

Premier's ANZAC Spirit Prize

Hannah Brown
St Peter's Girls' School



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

P08673.003

Sister Evelyn Claire Trestrail
1887- 1960

“Using a range of sources research the experience of a South Australian service man or woman on the Western Front and/or in the Middle East during World War 1.”

Her back was aching, and sweat dripped down her forehead. Her hands were shaking, but her mind was steady. She had to remain focused; there wasn't much time left. Ignoring the shells exploding above the roof of the hospital, Sister Claire Trestrail struggled step after step down the steep flight of stairs to the cellar below, trying desperately to keep the wounded soldier on her shoulders. It was October 8th 1914, and the siege of Antwerp was almost at an end.

Sister Evelyn Claire Trestrail was born in the town of Clare in South Australia, on December 10, 1887, and was the eldest of five siblings. Claire's mother, Constancy, was a trained nurse, involved not only with the St John's ambulance services, but with the King Edward Hospital in Perth. Perhaps inspired by her mother's work, Claire decided she too would venture down the path of nursing, and at the age of 18 began training at the Wakefield St hospital in Adelaide as a nursing sister, before passing her final exams for the Australasian Trained Nurses Association in 1911.¹

Looking to further improve her qualifications, Claire and two of her nursing friends- Catherine Ella Wilson and Myrtle Wilson set sail aboard the Benella ship to England in late 1913. Upon arriving in England, they joined the Scottish women's hospital, however it wasn't long after this that war broke out. Nurses were needed immediately, and the three women joined the Women's imperial service league destined for Belgium, led by Mrs St Clair Stobart. The party left for Belgium in September to assemble a privately funded auxiliary hospital unit. Sister Claire recounted the events to the Adelaide Register a year later, describing the journey:

“We left London on Sunday (September 20), and arrived in Antwerp on Tuesday morning. The crossing was awful, and we were all sick.”²

It was during her time in Antwerp that Claire showed the ANZAC spirit most prominently in her lifetime. The ANZAC spirit is the name used to encapsulate the inspiring traits shown by Australian and New Zealand service men and women during times of war. It seemed that war, although atrocious in nature, brought out the best in these people. This spirit was first exhibited at the landing of Gallipoli, and developed throughout the rest of the first world war, remaining strong through times of conflict ever since. Even now, the ANZAC spirit resurfaces in times of hardship, when people put their differences aside, and work together towards the greater good. Traits of endurance, courage, sacrifice and acceptance are displayed, all the while keeping up a sense of humour and mateship. All of these traits were displayed by Sister Claire Trestrail during her months at Antwerp.

¹ "1914 Star With August To November 1914 Bar : Nurse C Trestrail, Auxiliary Hospital Unit, Antwerp". *Australian War Memorial*. N.p., 2017. Web. 26 Apr. 2017.

² 1915 'ADELAIDE NURSE IN ANTWERP.', *The Register (Adelaide, SA : 1901 - 1929)*, 9 January, p. 10. , viewed 26 Apr 2017, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article59119683>

Just months before her arrival in the city, 65,000 Belgian troops had been ordered to retreat to Antwerp, after the 'fall of the forts' in Liege, on the 16th of August 1914. The city was heavily fortified, acting as an important part of the 'National Redoubt' of Belgium. Surrounded by 48 outer and inner forts, the city was intended to be the country's strongest defence in case of invasion. However, the construction of the outer fortress ring, beginning in 1906, was far from complete and when the German troops began to advance from the north, the city was far from ready to match them. On the 9th of September 1914, German General von Boseler was given the task of capturing the city, and the siege began.³

Upon their arrival in Antwerp, the Women's Imperial Service League occupied a large concert hall. *"We had a great time getting all the beds ready, and things in order. On Thursday, we received our first patients."*⁴, Claire recounted. Claire went above and beyond to personally get to know her patients, *"Teaching each other [their] own languages"*⁴, and helping them to make the best of the difficult situation.

The hall provided space for 120 hospital beds, yet by September 28th more than 170 French and Belgian soldiers lay wounded, some on hospital beds, while other were put on camp beds or straw mattresses on the floor. This day signified the beginning of the Siege of Antwerp, as five German divisions reached the city, and began to fire at the outer south east forts. *"All day and all night for 10 days, the guns continued to roar."* Claire remembered. *"We would even joke about them, and listen for the Hun's growl, and then the Belgians' answer."*⁴ The attitude Claire showed during her time in the hospital was commendable, showing true mateship towards her patients, and filling the atmosphere with humour and positivity. Sister Claire continued to show these qualities of the ANZAC spirit despite the horrors she was experiencing daily.

