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Sister Mary Loughron

ANZAC PARADE  
MELBOURNE 1939

MATRON MARY M LOUGHRON  
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# Men, Women And Their Careers

Have you ever thought what it would be like to be the guest of a King and Queen at afternoon tea, and have them wait on you?

Well, Miss Mary McLean Loughron, a patient at Grace McKellar House, had this happen to her at the end of the first world war.

Her hosts were King George V and Queen Mary.

"They treated us like nieces, they were so kind and sweet," Miss Loughron recalls.

This encounter was just one of many fascinating experiences Miss Loughron had during five years as a Red Cross matron working to save lives among Allied troops on the grim battle fields of France.

In those five years, Miss Loughron received, first in 1917, the second class Red Cross medal then, after the war, King George bestowed on her at Buckingham Palace the highest service medal presented by the Red Cross Organisation, the Royal Red Cross first-class medal in gold.

Sitting up in a chair in her comfortable room at Grace McKellar House, Miss Loughron had a sparkle in her eyes as she relived those hours when a guest of the King and Queen of England.

"It all started when Queen Mary dropped in for morning tea at our hospital at Abbeville to have a chat with the Matron-in-chief (Miss McCarthy). I was nursing the matron, who was recovering from a serious illness.

"The Queen asked me if Miss McCarthy, who was due to return to England for sick leave, was well enough to travel. I, who was to accompany her across the Channel, said, 'yes.'

"That night, with an air of secrecy, Matron McCarthy told me the Queen had invited us to return to England with her aboard the Royal destroyer.

"Naturally, I had to keep quiet about the whole thing," Miss Loughron said, sitting forward in her chair reflecting the excitement she must have felt at the time.

Although she is now 86, the memories of that occasion were still crystal-clear in her mind.

"A Royal car collected us from the hospital and drove us to Calais where we boarded the destroyer.

"The King and Queen greeted us like long lost nieces. We had lunch together, then sailed under heavy escort to England. It was a perfect day; the English Channel was like a mill pond.

"We had afternoon tea aboard the Royal train on the way to Victoria Station, where a Palace car was waiting to take us to our destination."

This was undoubtedly the highlight of Miss Loughron's war-time experiences. The rest was, to use her own expression, "like hell."

Miss Loughron volunteered to serve with the Red Cross in France after gaining experience as a nursing sister at Royal Melbourne Hospital. At the beginning of 1915, she embarked with a team of 20 doctors and 20 nurses as part of an Australian Government medical team.

They spent two weeks in London being equipped then were sent direct to a front-line hospital near St. Omer, a short distance from Abbeville.

From there, she went to an officers' hospital at Boulogne and later took over a hospital train, collecting wounded from the front line.

It was on this train that Miss Loughron had her closest brush with death.

A German bomb struck the end carriage, killing a number of the wounded, and five medical orderlies.

"It was terrible, the bomb wrecked the railway line and we were marooned for a week.

"We had on board 300 patients, two trained sisters and 24 male orderlies, a doctor as officer in charge and another doctor.

"The railway carriages seemed to be converted cattle trucks, the seriously wounded were given stretchers and the walking wounded — they were anything but walking — had to sleep as best as they could on their packs.

"When the bomb struck, one sister was away on leave, the other fainted and had to be put to bed, and the doctor received a shrapnel wound in the knee. I was left to carry on and, believe me, it was a shambles for a while.

"Yes, we received quite a few poor devils who had been gassed. I remember a group of Canadians and some Prussian Guards we had to treat. I can still hear them calling out for their mothers and sisters while we tried desperately to ease their tortured lungs with pain-killing drugs.

Miss Loughron can still smell the unmistakable odor of the ration issue margarine used by the Allied forces in France, and she can also taste the "bully beef" and biscuits, the black bread, and can remember the hunger when food was in short supply, as it often was.

Also the primitive living conditions in Bell tents with no conveniences . . . and the bitter cold.

"The cold was the worst element: it got so bad sometimes I would burst into uncontrollable tears."

When the Armistice was declared, 50 years ago yesterday, Miss Loughron was in charge of the Peace Conference Hospital in Paris, treating the British troops trickling back from the Eastern Front.

It was while at this hospital that the French Government commissioned famous national painter, Eugene Brenaud, to do a portrait of Miss Loughron.

The original still hangs in the Gallery of the Portraits of the Allies, in Luxembourg in a place of honor next to famous generals and statesmen.

Miss Loughron represented the British Army Nursing Service in the gallery, although she was an Australian.

