

Sister Anne Donnell

4th February 1878 – 23rd September 1956



Anne as a Student Nurse

<https://rslvirtualwarmemorial.org.au/explore/people/335000>

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Year 10

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Sister Anne Donnell

They hit the shore, you could hear the shots from the Dardanelles. They reached the “hospital”, a patch of rocky ground with soldiers lying in the sun, flies swarming. This is Lemnos Island.

Anne Donnell was born on 4th February 1878; she was the third child of William Donnell and Fanny Jacobs. She grew up in South Australia, in Cherry Gardens, it is believed that she was schooled by her mother at home. She trained as a Nurse at the Royal Adelaide Hospital, graduating in 1902. She then gained a job as a Theatre Sister, giving her good experience for what was coming.



Figure 1: HMAS Mooltan

(<https://rslvirtualwarmemorial.org.au/explore/people/335000>)

Anne was one of the first Nurses to enlist from South Australia, possibly with colleagues. She enlisted after seeing some soldiers aboard a train going past. They said “See you there, Sister” (Suzanne De Vries, 2013). Anne enlisted on the 20th May 1915. On enlistment, Anne was described as being 5 feet 2 ½ inches, 8 stone 10 lbs., having a medium complexion, light greyed blue eyes, browned grey hair and of Anglican faith. Her next of kin was her brother Issac Stewart Donnell. As her father was dead and her widowed mother was living with Issac and his family. She embarked aboard the ‘*Mooltan*’ (see Figure 1) the same day as she enlisted. She was a part of the 3rd Australian General Hospital as a Staff Nurse, though she did not join her unit immediately. The Commanding Officer’s wife, although aboard as a Nurse, (which was forbidden due to her being married), she was heavily pregnant and

needed a midwife to look after her and help her deliver the baby. Anne was an experienced midwife, so she was chosen by the Commanding Officer to stay in Alexandria; she assisted her in her pregnancy and delivery. The child was safely delivered on 11th September 1915 (see Figure 2).



Anne finally joined her unit on 13th

October 1915 on Lemnos Island (see Figure 3). By then the hospital was overrun with soldiers lying outside the ward tents, waiting for a bed inside. One saying used at the time by both the Nurses and soldiers was 'Imbros, Lemnos and chaos' (Peter Rees, 2008), explaining how disorganised the handling of the wounded was. Many of the nurses were sick with 'Lemnositis' or dysentery, the Matron, Grace Wilson and later, Ethel Grey, were running on a skeleton staff and desperate for extra Nurses. Diaries and letters of many of the nurses stated that 3. A.G.H. was the worst-off hospital on Lemnos (see Figure 4). When

Figure 2 : Anne holding Fiaschi child, Alexandria, 1915.

(<https://rslvirtualwarmemorial.org.au/explore/people/335000>)



Figure 3: Map of Gallipoli Peninsula and surrounding islands

(<http://www.susanburnett.me.uk/project/map-4/>)

the hospital was first set up, nurses had to wait weeks for supplies to arrive from England. Until then, nurses had used their personal supplies. Once they ran out of bandages, the nurses would remove their undergarments and tear them up into strips to use as bandages.



Figure 4: 3.A.G.H. on Lemnos

(<https://rslvirtualwarmemorial.org.au/explore/people/335000>)

Anne wrote in her diary that the soldiers she was nursing were “dreadfully weak and emaciated”. On the first ANZAC Day in 1916, Anne attended one of the predecessors of the modern-day Dawn Service. She wrote in her diary that she found the service ‘inexpressibly moving’ (Peter Rees, 2008). Anne served on Lemnos until 27th January 1916 when she returned to Alexandria with her Unit. She wrote in either a letter home or in her diary; “We have just seen the last of Lemnos. Of course, we are glad, yet there are many things we will miss; the unconventional freedom and the unique experiences we had there. Good-Bye Lemnos. We take away many happy memories of you. I would not have liked you, yet I have no desire to see you again.”



Figure 5: Anne and fellow Sisters in Abbassia.

(<https://rslvirtualwarmemorial.org.au/explore/people/335000>)

The 3rd A.G.H. first moved to Brighton, England, then moved with the troops to Abbassia in France (see Figure 5). Anne remained with her Unit until 11th July 1917 when she joined the 38th British Stationary Hospital. During this time, Anne was promoted to Sister on 5th May 1917 while with the 3rd A.G.H. in Abbeville. While at 38 S.H., she nursed the injured and wounded from many well-known battles, such as Bullecourt, Vimy Ridge, Messines, Passchendale, the Somme and Menin Road.

She wrote in her diary, as the 3rd Battle of Ypres, also known as Paschendale, was raging, she was "white, limp and helpless". She gathered up her few personal things; a few handkerchiefs, a comb and some hairpins, in case she needed to evacuate. At some point in this period of time, Anne became sick and was returned to 3. A.G. H., as she was recuperating, she remained at 3 A.G.H. She returned to active duty with 3. A.G.H. on 28th February, 1918. She was admitted to 2nd Stationary Hospital as a patient on 9th March 1918 again. She was then admitted to 12 Southwell Gardens in South Kensington, it was a hospital for sick sisters in England and France. She was discharged on 26th March 1918, though she was admitted again on 3rd April 1918, eight days later. She was discharged again on 9th April 1918 and was then sent to the 2nd Australian Auxillary Hospital, located in Southall on 19th May 1918. She was then detached and sent to the 1st Auxillary Hospital, located in Harefield on 24th May 1918. She was then sent to 1st A.A.H. on 26th May 1918 where she remained until the end of the war.

The A.A.N.S. (Australian Army Nursing Service) then sent the order for Anne to return to Australia on 18th January 1919. Anne's brother Issac, was notified that Anne would be returning to Australia on 7th February 1919. Anne returned to Australia aboard the '*Margha*' on 16th February 1919 and arrived in Outer Harbour on 28th February 1919. Her appointment was terminated from Keswick Barracks on 9th April 1919; it was officially terminated on 24th May 1919 by the Secretary of the Department of Defence in Melbourne. She received the 1914/1915 Star, the British War Medal and the Victory Medal. She died destitute in Perth on 23rd September 1956, aged 80 years.

(1,000 words)

Anne showed the ANZAC spirit in so many ways. Anne wrote letters home as a form of a newsletter for church members in exchange for comforts for the soldiers she was nursing. A demonstration of her will to keep promises made to soldiers to keep their spirits up and her compassion. She showed perseverance, courage, mateship, but most of all, she showed resourcefulness. While on Lemnos, the nursing staff had very little to make their patch of rocky earth a hospital. The nurses tore up their undergarments to make makeshift bandages and they used large sticks to make splints for broken limbs. The nurses used their environment and what was in it to their advantage. These women were very resourceful; when the men in the situation crumbled, the women rose above it and just kept going with their work.

When she returned home, she stayed resourceful, starting up the first maternity home in Kalgoorlie and working with wounded ANZACs in Adelaide. However, the resourcefulness she would have used at home would have been different to the resourcefulness she would have needed at a hospital in France or on Lemnos. Although she would have received a small wage, she used every last shilling to purchase comforts for others. She would have seen bloodshed, suffering and pain, but she would have seen mateship, courage and perseverance. All of these contributed to what we now know as the ANZAC Spirit. Many historians have overlooked the service of the men and women supporting the combatants, picking up the pieces after battle and putting them back together to go back into battle. Although they may not have physical scars, they suffered no less than the soldiers on the battlefield. Some also made the ultimate sacrifice. We need to bring these brave and courageous men and women out of the shadows and into the light.

(309 words)

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