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[950]

Egypt

St Burns

106  
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No 2 A.S.H. Mena House

pneumonia very prevalent.

April 1915 - detailed to No 17

British General at Victoria

very hard work - wounded

arriving before plane was

prepared. British Malin well

likes. Back to No 2 A.S.H. at

Cyzical Palace.

To No 14 A.S.H.

The Official War Historian of the Commonwealth Government (Dr. C. E. W. Bean), after his study of the collection of private war records preserved in the Australian War Memorial Library, wrote :-

"The private diaries in this collection furnish some of its most valuable historical records, but, like all private memoirs which were not compiled with any historical purpose, they should not be regarded as first-hand evidence except where it is certain that they are so. The diarist is almost always sincere in his desire to record accurately, but he is subject to no obligation or inducement to indicate whether he is recording his own observations or incidents told him by friends or heard at third or fourth hand at the mess-table. Thus, in some of the diaries in this collection, scenes described with vivid detail, and without any warning that they are told at second or third hand, have been found to be completely inaccurate in important details. A certain number also have been written up or revised long after the events, though doubtless usually from notes made at the time. In most cases the student must rely on his experience and on internal evidence to guide him in judging what is and what is not likely to be historically accurate."

70  
106  
Miss E. B. Swain 24  
106  
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Left Adelaide, South Australia, on November 27th 1914, to join hospital ship "Kyana," which left Melbourne on December 4th 1914.

This vessel had on board No 10. and No 11., Australian General Hospitals, as well as No 1. and No 2., Stationary Hospitals. The knowledge of military life generally, was rather remote I fancy, as far as we were all concerned, for this was the first hospital ship carrying hospital units, which left Australia in connection with the war.

We all had to learn what the difference meant in rank. Why some wore stripes, and other stars, and some stars with a crown. Personally up to this particular time, I had fancied a Sergeant, by far the most important person in the Army. As we have found out since, we heard the military world is "full of rumours," and it was not long before we heard all sorts of stories, about what our troops had done, who had gone on before us some weeks previously. Then again, at different stays, our destination was to be different countries, and I fancy not one rumour implied that we were to disembark in any Egyptian port, hence, such an idea had not occurred to the occupants of the "Kyana," personally

We were fortunate in calling at Colombo on the journey,--it was a delightful experience, though of course short. Then we viewed Aden, for a few hours, but did not go ashore, and when reaching Port Said, we had a whole day, most of us, to see the place.

We were fortunate too, in going through the Canal, starting the journey at about 1pm. During the time that had elapsed, the banks of the Canal have changed considerably, as far as defences are concerned. The banks were simply lined on both sides as we passed through, with Indian troops right to the waters edge. We heard after, it had been asked whether the soldiers were guarding the Canal, or vice-versa, one does not find the part protected in the same manner to-day.

On arriving at Alexandria, most of us tried very hard to pay Cairo what we thought would be a very hurried visit, We were nearly all fortunate in going to Cairo, for one day, and we found too, that it was a very hurried visit.

Our boat remained in Alexandria about a week, and by that time we were established in Egypt for duty, much to our surprise. No 1. General went to Heliopolis Palace, near Cairo, No 2. General, Mena House, near the Pyramids, and then No 1. Stationary to Ishmilia, and No 2. Stationary, to Mena camp. Being on the staff of No 2. General, I took up duty at Mena House.

All our troops which had previously left Australia, were camping in different parts outside Cairo, and there was a very large field of canvas at the Pyramids. We had heard rumours whilst waiting in Alexandria, of there being no Nursing staff required for our troops, but at No 2. General, we found we were in for a very busy time.

There was a surprising amount of Pneumonia among our men, and in its account we had some very sad experiences. The medical wards were simply full of these patients, and though of course comparatively few died, it seemed almost a daily occurrence to hear the "Dead March," played, as a funeral passed by. These deaths seemed particularly hard as we all knew so well, that the men were in such excellent condition physically, when leaving home, and also, that they had come out ready to give their lives,--but under different circumstances. There was a very pathetic phase in connection with the Nursing of these particular patients it did not matter how ill they were, whenever they saw a strange Sister, their first question was, "What part of Australia do you come from.

They all seemed to crave so for the company of some one who might know something of home.

The stay at Mena certainly had a very happy side also. As I say, everyone seemed to long for the company of someone from home, and the Nursing Sisters in this particular respect, were able to give their Soldier friends at the camp adjoining the hospital, the benefit of their company, when not on duty. The view used to offer an excuse for wanting to converse with an Australian Sister, by saying "I have not spoken to a lady for 3 or 4 months, as the case may be. We used to think this very dreadful, but at the present time one comes across men at times, who can say 2 years, instead of some months.

There was a camp hospital attached to No2. General, in which I worked for a time. The patients were not so ill as those in the building.

The weather was perfect, bright sunshine all day long, and we all were very happy in our work.

There were often times when the men became very impatient, and wanted some active Military duty. Sometimes they seemed to picture themselves living at the foot of the Pyramids until the end of the war.

