NURSES OF WORLD WAR I – THE GREAT WAR
FROM THE SHIRE OF LIVINGSTONE

Sister Catherine Reid Black of the 14th Australian General Hospital and the 27th General Hospital.

Catherine was born on the 18th June 1881 at Rockhampton Queensland, one of four children to William and Annie Maud (née Cox) Black. Catherine was raised in rural regions of Rockhampton and at the time she joined the Australian Army Nurses Service (AANS), her parents were living at Burnside, Yaamba St Rockhampton. Catherine trained as a nurse at the Diamantina Hospital in South Brisbane for three years and was employed as a qualified nurse at the same hospital when war was declared in 1914.

Catherine officially joined the Australian Infantry Force (AIF) on the 2 June 1917 aged 35 years although she was nursing at the 13th Australian General Hospital (AGH) in the AIF Enoggera camp from 30 May 1917. The nurses in World War One, who were to staff medical units that formed an integral part of the AIF, were recruited from the AANS Reserve and from the civil nursing profession. Orders from the AIF laid down the conditions of service as follows: Members of the Australian Army Nursing Service and nurses appointed to the AIF will receive all courtesies extended to the officers and will have the following rank and precedence – Principle Matron, Matron, Sister and Staff Nurse. Staff Nurse was known by the title “Sister” irrespective of rank. The AANS personnel did not hold military rank; hence there are no military rank equivalents.

She embarked on 9th June 1917 onboard R.M.S. “Mooltan”, disembarking in Egypt to join the 14th AGH in Abrassia on 23rd July 1917. The base hospitals (General and Stationary hospitals) were part of the casualty evacuation chain, located further back from the frontline. They were large facilities, often centred on some pre-war buildings such as seaside hotels. The hospitals grew hugely in number and scale throughout the war. Normally the nursing staff consisted of 1 Matron, 15 Sisters and 30 Staff Nurses with male medical orderlies. In 1917, some base hospitals had to be extended to 2,000 beds during a ‘heavy push’ (Allied offensives). Compare this to the Royal Melbourne Hospital in 1990: 700 beds and a staff of 670 nurses, excluding administration and education. Base hospitals were generally located near the coast and close to a railway line, in order for casualties to arrive and depart. They also needed to be near a port where the casualties could be evacuated for longer-term treatment in England. Most hospitals were assisted by voluntary organisations, most notably the Red Cross.

The casualties of the Australian Light Horse were treated almost exclusively by the 14th AGH. Following heavy fighting at Magdhaba and Rafa, the number of causalities rose to over 900 and by May 1917, after the battle of Gaza, to 1140. These increased numbers placed great strains on the nursing staff and in her report for September 1917, the matron of the 14th AGH, Matron Creal paid tribute to their 'unselfish devotion to duty' after the first battle of Gaza when some nurses were on duty for eighteen hours at a time.
Diagram of the system of evacuation illustrating the theoretical location of medical facilities for the Allies during WW1. While the evacuation system followed this general plan, in practice medical facilities were placed where they could best carry out their tasks under the exigencies of the operational situation. RAP = Regimental Aid Post (the unit-level medical support facility).

Three AANS nurses in ward 1, No. 14 AGH, Abbassia in Cairo – Jessie Tomlinson, Ursula Ashworth and Olive Jeffrey, courtesy of Judith Doig.

Conditions at Abbassia were primitive, for instance the primus stoves were the only means of obtaining boiling water for sterilization. In February 1918 the hospital moved to Port Said; in both locations the staff did their best to provide first-rate nursing care in an atmosphere as relaxed as military discipline would permit. Mr Henry Gullett (official historian selected by Charles Bean to cover the Middle East region), praised ‘the service of the splendid band of Australian nursing sisters who, under the inspiration of Matron Creal, greeted the battered men from the front as they reached hospital and nursed them back to strength, or softened the close of their soldier-life’.
Life as the hospital staff in Egypt is described by two extracts from a book titled ‘With the RAMC in Egypt’ by Sergeant Major RAMC:

"There were a couple of hundred in the convoy, perhaps; and each man had to be got to bed his clothes gently drawn or cut from him; his body washed; splints and bandages readjusted, perhaps; food given; his small personal belongings, if he had any, neatly arranged in the locker by his bedside; his hospital-kit drawn for him; his military equipment taken to the pack-store, and there left until he was well enough to reclaim it, or until it was certain he would need it no more."