Her wartime services were recognised by the British Government, which presented her with the 1914-15 Mons medal (she worked near the front lines during the famous battle of Mons) and also the general and victory service medals, with laurel wreath.

She was mentioned in despatches three times.

On returning to Australia, Miss Loughron, after living in tents with no floors or heating, was determined to make a home for herself.

She started the Guilford Private Hospital in Camberwell and ran it successfully for 10 years until she found the pace too great.

She then turned to the public service, and her fine record of achievements was quickly recognised by the shrewd directors of the Child Welfare Department, who appointed her chief inspector for the State.

For the next 20 years, Miss Loughron used her experience and energy in caring for the needs of the State's unwanted or parentless children.

With a team of 15 nursing sisters, she brought many reforms to the department and some of her ideas are still being used to-day.

On retirement ("I felt I had completed my life's work") Miss Loughron lived in South Yarra, but later became seriously ill, and finally came to Grace McKellar House last year on the insistence of her niece.

"Grace McKellar is a wonderful place. A happier or more efficiently-run home I do not think you could find.

"With my past experience in nursing and hospitals, I have to take my hat off to the people here — everyone is so happy," Miss Loughron said.

Although crippled by a hip injury, she can still get up and about with the aid of a mobile support. Mostly, Miss Loughron likes best to live with her memories.

"I have no complaints; life has been good to me," she said as we ended the interview.

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Local "News" 7/3/72. (5)

# MATRON LOUGHRAN

## (World War 1)



Matron Loughran writes a letter from her chair in the Grace McKellar home.

## Nursed wounded of Somme battles

Many writers have described World War 1 as cold hard hungry and bloody but when Miss Mary Loughran uses these words she is speaking from first hand experience.

Miss Loughran, Geelong born, now 87, talked to a NEWS reporter about her experiences from a chair in the Grace McKellar home.

She is one of the few living women veterans of the first World War. She is the only member of the Geelong ex-Service Women's Association who served in that war.

She went to France early in 1915 with an Australian medical group, and rose to become a matron. She served there for five years, nursing the wounded in some of the bloodiest battles the world has ever seen - then or since.

### cut down

These included the holocaust of the Somme, when men were cut down in their tens of thousands within a few hours.

Miss Loughran had trained as a nurse at the Royal Melbourne Hospital before she saw an advertisement for medical staff to help in Europe.

In France, she joined the Queen Alexandra Imperial Nursing Service, and was only at her second hospital there when she was transferred to a unit in which she was the only Australian.

Nightly air raids, massed bombardments, bad food and an unending stream of wounded men all stay in Miss Loughran's mind — but the thing she remembers most acutely is the bitter weather conditions of the battlefields in winter.

"I had never seen snow before and I never want to see it again," she told a NEWS reporter.

"People say how beautiful the snow is, but if you could have seen those poor men suffering with frost bitten hands and feet... "We don't know what cold is here."

### not bad

The conditions for the nurses "weren't too bad," Miss Loughran says.

"The camps were very good and when I was made a matron, I was transferred to a hospital."

"But sometimes it got rather rough, especially the things like food."

"I've seen bully beef served up to the tables, still frozen, and there was a stew

that was always served."

Miss Loughran's war record is something she is very proud of.

She was awarded the 1st and 2nd Class Royal Red Cross medals, which were presented by the Queen and was mentioned in dispatches.

When she returned to Australia, she became matron at a Camberwell hospital.

### against wars

Understandably, Miss Loughran is very much against all wars.

"War shouldn't be allowed. It is the saddest thing," she

"I didn't go to the second war. One was enough for me."





BUCKINGHAM PALACE.

The Queen and I wish you God-speed,  
and a safe return to your homes and dear  
ones.

A grateful Mother Country is proud of your  
splendid services characterized by unsurpassed  
devotion and courage.

*George R.I.*





*The War of 1914-1918.*

*Q. A. I. M. N. S. R. (Australia)  
S./Nurse Miss M. Loughron.*

*was mentioned in a Despatch from*

*General Sir Douglas Haig, G.C.B., K.C.I.E., K.C.V.O., A.D.C.*

*dated 30<sup>th</sup> April 1916*

*for gallant and distinguished services in the Field.*

*I have it in command from the King to record His Majesty's  
high appreciation of the services rendered.*

*Lucius D. Churchill*

*Secretary of State for War.*

*War Office  
Whitehall, S.W.  
1<sup>st</sup> March 1919.*