

NURSES OF WORLD WAR I – THE GREAT WAR

FROM THE SHIRE OF LIVINGSTONE

Sister Martha May Homewood of the 12th Stationary Hospital, 25th General Hospital and 3rd Australian General Hospital

Martha (Called Jane Martha known as Mattie/Mat by her family) was born on 27th December 1888 at Rockhampton, one of thirteen children to Alfred William, a stockman then grazier/dairyman and Margaret McLean (née Burns) Homewood. Martha was raised in the rural regions of Rockhampton and at the time she joined the Australian Army Nurses Service (AANS), her parents were living at the Kunwarara Station via Yaamba. Sometime after finishing her secondary education, Martha trained at the Mt Morgan Hospital and become a qualified nurse.



Photo of Martha May Homewood in her staff nurses uniform

Martha joined the Australian Imperial Forces (AIF) on 10th April 1916 at the age of 27 and according to her Attestation Papers, started work the next day at the 13th Australian General Hospital in the AIF Enoggera camp, Brisbane. Martha 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 their conditions of service with AIF as follows: Members of the AANS and nurses appointed to the AIF will receive all courtesies extended to officers and will have the following rank and precedence - Principal Matron, Matron, Sister and Staff Nurse - Staff Nurses will be known by the title 'Sister' irrespective of rank. The AANS personnel did not hold military rank; hence there are no military rank equivalents.

Martha sailed for England on HMAT (A32) Themistocles on 29th December 1916 and arrived at Plymouth on 3rd March 1917. Time was not wasted when it came to moving the medical staff to France as Martha spent nine days in England before she was transported to France on 12th March where she was posted to the British No. 12 Stationary Hospital in St. Pol-sur-Ternoise. No.12 Stationary Hospital was situated on the racecourse near the town from 1st June 1916 to 1st June 1919. St. Pol-sur-Ternoise located approximately 50 km north

of Amiens, was a military administrative centre during the whole of the First World War and was taken over by Commonwealth troops from the French in March 1916.



A section of a ward in the 13th Australian General Hospital at Enoggera in 1916. From left to right are: Private W Temple, Staff Nurse R A Skyring (left rear) and Staff Nurse Homewood.



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.

Martha was transferred to the 25th British General Hospital near Hardelot on 18th July 1917. Martha wrote a number of letters to her family, of which were published in the Morning Bulletin and the Capricornian newspapers. Below are several extracts from these letters which were dated mid July 1917.

“Here I am, like the poor boys, somewhere in France. I have been here a week and have tried several times to write home, but have failed each time. All our happy little band has been separated and distributed to all parts. Sister Barrow and I are still together and roughing it. Roughing it is not in it, as this place is one mass of mud (knee deep), and it has never done raining and snowing. It is such funny snow. When it hits your face and dress it freezes into ice, and one collects quite an amount while going around. All the sides and the tops of the tents are frozen, this condition lasting all day. For a change it starts blowing very

hard, and the tents come down with no respect for anyone that is under them. Our first experience was when Sister Barrow and I were in a dispensing tent for talk. The whole lot came down, and we were buried under the debris. We scrambled out. We are not in Australian quarters, therefore I never see any Australians.”

“It seems a year since I left Australia instead of a few months. I feel very well and fit to do the work. We have been very busy day and night working. It is just wonderful to think how long one can keep up. There is nothing else for it. Three days ago we got the first batch of wounded from the big push, concerning which you will see in the papers the good work that the Canadians and British Tommies have done. The lads are brave all the while. You would wonder how, dripping with mud from the trenches, and not having changed their clothes for days, and doing without a wash, they are still cheery. All that they seem to want is to be temporarily relieved from their sufferings. We render what aid we can in dressings and send them to the bases, which are situated further back. I am unattached to an Australian unit at present and am in the Imperial, as they are short of nurses and want reinforcements. Of course it would have been nice to be nursing Australian boys. We must not complain as we are in clover in comparison with the boys in the trenches.”

“It is still cold and snowing nearly every day. We have been very busy ever since the heavy fighting began. The wounded are constantly coming in. They are so good considering. The poison gas cases are shocking.”

Martha was taken ill (bronchitis) on 10th April 1918 and was admitted to the 14th General Hospital. She re-joined her unit on 23rd May but was transferred to the 3rd Australian General hospital (AGH) the next day. The 3rd AGH was located in Abbeville (45 km northwest of Amiens) France and operated from tents and huts. For most of its existence (May 1917 to May 1918) it admitted gassed patients and treated them briefly before sending them to other hospitals or units.