Then came the time when the part of the men left, we had no idea where they were going, and then later troops seemed to be leaving all the time. It was a very stirring sight to see them moving off, shouting, singing, and laughing. What a fearful difference took place with these troops in a short time.

We all seemed very unsettled, and were wondering what all this moving meant. There had been reports in the paper of the bombarding that was going on in the Dardanelles, some at times seemed to convert their movements with these reports.

About the middle of April 1915, a number of the Nursing Sisters of No2. General, were detailed to go to British hospitals in Alexandria. I was among four who were to go to No17. General Hospital at Victoria, not far from Alexandria. I stayed at this hospital until the following August, and I must say, those few months will always stand out as the most trying that I have experienced abroad.

When reaching the end of our train journey, we were met by a Medical Officer, who told us a little of the sort of work that was expected, the reported landing at the Dardanelles, and the consequent casualties. We were taken to an Hotel for the night, near the hospital, and were to interview the Matron the next morning. We seemed to be very much in the dark, but we expected from what we heard, to be receiving wounded almost at any time, and we also knew that the hospital was unprepared.

We went to the hospital in the morning, and met the Matron, and were immediately given beds to make up. It seems the orderly staff had been working very hard, but there were such numbers to be got ready, that we had plenty to do. Apparently the building was undergoing a lot of alterations, as I believe it had before been a College, consequently, there were numerous workmen about, and much hammering and inconvenience generally. The idea of bringing wounded men into a place of such unpreparedness, seemed almost impossible, however, in the midst of things the patients arrived. Some hundreds were admitted in a very short time. Among the first, mostly boys with wounded arms, and a lot of them walked in, occupying the beds downstairs. There was no time for anything but hard work, each and all had to do their utmost. The Medical men especially, did not spare themselves in the least, they worked both night and day, just rested and refreshed themselves when they were forced to do so. We thought that these conditions were trying enough, but when those



wounded abdominally, and in the head came to us; it was heart-breaking. No one cares to dwell on these matters, but for some time our patients were often just as they had been left after having had their field dressings supplied. Their torn, bloodstained clothes still on, and altogether sadly in want of care and nursing.

It was remarkable how quickly these conditions were improved ~~as~~ upon, and by the time we were recalled to No. 2. again, one would never have had the least idea what struggles had taken place in that hospital, such a short time before.

We were much too busy of course, to get to know anyone in the hospital, unless we came directly in contact with them. There was one person I am sure who greatly impressed the Australian Sisters there, and that was Miss. Nevill the Matron. We all learned to love her, during the short time we were under her charge.

We felt very much attached to the hospital during our comparatively short stay there, and felt many regrets at having to leave them, to go back to our own Unit. During our absence No. 2. A.G.H., had moved to Gizireh Palace, on the banks of the Nile, a very short distance out of Cairo. This building was immense, and of course seemed to have unlimited space and staff, for the accommodation and care of patients. One feature which was very noticeable, was the fact that the less serious patients went to Cairo, and from my limited experience, it seemed to be the place where the staff etc. were most plentiful, while the more seriously wounded, were forced to be in Alexandria, where all the necessary staff etc., apparently only joined up the Units by degrees. The work at Gizireh Palace, was comparatively easy compared with what we had known. I remember well at this particular time, the weather was most trying, the heat being very intense. The accommodation for the Nursing staff was not any too easy comfortable, but, in our spare time any Sisters who wished, were able to enjoy the comfort of a delightful sitting and reading room, in a house near by, ~~lent~~ which was kindly lent by Lord Cecil. When looking back over experiences at this particular time, I shall always remember the quiet and cool, which we enjoyed in those times off duty.

Some little time after our return to No. 2. A.G.H., Mena House was again opened as a hospital, it used to be talked of as a Convalescent home, but no one seemed altogether certain about the matter. However, there were times when we all felt we were fully entitled to be called a General hospital, those again were very happy days for everyone.

A small staff left Gizireh Palace with Matron Davidson in charge. We used to receive a good number of patients who were sent on from No. 2. General, to make room for others there, then again, an English camp had become an established thing at Mena by this time, and they were taken into our hospital as soon as they reported sick. In time our Nursing staff etc., had increased considerably, and usually we were kept very busy. Major Grey O.C., inspected the whole hospital daily, and at most times the wards looked as though it were ~~llam~~ even if that particular hour had gone by. The whole place seemed to work so smoothly, and everyone apparently enjoyed every moment. We were able too, to appreciate the surrounding view from the numerous balconies attached to the hospital, being particularly beautiful, when the country was under flood.

No doubt we all had to thank our Matron for having such pleasant recollections in connection with our work at this period.

The time came early in 1916, when the hospital had to be disbanded to a certain extent. There was a feeling of unrest among us all, and we felt a dread at severing our connection with Mena. Miss Davidson took the Matronship of another hospital, and a few of us went to some of the Auxiliary hospitals at Heliopolis, whilst a number remained at Mena, the hospital ~~was~~ after I believe was taken over by an English staff.