*"The wounds were awful. Some of the men had been lying for hours in the dirt, and the blood was dry on them, and they were hungry and exhausted."*⁴

As the Germans advanced further south into the city, the sounds of guns grew louder, until the night of October the 7th when the hospital came under the direct line of German fire. It was on this night that Claire exhibited the epitome of the ANZAC spirit. Late that night, the women were roused from their sleep. *"One shot came into the house next to [them] and ripped- the roof clean off. Another shot made a hole 6ft deep near the main door of [their] hospital"*⁵, Claire later reported. The nurses rushed across the road to the hospital, and using all their strength, began to courageously carry all 170 patients, one at a time, down the steep, dark stairs to the cellars below, while war continued all around them. *"Slight, frail nurses carried heavy men on their shoulders- the men's arms around their necks. Shells were bursting all around, but never once did I see anyone taking the slightest notice of them. The nurse's coolness was marvelous"*⁵, Mrs Stobart recounted.

The next morning, the city lay smoldering in silence, and the nurses knew they had to transport their patients out of Antwerp as soon as possible. They sent some to the train

³ "The Defence Of Antwerp – The Long, Long Trail". *Longlongtrail.co.uk*. N.p., 2017. Web. 26 Apr. 2017.

⁴ 1915 'ADELAIDE NURSE IN ANTWERP.', *The Register (Adelaide, SA : 1901 - 1929)*, 9 January, p. 10. , viewed 26 Apr 2017, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article59119683>

⁵ 1915 'Nurses Under Fire at Antwerp.', *The Richmond River Herald and Northern Districts Advertiser (NSW : 1886 - 1942)*, 19 February, p. 2. , viewed 26 Apr 2017, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article125936299>

station, and loaded others onto an ambulance and a motor lorry. Painfully, Claire realised there was no one left to take her and the rest of nurses out of the city. *“And so the hours crept on, and the shells continued to yell and scream all around us. The fires broke out in place after place, and night began to fall. We felt pretty blue”*⁶ However, shortly after, three London busses loaded with ammunition sped down the street. The nurses climbed aboard and began the hazardous journey, around fallen trees, telephone poles, broken glass, encompassed by dancing flames. Finally, the buses crossed the bridge of boats just moments before it was blown to pieces. Claire later recalled *“The burning city behind us and the burning oil tanks ahead. It was a scene that we will remember to the end of our lives.”*⁶

In that one night alone, Claire had exhibited the utmost courage, sacrifice and endurance, each significant qualities of the ANZAC spirit. Not only had she and the other nurses worked together using immense physical strength and persistence to carry the wounded soldiers to the cellars, but she had used her mental strength, to push any fear aside, and ignore the danger presenting itself all around her. The next morning, she had ensured the safety of the soldiers, sacrificing her own chances of escaping for the good of her patients, and ultimately for her country.

Claire continued her military nursing service, and went on to work in various private military hospitals in Paris until the end of the war. After returning to Australia, Claire married Sydney Percival Swan, a returned serviceman, and had three children. Claire continued to work in nursing, and in 1939, used her experience in military medicine to train nurses of the Voluntary Aid Detachment for the second world war. Claire will always be an important South Australian to remember. She was a passionate, courageous, positive, and hard working woman, who showed the true meaning of the ANZAC spirit.

Word count: 1490

⁶ 1915 'ADELAIDE NURSE IN ANTWERP.', *The Register (Adelaide, SA: 1901 - 1929)*, 9 January, p. 10. , viewed 26 Apr 2017, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article59119683>



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL P08673.002

1. Nine patients of the Auxiliary Hospital Unit with Claire (seated) and a ward assistant.



2. Troops positioned at the forts in defence of Antwerp



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL REL40943.001

3. The 1914 Star (August to November), British War Medal (1914-20), and Victory Medal, received by Claire for her service

ADELAIDE NURSE IN ANTWERP.

Service Under Fire.

