box 6, Nurses Assn. records; "Trained Nurses Organize," *Minneapolis Tribune*, Aug. 14, 1898, 7, and Ericksen's address to the 1909 Nurses Convention, later published in *The Trained Nurse and in Hospital Review*, both in Nurses Assn. records.

5. Bessie Park Haines, *The Red Cross Society of Minnesota* (Minneapolis: Press of Tribune Printing Company, 1900), 106–7; Nurses Assn. records; Charles Barnes, "Boys of 98," Ericksen scrapbook; letter from Charles Barnes, Nov. 11, 1931, Theresa Ericksen Papers, P1260, correspondence, MNHS (hereafter, Ericksen correspondence). Haines organized the credentialed contract nurses.

6. Nurses Assn. records; "Viking Nurse," *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, Ericksen scrapbook. "Pto-maine" refers to bacteria or bacterial products that were thought to cause food poisoning; the term is no longer in use.

7. "Viking Nurse" and "St. Paul Nurse, Doughboys' Comrade in 3 Wars, Settles Down to Be Peacetime Pal," *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, both in Ericksen scrapbook. Ericksen's Red Cross flag remains in the MNHS collections.

8. Nurses Assn. records.

9. "Little Minnesota Nurse, Veteran of Three Wars, Guards Health of Children," *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, n.d., Ericksen scrapbook.

10. Ericksen autobiographical typescript, 3.

11. Nurses Assn. records; Ericksen's formal dress, MNHS collections. Following his stint in

the Philippines, Taft became secretary of war in the administration of President Theodore Roosevelt. After his presidency, Taft became the tenth Chief Justice of the US Supreme Court (1921–30), making him the only man to have been both president and chief justice.

12. Ericksen autobiographical typescript, 4; "The Visiting Nurse," *The Echo*–1917 (Anoka High School student yearbook), 11, Anoka County Historical Society.

13. "Little Minnesota Nurse, Veteran of Three Wars"; letter to Sammy Backers from Ericksen, Aug. 26, 1918, Sammy Backers file, Anoka County Historical Society.

14. "Little Minnesota Nurse, Veteran of Three Wars" and "Nurse, Veteran of 3 Wars, Ill in Hospital, Finds Boy She Aided Is D.V.A. Chief," both in Ericksen scrapbook.

15. Letter to Sammy Backers from Ericksen, Jan. 5, 1919, Sammy Backers file, Anoka County Historical Society.

16. "Honors Planned for Miss Ericksen for Service in '4th War,'" Ericksen scrapbook; "In 1935 More Vets Died of Tuberculosis than of Any Other Disease," *Minnesota Legionnaire* 15, no. 1; letter from Margaret Breen, Minnesota Public Health Association, Nov. 6, 1936, requesting a radio interview on WCCO, Ericksen correspondence.

17. Commandant/administrator subject files, box 1, Minnesota Soldiers Home (Minneapolis), MNHS; application for Spanish-American War veteran relief, warrant A-364898, and World War I Disallowed file, Theresa Ericksen app. #50700, MNHS, <http://www2.mnhs.org/library/findaids/gr00056.xml>. Dollar conversions: Dollar Calculator, <https://www.dollartimes.com/>.

18. "Pleasant Day Nursery Comes to Rescue When Wife of Gassed War Veteran is Forced to Go to Work," *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, Ericksen scrapbook.

19. "Only Woman VFW Is in City: Anoka County Nurse Is Veteran of Three Wars," Ericksen scrapbook; Theresa Ericksen app. #50700, World War I Disallowed file. Ericksen was also partly responsible for organizing VFW Post 212 in Park Rapids, MN, in 1919: see "History of the American Legion Post #212," <http://www.parkrapidsamericanlegion.com/aboutus.html>.

20. "History of the gavels presented by Theresa Ericksen" (undated memo), Theresa Ericksen file, Thirteenth Minnesota Regimental Association, box 1, MNHS (hereafter, Thirteenth Minnesota papers).

21. "Nurse of Three Wars Sees City: Edith Cavell of America Guest of 'Boys,'" Ericksen scrapbook; Ericksen autobiographical typescript, 5.

22. "National Cemetery to Be Established at Fort Snelling," *The National Tribune: Washington, DC*, Sept. 24, 1936, 8; "Lundeen Noted for Opposition to US Entry into War," *Minneapolis Star Journal*, Sept. 1, 1940, 5.

23. Letter from F. W. Pederson to Senator Ernest Lundeen, Apr. 30, 1935, Fort Snelling National Cemetery.

24. Dean Holt, *American Military Cemeteries: A Comprehensive Illustrated Guide to the Hallowed Grounds of the United States, Including Cemeteries Overseas*, 2nd ed. (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co. Inc., 2010), 4, 146; letter from F. W. Pederson to Congressman August Anderson, June 7, 1935, Fort Snelling National Cemetery.

25. Program honoring Dr. John Soper at the 42nd Rainbow Division Association Event, Rollo Lester Mudge Papers, P1643, MNHS; "Fort Snelling Cemetery Has Been Hailed as Northwest Arlington," *Minnesota Legionnaire* 18, no. 41, 1.

26. Theresa Ericksen file, Thirteenth Minnesota papers; "Theresa Ericksen—Nurse and Comrade: Dr. Mayo Honors Pioneer Nurse, Veteran of Three Wars, for Her Service in the Fight against Tuberculosis," *Everybody's Health* (Dec. 1936): 4–5, 15.

27. "Nurse Warns Against War: Veteran of Three Conflicts Recalls Both Sad and Happy Days," *Los Angeles Times*, Mar. 20, 1940, 12.

28. Holt, *American Military Cemeteries*, 146.

29. Theresa Ericksen file, Thirteenth Minnesota papers; "Theresa Ericksen, Former School Nurse Died at Vets Hospital," *Anoka Herald*, Sept. 8, 1943, and "A Pioneer Nurse Dies," *Anoka Union*, Sept. 15, 1943, both in Theresa Ericksen file (news clippings), Anoka County Historical Society.

30. "Services for Dr. Soper Set Tuesday," *Minneapolis Star*, Mar. 26, 1956, 13a; "Lundeen, 24 Others Killed in Virginia Plane Crash," *Minneapolis Star Journal*, Sept. 1, 1940, 1; "Frederick Pederson Rites to Be Thursday," *St. Paul Dispatch*, Sept. 15, 1948, 20.

31. Philip J. Carney to Robert McCollum, Director, Fort Snelling National Cemetery, Sept. 21, 2004, uncataloged letter in Fort Snelling National Cemetery files, courtesy John Knapp.

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Photos on p. 302, 312, courtesy of author; p. 303, 304, 305, 306, 307, and 308, MNHS Collections; p. 310 and 311, courtesy Fort Snelling National Cemetery.





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