Sister Edith Mary Toft of the 10th and 25th General Hospitals and 1st Australian Auxiliary Hospital

Edith was born on 2nd May 1886 at Rockhampton, eldest of five children to William, an engineer and Prudence (née Griffiths) Toft who lived at Oakwood, Koongal in North Rockhampton. Edith was raised in Koongal and received training in general nursing at the Rockhampton Hospital from April 1907 to April 1910. This training consisted of lectures by both medical staff and the matron on a wide range of medical and surgical nursing practices as well as invalid cooking and ward management. The nurses experienced practical work in general wards, working in isolation wards for contagious cases and children’s wards. Some also gained experience in theatre nursing and even received psychiatric patients. Even in her time off, there were at least three lectures a week and two examinations each year with three in the last year. Most of these skills would be of value during the war.

At some stage after qualifying as a nurse, she moved to Sydney where she was employed at a private hospital. Edith moved back to the family home in Rockhampton before enlisting in the Australian Imperial Forces (AIF) on 18th November 1915 at the age of 30. Edith’s rank was Staff Nurse. 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.

Photo of Staff Nurse Edith Toft taken at the 13th General Hospital in Enoggera, Brisbane

Edith’s first posting was at the 13th General Hospital in the AIF Enoggera camp at Brisbane from 18th November 1915 to 29th December 1916 when she sailed for England on HMAT (A32) Themistocles. The ship arrived at Plymouth on 3rd March 1917. Time was not wasted
when it came to moving the medical staff to France. Edith spent seven days in England before she was transported to France on 14th March where she was posted to the 10th General Hospital in Rouen, France. Rouen was a major logistics centre with numerous base hospitals. The Commonwealth camps and hospitals were stationed on the southern outskirts of Rouen. A base supply depot and the 3rd Echelon of General Headquarters were also established in the city.

![Group portrait of nursing staff of the 13th Australian General Hospital at Enoggera in Queensland. From left to right, back row: Staff Nurses Sarah Cairns, Phillips, Catherine Reid Black, Cave, Caroline Rose Griffith, Annie Isabel Warner, Janet Barron, Burt, Gertrude May Skyring, Martha May Homewood. Front row: Staff Nurses Rowe, Bryden, Sister Florence Lynch, Matron Emily Anne Ralston, Sister Goodman, Staff Nurses Lawson and Edith Mary Toft (in red circle).](image)

The base hospitals were part of the casualty evacuation chain, located further back from the front line. 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’ (major battles). Compare this to the Royal Melbourne Hospital in 1990: 700 beds and a staff of 670 nurses, excluding administration and education. Most of the hospitals moved very rarely until the larger movements of the armies in 1918. They 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.

Edith, like all the other Australian nurses faced many environmental challenges in France. There were the freezing winters which were a major change for those used to working in more temperate climates. It was very difficult nursing patients in tents covered with snow and with all liquids, including medicine and hot water bottles, liable to freeze. With such temperatures, the nurses struggled to keep their patients warm and dry, and there was a high incidence of frostbite. For example, during the harsh winter of 1916–1917 in France, the AIF evacuated more than twenty thousand Australians with exhaustion, frostbite, or trench foot. Towards the frontline, there were no clean white hospital wards such as at home; usually it was just huts and mattresses with brown army blankets, often with sandbagging at the entrance to the ward offering some protection from bombs.
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).

In Boulogne, France, the sterilizer was used for dressings, gowns, etc., was quite a good size, under which was placed a six burner primus, which had its good & bad days with the inferior kerosene that was available. For the instruments and gloves, there was an ordinary one burner primus. When there was only one nurse sterilizing the instruments, they had to take the patients in/out of the operating theatre, change the tables between the patients, change the instruments as well as keep the primus burner alight which was often extinguished by the movements within theatre.

Edith was suffering with Debility and was hospitalised on 31st May 1917 at the convalescent hospital at Etretat (approximately 20 km north east of Le Havre) but was back at work ten days later. She was posted to the No. 25 British General Hospital (25 BGH) at Hardelot (10 km north of Etaple) in France on 16th July 1917 (note; this was two days before fellow Rockhampton nurse Martha Homewood was posted to the same hospital). The matron and nursing staff were Australian while the medical officers were English. The 25 BGH was a large hospital with 2,400 beds which were mainly covered by tents. It specialised in treating skin diseases such as scabies, psoriasis and eczema, though there were also medical and surgical cases. During an Allied offensive in 1918, the hospital functioned as a casualty clearing station, its operating theatres in constant use day and night.

