

A Nurse at War

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NUMBER & RANK. VFX 112006 LIEUTENANT
DATE OF BIRTH 9-11-1918
PLACE OF BIRTH PORT MELBOURNE

I left school at 13 years in December 1931, in Grade 8. after passing Merit Certificate at Sassafras State School 3222. Victoria.

Stayed at home with my parents and did a course in Book-keeping in 1932. Next year I went to Melbourne as an apprentice dressmaker.

In 1934 at 16 years I started nursing at a small private hospital in Greensborough. Then in 9th Nov 1936 started General Training at Prince Henry's Hospital, Melbourne completed Feb 1940. After leaving I went to Fairfield Infectious Disease Hospital. in Victoria.

Why and how did I enlist?

The night war was declared September 1939, a friend and I had walked to Flinders St Station and heard paper boys calling "Extra, Extra, War has been declared". The night was wet and cold but the shiver that went down my spine was from the words the boys spoke. I silently made two vows that I will nurse these men and that I will not marry until our country was free.

Next morning I went to the Army Barracks in Albert Park to register but I was told to go home and grow up, I wasn't impressed! I was too young, as twenty five was the minimum age for nurses at that time.

I kept going to the barracks and they told me to do a training in infectious diseases this was looked on favourably by recruitment officers.

I applied to Fairfield Infectious Disease Hospital in February 1940 and did a six months training course, which included a unit in training to be a tutor. After completing I worked there as charge nurse living a normal life reading papers, hearing of school friends being posted "missing in action." I stayed in contact with the Barracks, and then the Japanese bombed Darwin, my call up came, 3rd March 1943. I found out later that many boats are sunk, one hospital ship was hit trying to escape.

It is hard to describe how I felt, anxiety? Would I be tall enough? Do I know enough? What will I do if I am not accepted?. However, I was accepted and classed as being A1 medically.

I am now 23 years, and had 2 years experience as charge nurse. My next move was to report to the Matron, to my surprise she threatened to have me man-powered to remain there on under her for the duration.!

I told her that my brother had completed his apprenticeship as an engineer and was already in the Air Force and serving in Darwin, and it was my duty to go, that did not help! However I managed to escape before her position as Manpower Director (Nurses) was ratified

What did I do in the War

I was an Army Nurse, a lieutenant in the Royal Australian Army Nursing Service. All army nurses were registered nurses before enlistment, we did no further training in the Army, unless you call learning to march as training! We were already trained nurses with experience of being in charge of wards and other aspects of nursing. I worked as a nurse in camp hospitals and large general hospitals where ever we were sent.

Describe your War experience.

I was now Lieutenant A Storrie in the Royal Aust Army Nursing Service and wore the grey uniform for the next five years

The first six weeks were at Heidelberg Military Hospital, I nursed soldiers who were injured in the New Guinea champagne, they were physically and mentally exhausted

I was then transferred to 107 AGH Puckapunyal, near Seymour, in April '42. This was a very busy camp hospital, in the training camp for high ranking senior officers, infantry recruits and the armoured divisions. There over a ten thousand men in camp at any one time.

Matron Helena McMahon was in charge at 107 AGH Puckapunyal from 1941 and did not go to Darwin with us, unfortunately; she was strict but very fair, and easy to talk to. Puckapunyal was an introduction to a different life style, we were not free to go out, only to the camp pictures, in groups of six escorted by two Army Officers!

I will never forget the first time I went to that huge theatre which held 1000 men. All officers sat down the front on reserved seats and the hall was full before we got there. We had to walk down the centre isle to the front row, and we had to wear our formal evening uniform, which included small red capes and white veils. The boys cheered clapped and whistled as we strolled down, my face was red as a beetroot by the time we sat down, we soon got over the embarrassment and bowed and waved like a royal ladies!

We had a bright social life, we were invited out to the various units for formal dinners after training schools mostly. One dinner was after a conference of very senior officers. Matron sent me to the top table sitting with Generals, and Colonel, I was horrified and didn't know what to say, I would rather have been with the juniors!

A sparkling Burgundy was served by the stewards who kept filling my glass, that loosened my tongue and I was able to chat away to those men. Matron caught my eye, frowned and pointed to her glass, I had the cheek to smile at her and raise my glass in salute! When I got home I couldn't lie down and was sick all night. I was on duty at 6 am. I felt awful, that taught me a lesson I will never forget!