The following description of the work of the nurses during the bombardment of Antwerp has been received from one of their number, Miss Claire Trestrail, formerly of Adelaide:—"We left London on Sunday (September 20), and arrived in Antwerp on Tuesday morning. Though as a rule the trip only takes a few hours, at present boats are only allowed to travel between sunrise and sunset, on account of submarines. The crossing was awful, and we were all sick. However, we were met by the British Consul and members of the Red Cross, and taken in 'motors and carriages to the convent, which was our home for three weeks. On the opposite side of the street, in the centre of a dear old garden, was the hospital. We had a great time getting all the beds ready, and things in order. On Thursday we received our first patients (43). Oh, how we spoilt them! Teaching each other our own language was a favourite pastime. We loved them all. But on Monday (September 28) the siege of the fair city began, and the patients came in by the score. We had to put some on camp beds and some on straw mattresses on the floor. The wounds were awful. Some of the men had been lying for hours in the dirt and cold until the blood was dry on them, and they were hungry and exhausted. All day and all night for 10 days the guns continued to roar, until we became so used to them that we could even joke about them, and listen, first for the Hun's growl, and then the Belgians' answer. But the pathetic part of it all was the appeal to England for help. Each hour the soldiers would ask of us in imploring voice, 'Oh, sister, when are the English coming?' Of course, we did not know, and could only say that we were sure that when they did come all

4. An article in the 1915 Adelaide Register, written by Sister Claire Trestrail

References

1. "Portrait Of Sister Claire Evelyn Trestrail (Seated), Of Clare, SA, A Ward Assistant And Nine Patients, At The Auxiliary Hospital Unit, Antwerp. Working In England When The War Began, Sister ...". *Australian War Memorial*. N.p., 2017. Web. 28 Apr. 2017.
2. "Belgium In The First World War - Clevelode Ltd". *Clevalode Ltd*. N.p., 2017. Web. 28 Apr. 2017.
3. "1914 Star With August To November 1914 Bar : Nurse C Trestrail, Auxiliary Hospital Unit, Antwerp". *Australian War Memorial*. N.p., 2017. Web. 28 Apr. 2017.
4. 1915 'ADELAIDE NURSE IN ANTWERP.', *The Register (Adelaide, SA : 1901 - 1929)*, 9 January, p. 10. , viewed 26 Apr 2017, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article59119683>

Bibliography:

Websites-

"Siege Of Antwerp (1914)". *En.wikipedia.org*. N.p., 2017. Web. 26 Apr. 2017.

"Belgium In The First World War - Clevelode Ltd". *Clevelode Ltd*. N.p., 2017. Web. 26 Apr. 2017.

"Exploring World War I In Belgium And The Netherlands - A Virtual Adventure With Dr. Steven Rubert". *Exploring World War I in Belgium and The Netherlands*. N.p., 2017. Web. 26 Apr. 2017.

"The Defence Of Antwerp – The Long, Long Trail". *Longlongtrail.co.uk*. N.p., 2017. Web. 26 Apr. 2017.

"National Redoubt (Belgium)". *En.wikipedia.org*. N.p., 2017. Web. 26 Apr. 2017.

"Australian Nurses In QAIMNSR". *Great War Forum*. N.p., 2017. Web. 26 Apr. 2017.

Mrs St Clair Stobart | Woman And Her Sphere". *Womanandhersphere.com*. N.p., 2017. Web. 26 Apr. 2017.

"Anzac Spirit". *En.wikipedia.org*. N.p., 2017. Web. 26 Apr. 2017.

"Dawn Of The Legend: The Anzac Spirit | Australian War Memorial". *Awm.gov.au*. N.p., 2017. Web. 26 Apr. 2017.

"Great War Nurses | Australian War Memorial". *Awm.gov.au*. N.p., 2017. Web. 26 Apr. 2017.

Newspaper Articles-

1915 'Nurses Under Fire at Antwerp.', *The Richmond River Herald and Northern Districts Advertiser (NSW : 1886 - 1942)*, 19 February, p. 2. , viewed 26 Apr 2017, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article125936299>

1915 'ADELAIDE NURSE IN ANTWERP.', *The Register (Adelaide, SA : 1901 - 1929)*, 9 January, p. 10. , viewed 26 Apr 2017, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article59119683>

1914 "'Antwerp (1914).'", *Ultima and Chillingollah Star (Vic. : 1914 - 1918)*, 20 November, p. 2. , viewed 28 Apr 2017, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article128442630>

Books-

Stoney, Florence A. *The Women's Imperial Service League Hospital*. 1st ed. London: William Heinemann, 1915. Print.

Walker, Carlie. *Audacity*. 1st ed. Canberra: Department of Veterans' Affairs, 2014. Print.

Coombs, Rose e. b. *Before Endeavours Fade*. 12th ed. Essex: After the battle, 2006. Print.

Pelvin, Richard. *ANZAC*. 2nd ed. Victoria: Hardie Grant Publishers, 2008. Print.