“And all of them meant increasing care and hard work for the orderlies, sisters, and nurses of the ward dressing and bandaging, blanket-bathing, the preparation and administration of food and medicine, constant sanitary service, the preservation of cleanliness everywhere, the hundred-and-one nameless little offices due to the helpless sick. And then there were the special things dictated by the sub-tropical climate in which we were working. It was bad enough to have to endure bodily pain; it was too much to have to put up with the added torment of heat and dust, flies and mosquitoes. Little could be done to mitigate the heat, that is when it was really hot in Cairo 120 degrees Fahrenheit (48.8 degrees in Celsius) or so in the shade. But the dust-storms could be somewhat mitigated by wire-meshed screens over windows and doors; and mosquito-nets over the beds would do the rest. In special cases also the fan was a potent vehicle of mercy, in our hospital at least.”

Catherine then transferred to the 27th General Hospital in Cairo on 30th July 1917 and returned to 14th AGH on 2nd November 1917. Catherine was taken ill with malaria in May 1918 (note; this is not recorded in her service record but in her repatriation commission file, hence no further information on Catherine contracting malaria). Catherine was in the 14th AGH when the Armistice was declared. She was promoted to Temporary Sister on 12th June 1919 and a month later to Sister. Catherine was granted paid leave to attend non military employment; hence she boarded the HT Nile at Port Said on 26th June 1919, bound for England. She arrived in London on 17th July where she attended a course on face/scalp massage and manicure chiropody by Gerard De Boer at 102 Victoria St, Westminster. Catherine completed the course on 17th October 1919 and was granted leave prior to boarding the HMAT (A9) Shropshire on 2nd December 1919, bound for Australia. She set foot back in Australia on 30th January 1920.

After the war, Catherine married Robert Nicol Just (Service No. 3561 of the AIF 2nd Pioneer Battalion) in 1921 and raised three children (Yvonne, Roma and Dawn) at Rockhampton where Robert was working his farm until the early 1930s when he became a truck driver. At a later stage, the family moved to Yeronga Brisbane where Catherine died on 23 July 1936 at the aged of 52 years and is buried in the Toowong Cemetery Brisbane.
Catherine Reid Black’s medal entitlement - British War Medal and Victory Medal.

Unit Colour Patch of the 14th Aust. General Hospital 1918 – 1919 and Australian Army Nurses Service 1918-1919

AANS Pledge of Service

I pledge myself loyally
to serve my King and Country
and to maintain the honour and efficiency
of the Australian Army Nursing Service.
    I will do all in my power
to alleviate the suffering of
the sick and wounded, sparing no
effort to bring them comfort of body
and peace of mind.
    I will work in unity and
comradeship with my fellow nurses.
    I will be ready to give assistance
to those in need of my help,
and will abstain from any action
which may bring sorrow
and suffering to others.
    At all times I will endeavour
to uphold the highest traditions of
Womanhood and of the Profession
of which I am Part.

Sources of the information on the Catherine Reid Black WWI story are:
1. Catherine Reid Black’s WWI service record, National Australian Achieves website
2. General information from the Australian War Memorial website,
3. Harris, K., New horizons: Australian nurses at work in World War I, Endeavour (2014), http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.endeavour.2014.05.004 New horizons: , and
4. Australian Country Hospital Heritage Association, and
5. Book titled ‘With the RAMC in Egypt’ by Sergeant Major RAMC