In April 1943 we were advised that we as a unit were to be sent to relieve a hospital somewhere up north; and were sent home on a few days leave and refitted with tropical

uniforms, trunks and kit bags. We guessed it was somewhere above the 26th parallel I don't think the whole unit went but my friends were going; we were all fairly young, all under 25 years. We were transferred to Darwin in April 1943; and were sent overland, in trains and trucks up through Alice Springs to Adelaide River.

We worked long hours six days weekly in tent wards, in the heat, no air conditioners in those times !

The journey from Melbourne to Adelaide River was another first time experience for us and a long tiring trip, but we were young and, apart from a few minor disagreements we enjoyed the journey.

We left Melbourne at night, on a crowded troop train, most of us sad to leave our friends and families. We arrived in Adelaide in the morning, and went on a local train to Port Pirie and somehow we transferred to the Ghan on our way to Alice Springs. This was a very different train from the tourist train now running on that line!

I was told later that the carriages converted from cattle trucks but were comfortable enough, better than that crowded troop train from Melbourne. We choose our bunks, stowed away our gear, and prepared for the journey ahead.

The first stop was up the line past Port Augusta; the CWA ladies served a morning tea for all troops going through on that train. Everyone gets a cuppa and a bite to eat their service was amazing as the stops were short. I often wonder, where it was and who were they?

The train was slow, we took photo's, eventually we arrived in Alice Springs, where we were transferred to trucks, and joined the convoy. We sat on boards with legs, our luggage was in one truck, and small kit bags were with us.

The roads were red dust and heavily corrugated, not very comfortable, but it was an adventure. The drivers were on orders not to drive more than 20 miles an hour and to stop for 5 minutes every hour to preserve the trucks. For some of these stops our 'luggage truck' would go ahead and 'boil the billy' so we had a break from those hard seats.

We lunched at Ti Tree Wells. I remember going down into a large underground cellar, very cool; then went on to Barrow Staging Camp the first overnight stop. I believe we were the first women to go overland, and each night there was a dinner dance arranged for us, no rest for us, but it was fun.

The journey to the second camp Banka Banka was 612m (985 kms) We were told to be ready for the road at 6am each day, we had to be well organised after our social evenings, making up our bunks and packing up by 6am! We continued on to Elliot, then to Larrimah. There we saw an outdoor show sitting on cans or on the ground, a change from the dinner dances!.

I remember stopping for lunch under canvas at Mataranka, which must have been working as a cattle station. Aboriginal stockmen were breaking in horses; I went down and sat on the fence watching them. Aboriginal girls worked in the kitchen and brought in the food, one girl was complaining because she was being sent to an out camp for a week for some demeanour! We continued on to Katherine in the trucks to connect with the Hospital Train to Adelaide River, the troops went on a different train to Darwin.

I worked in medical, surgical, dysentery wards on day and night duty. We worked long hours, only one day off each week

We enjoyed a good social life, we had dances in the recreation hut, went out, unofficially, with officers who could get a vehicle. My friends and I met officers of a commando unit who had vehicles and they would take us out on the Marrakai Plains for picnics. This unit arranged a day out for me with the Nacheroos, riding their small horses, day I will always remember.

The Japanese Airforce frequently raided the northern area of The Territory until November, 1944, I was lucky twice!, on June 20th of that year my friend Jean Hower invited me on a trip to Darwin with two American officers, it was fortunate that we were legal as we had applied for a permit to go!

We were travelling back just on dark and at Winnelli, we were stopped and told to get into the slit trench and keep your heads down, we heard them coming and didn't need to be told twice!. Our boys did not like the Americans, and specially when they were escorting their nurses around! Jean and I were concerned that we would be late home, we may be sent South for being AWL.

After some time we were told to go, drive with out lights and put the jeep under a bush, and scatter. We were half way home, when we heard the droning of the engines, and were sitting ducks on such a bright moonlight night, so we scattered! We eventually got back to base to we greeted by a very worried Matron. The troops had advised them that we were in the trenches and we would be on our way back as soon as possible. Just as well we had a legal pass We had a cup of coffee in Matrons tent, and off to bed as we were on duty early AM.

Another member of Esperance RSL was in the same raid not more than a few hundred yards away so we have discovered! He was member of the Nacheroos.