Four of us, myself included, went to an Auxiliary hospital at Heliopolis, we lived at Heliopolis Palace some little distance away. The patients when boarded for Australia were all sent to this particular hospital awaiting a boat to take them home. There was not very much special Nursing to be done, but time on duty seemed to go very quickly. By this time Military hospitals had undergone a great change. Our troops had evacuated Gallipoli, and were stationed at Tel El Kebir, and consequently, there was practically nothing to do, in fact, at times we were almost in each others way. During this quiet time, one had plenty of occasion to think of home, and apparently Sisters were always being required to go to Australia, on transport duty, so I wrote out an application for duty, and I left Egypt March 1916, arriving in Adelaide in April. After a fortnights leave, one begins to think of about service abroad again, but I had to remain on home service, for a few months, as evidently no Sisters were at that particular time leaving Australia.

The Infectious diseases hospital was very busy at the time of my duty, there being an outbreak of Meningitis in the Military camp. The work was certainly hard, and equally interesting, and then we were well repaid, because our patients improved so, with very few exceptions.

Some time beforehand, I had orders to leave Australia on August 12th on the "Ballarat," having been detailed for a new Unit the 14th A.G.H., which was being formed. Three of us Sisters joined this vessel, and found she was carrying a large number of troops. We were assured that Nola, would be going to France, and we felt confident of doing some duty on that front. The journey on the "Ballarat," was a rough one, most of the time, from a tourists point of view, but an interesting one for us. The beds in the ships hospital were always mostly occupied, and towards the later part of the journey two men developed Meningitis, which meant strict isolation.

We arrived in Devonport at the end of September 1916, and proceeded to London the following day, arriving at Paddington Station at 4pm, on October 1st, having made the trip unfortunately in the night. On reporting to our Matron-in-Chief at headquarters, we were greatly disappointed and surprised to hear, that the Unit to which we belonged was in Egypt, and that we were to return there at any time.

Of course in Military life, there are occasions when we have to remind ourselves that we are away on Service for our country, and I am afraid if one arrives in England for the first time when in the Army, one is to be pardoned for finding it very difficult task to realize this fact. I immediately found myself longing for some leave, and thought often too of letters I had had from Sister friends, telling of the delightful sights they had seen in different parts of the British Isles. In any case my desire at that particular time could never have been fulfilled, because I, as well as others in a similar position, had to be ready to embark at any time to proceed to Egypt.

The Autumn had just started, and what with cold, fogs etc., I found I had Pleurisy after seeing an O.C., this meant three weeks stay in hospital, then a weeks convalescence. The latter week was spent at a most delightful English house in Hertfordshire. Mr. Mollwaith kindly lent this estate of his, to Australian Sisters, so they were able to have every conceivable comfort after a sickness. The surroundings were just typical of what we hear and read of grand English houses, and I was very fortunate in experiencing this delightful week.

After my return, it was not long before we, who were detailed for No. 14. A.G.H., were on our way to Southampton. Fourteen of us left in November, on the hospital ship "Lampare," and arrived in Cairo again, towards the end of November.

We received a very warm welcome from everyone, and soon felt quite at home. The Unit was settled at Abbassiah, by the time we were on duty again. The wards in this particular building seemed specially suited for a hospital, they were large and airy, each having a convenient pantry close at hand. There was any amount

of room, as the place was surrounded by large ~~bal~~ broad balconies. The Sisters home too, which was a few minutes walk from the main building, was delightfully airy and large, with a lovely old garden, surrounded by a high wall at the back.

The work in the wards at Abbassiah at times was very strenuous, after our men had had a big stunt, more especial, but otherwise, duty was not so trying. I shall always feel that while with the No 14. A.G.H. I have had a good insight and experience in the ~~gen~~ general management of a large ward and staff. During my stay at No 14. A.G.H., the work always went on steadily. There was never the shortage in staff that there once was, but one had the satisfaction of feeling all the while that one was busy all the time.

In January 1917, the unit moved from Abbassiah to Port Said. In December 1917, a number of Sisters from No 14. A.G.H., were lent to the Government hospital at Suez. I was among the number. We returned to our unit early in May 1918, and remained at Port Said.

I think we nearly all missed the conveniences of the hospital at Abbassiah, as the building were very rough and scattered. Then again Port Said did not offer any attractions in the way of gardens etc, like the surroundings of Cairo have.

There are comparatively few of the original staff of the No 14. remaining. The Matron, is still in charge, and has been since the unit left Australia. We are all pleased I am sure, to have had an opportunity of doing Service in Egypt, but are hoping that we will be able to see Service in England or France later.

In closing I must say a few words about our boys on this particular fighting front. I beleive I have spent more time on Service actually in Egypt, than any other Sister in the A.I. Force, so perhaps I am able to judge. Occasionally in the wards of to-day, one comes across men who were in Egypt in those early days of 1914, and in the beginning of 1915. They saw sevice in Gallipoli, and perhaps have been sick, and wounded in between, sometimes I am amazed to meet men who have not been even in hospital all through,-- they never left their Regts. It makes one wonder what stuff they are made of, for they invariable want to get back as soon as possible. The men generally are most unselfish and thoughtful for others, only too ready to be ready of help to someone more unfit to it than themselves. The old service men are beginning to look thoroughly worn out, and one wodders how they have come out through it all.



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