

ANZAC School Spirit Prize – Anne Donnell

*For abbreviations see glossary



Sister Anne Donnell was born on October 31st, 1878 in southern Adelaide to her parents William Donnell (1830-1881) and Fanny Jacobs (1846-1888). Anne had 4 siblings, Issac, Mary, Elizabeth and Henry with Anne was the middle child of the five. Donnell and her siblings spent the first years of their life in Cherry Gardens. In 1881, Anne's father William died. Seven years later her mother, Fanny, died leaving the children as orphans until Issac turned 18. There is little about Anne's childhood and life up until she enlisted. On Tuesday, May 20th, 1915, at the age of 39, she boarded the SS *Mooltan* to leave Australia to serve in the AIF as a staff nurse of the 3rd AGH.

Donnell served in the Gallipoli campaign, the Middle Eastern Front in Egypt and the Western Front in France. All three areas of conflict had a very different environment. Soldiers and nurses had to adapt in order to survive and serve. In the Gallipoli campaign Sister Donnell

was working on Lemnos, a small island a few kilometres from Gallipoli, at the hospital. At the time of Donnell's arrival, the Australian nurses were still living in tents whilst the British and Canadian nurses were living comfortably in huts. In Egypt, Donnell worked in the Abbassia Barracks at the 3rd AGH, the largest in Egypt. Donnell described Egypt as the most unsanitary place she had ever served. Finally, Donnell served in France before the war ended on November 11th, 1918. In her letter from June 5th, 1917 Donnell stated "*In France we see the acutest of work and the havoc of war plays on our precarious human lives*" (Donnell, 1917).

On May 20th, 1915 Donnell's journey through the war began when she departed Adelaide on RMS *Mooltan*. Five weeks later, on June 27th, 1915 Donnell arrived in England where she was prepared to serve for Australia. On July 2nd, 1915 Donnell received the order to proceed to Mudros Harbor, Lemnos. On October 9th, 1915, Donnell arrived on the small island and began nursing immediately. Anne Donnell spent less than three months on the small island off the coast of Gallipoli before the evacuation was called and HMHS *Oxfordshire* became her new home from January 14th to 21st 1916. She then prepared to treat patients in Egypt for the majority of 1916.

In Egypt Donnell served at the Abbassia Barrack, 3rd AGH. Donnell described the hospital as *"the most suitable, beautiful hospital in Egypt along with the largest as it was able to take 1500 patients."* (Donnell 1916). Whilst the 3rd AGH was one of the most luxurious, the conditions in the Middle East were horrific. *"There's no doubt about Egypt being unhealthy, and another terrifying disease is Bilharziasis which is caused by bathing or paddling un the canals of the Nile. If you get it, it is almost certain death..."* (Donnell, 1916) Sister Donnell wrote, proving that the conditions in Egypt were horrible. In Egypt, Anne grew closer to some of her patients such as *"Private Hanke, a South Australian"* (Donnell, 1916) who was diagnosed with small pox and passed away.

Four days later, Donnell along with every other ANZAC nurse, soldier, pilot and sailor commemorated the first ANZAC Day. Donnell attended a service at 0900 at the ANZAC Hostel in Cairo. After the service, flowers were taken to Cairo cemetery and were laid at past soldier's graves. At the end of the day Donnell wrote *"... sad as it all was, one came away with of being drawn much nearer to those who gave their lives twelve months ago, that they were richer by far and that their deeds are a lesson to remember for all time."* (Donnell, 1916) A few months later on September 25th, 1916 Donnell departed Egypt on the 1st AHS Karoola.

On October 5th, 1916, Donnell arrived in Brighton, England where she stayed until journeying to France on April 27th, 1917 with the 3rd AGH. On May 3rd, 1917, Donnell arrived in Abbeville, France. Only two days later she received a promotion to Sister. In her diary entry from July 5th, 1917, Donnell described her life in France as depressing and miserable. *"There in the distance is the continual boom, boom, booming of the great guns which brings more suffering and sadness."* On July 7th, an air raid occurred at 0245. Donnell spent 15 minutes of bombing bunkered down and praying for her life. On July 12th, Sister Donnell was transferred to the 38th Stationary Hospital with the BEF. She did not spend long at this hospital before she was transferred again on the 22nd of November 1917 to the 48th Casualty Clearing Station. Donnell and the other nurses survived through many air raids, bombings and shelling's throughout the last few months of 1917 and early into 1918. On the eve of 1918 Donnell wrote *"...Awakened suddenly at the early hour of 2.30am to the sound of close shelling, and quickly detected a faint, sweetish scent like pineapple, which immediately followed a loud knocking at the door and Owen saying "Sister Donnell they're sending over gas shells, have your respirator ready"* (Donnell, 1917)

On the 18th of January 1918, not only was Donnell worried about shelling's and air raids taking her life but also illness. It was on that day that Donnell was admitted to the Sick Sisters Hospital in Abbeville. It wasn't until February 28th, 1918 that Donnell returned to active duty with the 3rd AGH. On March 9th, 1918, she again fell sick and was admitted to the 2nd Stationary Hospital in Abbeville. On March 17th Donnell was transferred from Abbeville to Southwell Gardens with an unknown illness. There is no noted date for when Donnell was released from hospital but she began working at the 2nd AAH, in Middlesex on May 18th, 1918.

