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The Sister Evelyn Hutt World War I Collection: an Australian nurse at war

The Sister Evelyn Hutt World War I Collection, recently donated to State Library Victoria, encompasses over 330 photographs and postcards as well as important memorabilia documenting Evelyn's years as an Australian nurse in World War I. The items cover her service in Egypt, England and Italy, as well as her voyages to and from Australia. Most importantly, the collection includes a photographic album containing 75 photographs taken during her service on Lemnos in 1915.¹ The photographs, like the postcards, were collected by or given to Evelyn during her service.² It also includes notes on Evelyn's life prepared by her daughter, Judith Gunnarsson.

Lemnos, Gallipoli and the nurses

The Greek island of Lemnos played a critical role in the Gallipoli campaign, and was part of the Anzacs' experience of the Dardanelles disaster. The island's great protected bay at Mudros, with its surrounding shores and proximity to the Dardanelles, was the reason for its selection as the Allies' advanced supply and support base for the campaign.³

From the arrival of the first troops in February 1915 until the final departure of the Allied invasion force in January 1916, Lemnos was home to tens of thousands Allied troops, medical and other support personnel. On its shores the Anzacs practiced their landing routines and, more importantly,

Soldiers outside the tents of the 3rd Australian General Hospital, Turks Head Peninsula, Lemnos, 1915. Note the Arnott's biscuit tin. Sister Evelyn Hutt Collection, MS 15166



the island was home to major medical facilities including Australian and other field hospitals, with the town of Sarpi being the location of the great Anzac rest camp, to which the battle-weary Anzacs returned in September and October. It was to Lemnos that many of the Anzacs were evacuated after the end of the Gallipoli campaign in December.

Born in Bagdad, Tasmania, Evelyn received her nursing training at Hobart General Hospital and was 27 years old when she enlisted in the Australian Army Nursing Service in May 1915.⁴ The matron of the Hobart General Hospital commended Evelyn's work as 'excellent' and wrote that 'she [could] be entirely depended upon in an emergency',⁵ an assessment reflected in the confident image captured in the photograph opposite.

Evelyn joined Matron Grace Wilson and the other nurses of the 3rd Australian General Hospital, who departed Australia in May 1915 on the RMS *Mooltan*. This first complement totalled 80 nurses who progressively joined the ship at Sydney, Melbourne, Adelaide and Fremantle.⁶ Evelyn and the Australian nurses would eventually total an estimated 136 nurses across the two Australian field hospitals on Lemnos in 1915.⁷

Evelyn and the other nurses were thrown into an emergency from the day of their arrival on Lemnos on 8 August 1915. Two hundred patients arrived at the hospital before breakfast on 9 August. These were the first of hundreds of casualties flowing from the bitter fighting of the new offensives at Gallipoli that began on 6 August. By 13 August, Evelyn and her fellow nurses were treating 900 wounded or ill soldiers.⁸

In the two months to October 1915, 57,000 sick and 37,000 wounded were evacuated from the beaches of Gallipoli to the allied hospitals on Lemnos and, from August, more than 100,000 casualties were shipped from Mudros to other facilities in Egypt, Malta, Gibraltar and England.⁹ In one week alone – that ending 22 August – 10,191 sick and wounded passed through Mudros harbour.¹⁰

Grace Wilson wrote in her diary of the conditions on Lemnos being 'too awful' to describe.¹¹ Initially the hospitals operated with little or no equipment¹² and in rudimentary structures constructed on the weather-exposed peninsula – Evelyn describing it as 'a field of stones and thistles'.¹³ She recounted the nurses 'tearing up their petticoats for bandages, of the absence of needed medicines, the poor food and lack of water'.¹⁴ Another nurse described it as 'a state of chaos'.¹⁵

By September, the wounds of war had been replaced by the ravages of disease, as the soldiers succumbed to sickness resulting from the lack of sanitation at Gallipoli. Illness accounted for 44,000 evacuations from Gallipoli