The last raid in November 12th included Adelaide River the target was our Hospital, as Tokio Rose had been threatening for some time. I came off evening duty about 9pm, and just walk in to relax before going to bed, when the sirens rang.

The wardens came around immediately, all lights were off and told us to get under our beds, don't smoke and stay there until the siren rings again. We heard the well known droning, up and down the road, and then the scream of their engines as they dropped their load in what seemed to be on the Hospital.

We stayed as we were, thinking the Hospital was gone, the wardens arrived calling to us, are we OK? They were certain we had collected the lot, but the bombs hah fallen on a rubbish dump, which had been a tennis court. We were all lucky, if they had turned in a half circle they would have got us and the wards as well.

We were sent home on leave June 1944, flying in a DC 3 to Adelaide then by train to Melbourne. After some leave, I was sent to Ballarat Convalescent Depot for six months We had a small hospital for any soldiers who happen to get a minor illness while recovering; this was the most boring time I had in the Army.

While working in Ballarat, my friends and I kept in contact and four of us requested a posting to north Queensland. Matron Sage was Chief of the RAANS and very approachable and granted our wishes, first time ever!

We were posted to the 2/2 AGH at Rocky Creek near Atherton Queensland. The 2/6 AGH was across the road from us they were packed ready to go off on the final push to Borneo. I was down at Cairns on a few days leave at the Trinity Beach holiday house and saw them sailing out. I did want to be on that ship with them, and had a few silent weeps.

That was a strange time for us because they were broadcasting the troop movements and we heard this over the radio as we sat on the beach. "Such and such division has landed on Borneo at such and such place". We were amazed as we had been constantly warned not to talk on what is happening any where.

The War Ends.

Some weeks later the bomb was dropped, the end was near. The wards were closed down and patients sent to Brisbane. We were told to evacuate and sent off in a train to Cairns and Brisbane, and the nurses were scattered all over Australia, I am always amazed how an army can move so quickly, to close a large hospital in such short time!

I was sent to Concord Military Hospital, most nurses went back to their own States, may be I was kept in Sydney because of my experience in infectious disease nursing ?. I didn't mind as I had never lived in Sydney.

I was told to set up a ward to take the first internees from Changi, and all had to have Xrays and blood tests before going on leave. You can imagine the complaints from men who had been POW's for three years! Many were not allowed to leave as they were diagnosed with tuberculosis.

We ended up with a full ward, officers and other ranks, I managed to have a special place for senior ranks, and kept the very sick up near the nurses station. They were wonderful men, I explained the need to rest and to accept the treatment or they would die.

One officer, Colonel Thia, a very important person I found out much later. He told me that he was to attend a Court of Inquiry, into the incident of General Gordon Bennett leaving Singapore before the Japanese had taken over. The inquiry was to be held after he had recovered from a very serious operation, and be held in the hospital. He asked me not to discuss this with anyone, and he was requesting that I be permitted to go down with him. This was granted but I must leave on request. I wheeled him down in his bed, but had to leave when the proceedings commenced.

The inquiry was for a few days only and many photos were taken, which I never saw, these must be in the archives somewhere.

He often spoke to me, he was a regular soldier and considered that General Bennett was wrong leaving as he considered a senior officer could have more influence to assist the POW's.

There many stories. I recall the night I went up to see a very sick patient after returning from a show in Sydney, and looked in on the others to see five empty beds!

The night nurse was mortified, and I got the story. These men had been going out at night for ages and had begged the nurses not to tell ! I said to her "Tell them I will see in the morning".

I came on at 9am as usual and did the rounds and told the culprits of the risk they were taking to themselves and to people they were seeing. Four said "OK Sis I will not go

again" the other said " I have no wish to live, my life is breaking in horses up in the hills behind Albury if I can't do that I have no life" It was his choice, he died a few months later. The others were still going well when I left Sydney, one actually came to Melbourne a year later and I had a cuppa with him, and that was another wonderful memory.

I have just heard on the ABC radio that "on the 16th September 1945 of a special flight bringing very sick men back" that must have been to my ward ?.

I have so many more stories, memories of a special time of my life that my family would not understand. After working in that ward for a year I asked for a transfer back to Melbourne to be discharged This took some months but eventually I was discharged and registered to train as a midwife and child health nurse.