Soldiers suffered all manner of diseases, including dysentery. Many of the sick soldiers had their wounds or illnesses compounded by general debility, and nurses spent significant amounts of time using primus stoves to cook invalid food for their patients to build up their strength and weight. As matrons did not permit nurses to visit the stores or kitchens, military nurses sought to provide the ‘boys’ with additional foodstuffs from outside the official system. Like Australian soldiers, clever at what they termed ‘legitimate scavenging’, the
nurses’ resourcefulness in adding vegetables and fruit to the basic diet of their patients was outstanding.

Edith contracted bronchitis and was hospitalised from 2nd to 20th January 1918 at the 1st General Hospital. She became sick again on 6th February with gastro enteritis and was moved to the No.12 Southwell Gardens Hospital in London. Edith was back at the 25 BGH by 27th February where she was treating the soldiers’ wounds that were caused mostly by bullets, shrapnel, high explosive shells, trench mortars and hand grenades. With the many wounds came a constant round of dressing and redressing, many men having multiple serious injuries. Unlike the casualty departments at home where doctors did every procedure, now nurses helped remove smaller pieces from wounds frequently without anaesthesia at dressing stations. Often two nurses had to dress the wounds of one patient such was the extent of the damage. Edith was faced many new illnesses in her patients such as trench foot, trench fever, and shell shock. For men standing in cold and waterlogged trenches, the inability to get the blood circulating by moving around caused trench foot.

A new psychiatric condition often called ‘shellshock’ which was caused by the strain, exhaustion, horrifying unnatural conditions and the general turmoil of war. The noise of the frontline often shattered men’s nerves with the continuous rumble and roar, but mixed with the vibrations from the exploding artillery shelling, resulted in awful effects to the soldier’s bodies. Stammering, loss of memory, headaches, insomnia, nightmares, hallucinations, deafness and temporary blindness afflicted those with shell-shock. Some jerked, twitched or trembled uncontrollably for several days and nurses fed those unable to hold a cup of fluid or feed themselves. Doctors generally ordered the nurses to administer bromide and other sedatives, the regular treatment being complete mental and physical rest in bed. Nurses offered kindness, held hands with these patients, massaged them, and managed them through their screaming nightmares. In the convalescence hospitals, very careful handling was applied, imagine a man was just finding his voice, to be spoken to in any way that was not gentle and quiet, would break the man, and he would have to start all over again to be taught how to speak. The same thing applied to walking.

On 13th April 1918, Edith was posted to the 1st Australian Auxiliary Hospital (AAH) in Harefield London, which was one of the many Australian convalescence hospitals. Edith was with the 1st AAH for the remainder of the war and soon after the Armistice, was promoted to Sister on 29th Dec 1918. She was detached to the Queens Hospital Sidcup in Kent from 13th January to 1st May 1919. Queen’s Hospital was developed as the First World War's major centre for maxillo-facial and plastic surgery. This hospital and its associated convalescent hospitals provided over 1000 beds and between 1917 and 1921 admitted in excess of 5000 servicemen. The Hospital's medical staff were organised on national lines, with contingents from Great Britain, Canada, Australia and New Zealand

Edith was detached from the Queens Hospital to the 3rd AAH on 2nd May 1919. A few months later, she boarded the HMAT (A60) Aeneas and returned to Australia on 14th July 1919. Edith married Albert Hearne Howard (Service No. 30196 of the 6th Field Artillery Brigade) in 1924 and raised one child. Edith died on 28th November 1979 and is buried in the Parkes Cemetery, New South Wales
Group portrait of nursing sisters at No. 1 Australian Auxiliary Hospital.
Reading from left to right, front row; Sisters Kelly, Eleanor Mary Judd, King, Head Sister Carpenter, Matron Clara Louisa Ross RRC, Janet Sorley, Benson, Walker (behind masseuse), Masseuse Josephine Jennings, Mason, E M Wilson, Stafford, McNicol, R Wilson, Toft, Pearl Elizabeth Corkhill MM RRC, Alma Dowe, Shute, Canny, Jackson, Jeffreys, Wood, and Taylor.
Note: Names doubtful as key description identifies Sister Taylor in back row, after Wood while photograph shows twenty two in group only

Edith’s sister, Catherine Toft also joined the AIF in WWI. Catherine joined the AANS on 27th December 1916 and enlisted on 1st May 1917 as a Staff Nurse. She returned to Australia on 15th October 1919. More information on Catherine will be inserted at a later date.

*Edith Mary Toft’s medal entitlement* - British War Medal and Victory Medal.
Unit Colour Patch of Australian Army Nurses Service 1918-1919 and 1st Australian Auxiliary Hospital 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 Edith Mary Toft WWI story are:

1. Edith Mary Toft’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,