Left: Sister Evelyn Hutt, c. 1916. Sister Evelyn Hutt Collection, Australian Manuscripts Collection MS 15166

Right: Nurses relaxing, Egypt, 1916. Sister Evelyn Hutt Collection, Australian Manuscripts Collection MS 15166

compared to just over 6300 for wounds in September and October.¹⁶ And these diseases affected the medical staff – though fortunately not Evelyn¹⁷ – such that Matron Wilson referred to the sick as having contracted ‘*Lemnositis*’.¹⁸

While on Lemnos, Evelyn was given two gifts by diggers. One was an Ottoman soldier’s Koran and the other a hand-stitched Ottoman flag. The Koran records that it was taken from a Turkish soldier on 7 August 1915 – presumed killed at Lone Pine on the peninsula – by Kyneton-born Victorian Sergeant Robert Alexander Murdoch of the 4th Battalion. Evelyn would most likely have met Murdoch when he was admitted to her hospital in October suffering from dysentery.¹⁹

Medical and living conditions on Lemnos gradually improved and, despite all they had to contend with, the operation of these Australian field hospitals was a remarkable success. The assessment of the 3rd Australian General Hospital and its nurses revealed a survival rate of 98.03 per cent.²⁰ The Australian director-general of medical services, Lieutenant General Featherstone, shared this view, concluding in his report on the nurses on Lemnos:

I believe that the Hospital would have collapsed without the nurses.
They all worked like demons and were led and guided by Miss Wilson.²¹

Evelyn’s photographs

Despite the conditions on Lemnos, Evelyn, along with the other Australian nurses and soldiers, wandered the island during periods of leave, visiting its towns, villages, churches and thermal springs, experiencing Greek food and culture for the first time and enjoying a freedom that they had not experienced in Australia.



The tents of Evelyn's 3rd Australian General Hospital, Turks Head Peninsula, Lemnos, 1915. Greek villagers visit the hospital in the foreground while, across the bay, the neat rows of the Anzac rest camp at Sarpi are visible. Sister Evelyn Hutt Collection, MS 15166

These experiences were recorded in their diaries, letters and photographs, which referred not only to the horrors of war but which are also a unique record of the life and beauty of this northern Aegean island. Evelyn's collection of 75 photographs captures the life of the Anzacs on Lemnos; for example, one depicts the initial rudimentary accommodation on the slopes of the peninsula and, another, the smart rows of tents that signalled the improved conditions at the hospitals on Lemnos, with the Anzac rest camp visible across the bay.

One photograph shows two, presumably Australian, soldiers outside their tents, with a box of Arnotts biscuits at their feet – a poignant reminder of home. Another is of a group of young Australian soldiers, now patients on Lemnos. They stare into the camera, a few smiling and others with expressions that are more difficult to read.

The collection also includes photographs of moments of relaxation. There is one of an army band marching through the hospital, entertaining the nurses and soldiers. Another shows diggers acting up at the Anzac rest camp at Sarpi, which was often visited by the Australian nurses.

Some of the most important images are those featuring the interaction between the Anzacs and the local community. During the months that the Anzacs stayed on Lemnos, they spread out across the island, visiting its villages, cafes and natural springs. Evelyn's collection adds to the evidence of this experience.

We see a photograph of the 4th Battalion's Private Oscar Keyte, a dentist from New South Wales, and another soldier standing with their hired donkeys,



Australian patients of A1 Ward, 3rd Australian General Hospital, Turks Head Peninsula, Lemnos, 1915. Sister Evelyn Hutt Collection, Australian Manuscripts Collection MS 15166

a village and the distinctive windmills of Lemnos behind them. Another captures a group of Anzacs with their donkeys and local guides, most likely on their way to the hot springs of Therma.

Evelyn and many other Anzacs visited Portianou, one of the main villages on Lemnos and the location of one of its war cemeteries. Her photographs show the village and the villagers. One, entitled 'Sisters – A Day Out', shows Australian nurses and soldiers with local women and children.