Patients enjoying the sunshine in the lines at No 3 Australian General Hospital at Abbeville. October 1917.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

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Martha wrote another letter on 2nd September 1918 when she was in the 3rd AGH and an extract from this letter is below:

"We are kept moving to such an extent that one is never settled for long in the same place. We are back on our old land again. Jerry must feel disappointed with himself at losing it again. The villages and towns are smashed to pieces. Not a standing roof remains. The cathedrals are in a deplorable state, and their beautiful statues are in ruins. I am sure the French folk must be heartbroken about it all. It is getting cold again here. It seems to be no time since we had snow. I can see another winter staring us in the face, but I think that it will be the last. I had my first experience a few days ago in an Australian hospital since being on active service. I like the methods on which they are run, and the boys have every comfort that it is possible to give them. It is quite different being in a colonial hospital. The discipline in the British Expeditionary Force is very strict indeed. The orderlies in our hospital are the dearest of boys. They make you a cup of tea and bring it along at night and all sorts of things. They are so different to the orderlies that I have been used to for the past two years. The Australians come along, and the first thing they say is 'Sister, what state are you from?' and they like a few words of conversation. I am on night duty. The nights are very short."

In France, the General and Stationary Hospitals are Base Hospitals and were part of the casualty evacuation chain, further back from the front line than the Casualty Clearing Stations. 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. 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 Britain. Most hospitals were assisted by voluntary organisations, most notably the Red Cross.

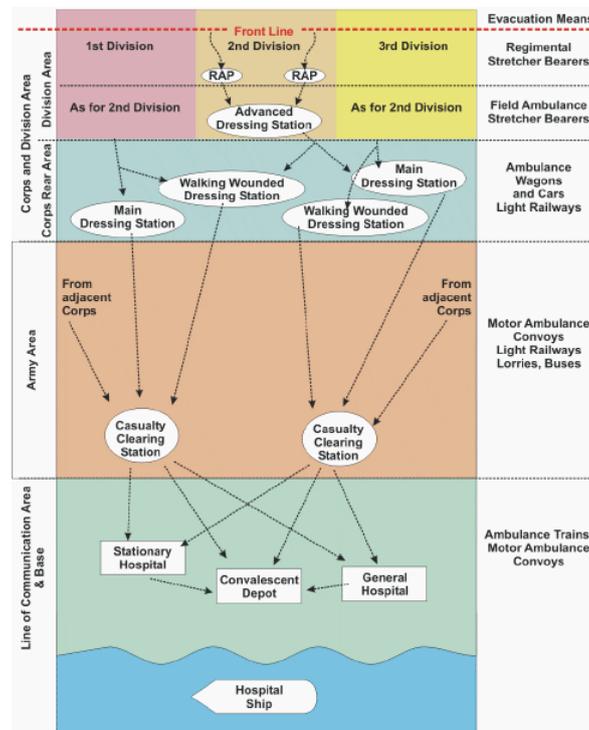


Diagram of the system of evacuation illustrating the theoretical location of medical facilities for the Allies during WWI. While the evacuation system followed this general plan, in practice medical facilities were placed where they could best carry out their tasks under the exigencies of the operational situation. RAP = Regimental Aid Post (the unit-level medical support facility).

Martha was hospitalised again on 30th September 1918 at the 2nd Stationary hospital and later moved to the 14th General Hospital where she was treated for diphtheria (a serious infectious disease that causes fever and difficulty in breathing and swallowing). She re-joined the 3rd AGH on 26th November 1918 and was promoted to Sister on 29th December 1918. Martha left France on 4th March 1919 bound for England onboard HMT Shropshire. Prior to leaving for England, Martha was granted leave to attend motor driving training from 24th March to 5th June 1919. She attended this training at Mansions Motors, 78 York St, Westminster in London. She was then attended the 3rd Australian Auxiliary Hospital at Dartford until 4th July when she boarded HMT Norman and returned to Australia on 20th August 1919.



An informal portrait of Australian nurses homeward bound on HMT (A9) Shropshire. From left to right are Nurses Quinn, Warner, Homewood, Baron and R A Skyring

Martha married William Mylrea (AIF Service No. 650 of the 4th Machine Gun Battalion) on 6th July 1920 at St Andrews in Rockhampton. They raised five children. Martha died on 3rd July 1989 in Rockhampton Qld at the age of 100 years.

Martha's sister, Grace Ethel Homewood also joined the AIF in WWI. Grace joined the AIF on 1st September 1917 as a Staff Nurse and returned to Australia on 17th July 1919. More information on Grace will be inserted at a later date.



Martha May Homewood's medals - British War Medal and Victory Medal.



Unit Colour Patch of Australian Army Nurses Service 1918-1919 and 3rd Australian General 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 Martha Homewood WWI story are:

1. Martha Homewood's WWI service record, National Australian Achieves website
2. Martha Homewood's letters from the Australian Country Hospital Heritage Association,
3. General information from the Australian War Memorial website,