Donnell's diary entries were very scarce until November 11th, 1918 when she wrote "*The Kaiser has chucked in his job and the war's over*". It wasn't until January 17th, 1919 that Donnell boarded the *Margha*. On January 19th, Donnell, nine other nurses and six hundred troops departed England and landed back in Australia on February 28th, 1919.

Anne Donnell Perseverance

Perseverance is the persistence in doing something despite difficulty or delay in achieving success. There is no doubt that throughout her service during and even after the war Anne Donnell consistently showed perseverance. Regardless of what Sister Anne Donnell faced, whether it was the loss of a patient, illness, bombings or air raids she always pushed through and made the best out of the resources she had. On the 21st of October 1915, Anne Donnell wrote "*We are really roughing it but most of us are as happy as can be, we feel as if we are doing what we came out to do, as long as we can benefit the boys in making them better, comfortable, and contented we do not mind.*". This quotation proves no matter how horrible Sister Donnell's life was on the battlefield everything she did was for the comfort and benefit of the ANZACS. In fact, her entire life was dedicated to helping other people. After the war Anne Donnell worked in social care dealing with many types of people, from children and infants to abandoned ANZACS and disabled veterans.

After the war Anne Donnell became the Matron-In-Charge of the ANZAC Hostel in Glenelg, Adelaide; a home and hostel for disabled veterans and homeless ANZACS. In August 1939 Sister Anne Donnell returned to South Australia for unknown reasons with toddler, Yvonne. Throughout the 1940's and during World War Two, in her mid 60's, Donnell did voluntary work for the Australian Red Cross. In 1954, after a lifetime of service to humanity, Anne Donnell decided to retire and lived at 24 James Street in North Beach, Perth. Donnell was relatively poor at this time and had no family to look after her so a red cross friend provided her a home and care. On the 23rd of September 1956, Anne Donnell tragically passed away alone in her home. After dedicating her life to nursing and helping other people it is a tragedy and dishonor that this humble hero's story and her legend is totally unknown. Anne Donnell is now buried and resting peacefully at the Karrakatta Cemetery Crematorium Rose Garden (Site S, Position 1) in the Perth suburb of Nedlands.

On the battlefronts Donnell faced almost every challenge imaginable, from seeing hundreds of dead, wounded or mutilated bodies daily to becoming ill herself and worrying about the risk to her own life and losing patients along the way such as Private Hanke. Mentioned in Donnell's biography, he was a man who remains unknown except in Donnell's diary entry on the 5th of July 1917 "*The days were gone before you knew it, and you felt you hadn't accomplished anything, but this laddie in the corner I thought he shall have some special care, and I told him he would be mine until his mother came. He gave me the loveliest smile, but next morning his bed was empty, just another one of many there that had made the supreme sacrifice.*" All of these experiences and situations are enough to make anyone want to give up. Despite all of this Anne Donnell never gave up. Her perseverance exemplifies the ANZAC spirit.

Glossary

SS – Steam Ship

AIF – Australian Imperial Force

RMS – Royal Mail Ship

HMHS – His Majesty's Hospital Ship

AHS – Australian Hospital Ship

AGH – Australian General Hospital

BEF – British Expeditionary Forces

AAH – Australian Auxiliary Hospital

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Appendix

1. Anne Donnell's diaries



Appendix

2. Anne Donnell Diary 6th December 1915

Number of Patients 42.
Orderly Private Andrews
December 6th 1915.

Dear.

Lancey This is my 91st page. On looking back it seems to be quite a book. I haven't written for some days. The truth is I have felt too down hearted and miserable. The foundation of it being the weather. Yes, we are indeed experiencing the grim realities of this awful war. The 26th 27th 28th + 29th of Nov. will never be forgotten. We all suffered to the cold terribly & with all our warm clothing we couldn't get warm day or night. Personally I shivered for 3 nights without sleep and the chilblains agony - my 2 small toes were frost bitten. Then in the day time most of us just tottered about. I heard one boy say as he saw me "She won't stick the winter through". He exactly expressed my feelings. It all seems in that weather with wind travelling at the rate of 100 miles an hour and rain & sleet + snow so pitifully hopeless. The wards inside both night + day are dark. The Patients cold. I would defy anyone to call the outlook bright. Some of the Sisters was able to rise past their own feelings & be bright + happy. Dear old Ruth was one of them. How fond I am growing of her. She saved me from being down right sick. I will send you a snap & state of the inside of the tent showing the disease.

Appendix

3. Beaded snake and walking stick Donnell purchased in Egypt



Appendix

4. Donnell in her nursing uniform



Appendix

5. Pages from Donnell's diaries