There is a touching image of a local woman with her child talking to an Australia nurse and a soldier beside a windmill above Mudros town. Despite the language barriers, the locals and their visitors obviously found ways to communicate.

After the evacuation of the peninsula, Evelyn and the other Australian nurses departed Lemnos in January 1916 on their way to Egypt and beyond.²² She wrote 'Good-bye LEMNOS Island' underneath the last photographs of Lemnos that she pasted in her album.

Evelyn's service beyond Lemnos

The 3rd Australian General Hospital was located in Egypt at a former barracks at Abbassia.²³ Evelyn's photographs record both life at the hospital and some aspects of Egypt itself that she enjoyed during periods of leave. One photograph shows nurses relaxing in what may be an Egyptian hotel and her collection includes a memento from Cairo's Semiramis Hotel.²⁴



Two Anzac soldiers – Private Oscar Keyte and Private Campbell (forename indecipherable) – with hired donkeys, Lemnos, 1915. Sister Evelyn Hutt Collection, MS 15166

Evelyn was touched by one patient in particular during her time nursing in Egypt. A young, dying digger gave her a token, a Peruvian coin, by which to remember him. She treasured this heartfelt gift and wore it proudly as a brooch after the war.²⁵

On 18 September 1916, Evelyn sailed for England via Malta and Gibraltar, both of which locations are recorded in the photographic collection. In England, she was attached to Bagthorpe Military Hospital, before being posted to France in August 1917 where she served with the 8th General Hospital and the British 38th Stationary Hospital in France.²⁶

The latter hospital was posted to northern Italy in November 1917. At the request of the British army nursing authorities, this hospital would be led by an Australian matron, Miss Davidson, and staffed by 35 Australian nurses, including Evelyn.²⁷ The Australian role on the Italian front is one of the less well-known aspects of Australia's involvement in World War I.²⁸ Her service at Genoa earned Evelyn the Royal Red Cross, 2nd Class, on 3 June 1919, 'in recognition of her valuable services with British Forces in Italy'.²⁹

Evelyn witnessed the Armistice while serving in Italy and, during the celebrations, was given a US naval vessel's flag as a memento by its sailors.³⁰ This unique piece of memorabilia of the Australian presence in Italy in World War I is now preserved in State Library Victoria.

Returning to Australia in 1919,³¹ Evelyn's experience on Lemnos haunted her throughout her life. She often referred to the incompetent organisation, poor food, lack of supplies and water, which all added to the misery of life



Two villagers and an Australian nurse and soldier near a windmill at Mudros, Lemnos, 1915.
Sister Evelyn Hutt Collection, Australian Manuscripts Collection MS 15166

for both patients and medical staff in their tents on the cold and windswept peninsula. Sadly, working in poor lighting in the operating theatres permanently damaged Evelyn's eyesight. She never forgot the diggers that she cared for, and she often wore the brooch given to her by the dying digger in Egypt. Evelyn always expressed 'the greatest admiration' for Matron Wilson, with whom she served on Lemnos. Evelyn died on Anzac Day in 1980, aged 93.³²

An assessment

Evelyn's memorabilia, photographs and postcards are an important addition to the State Library's holdings of World War I-related material. Recording the experiences of a young Australian nurse at war, they reveal her service across many fronts and document the medical aspect of the war and the interaction of these young Australians with cultures and environments that were new to them – from Colombo in Sri Lanka, to India, Egypt and beyond. The collection is most meaningful because of its record of Evelyn's experiences on Lemnos and the island's impact on the thousands of Anzac soldiers and nurses who went there over 100 years ago. In this regard, her collection complements other material held in other Australian collecting institutions and which documents the role played by Lemnos in the Gallipoli campaign. This includes the photographs of AW Savage at the State Library of New South Wales and University of Queensland, and extensive photograph collections in the Australian War Memorial. The Evelyn Hutt Collection is a lasting and important legacy of the centenary of Anzac and of the Great War.