

CHAPTER 32

THE R.A.A.F. NURSING SERVICE

UNTIL 1940 R.A.A.F. sick were nursed by male nursing orderlies or by civilian nurses. The latter were engaged for short periods on occasions when emergency surgery was carried out at station sick-quarters. Early in 1940 outbreaks of minor infectious diseases, influenza, rubella and mumps, swept through R.A.A.F. units, and Group Captain Daley arranged for the continuous employment of 16 civilian nurses. Four were allocated to Laverton, 2 to Point Cook, 5 to Ascot Vale and 5 to Richmond. Later their number was increased. With the rapid expansion of the air force in 1940 and later, this was not enough, and it became clear that a nursing service was required within the air force. R.A.A.F. nurses, in addition to benefiting the sick by their high professional standard of attention, could be used for the instruction of nursing orderlies, and so increase the orderlies' efficiency in the smaller units in whose establishments nurses could not be included.

In June 1940 Air Commodore Hurley recommended to the Air Member for Personnel that an air force nursing service should be formed, and in the same month the recommendation was approved by the Minister. The establishment of a reserve was also recommended, but approval for this was withheld until 1948. The R.A.A.F. Nursing Service which came into being on 26th July 1940, was modelled on the Princess Mary's Royal Air Force Nursing Service, with conditions and rates of pay similar to those of the army nursing service. The suggested provisional establishment was:

Laverton . . .	(200 beds)	12	nurses	initially,	increasing to	20
Richmond . . .	(150 ")	10	"	"	"	15
Pearce . . .	(100 ")	6	"	"	"	10
No. 1 Engineering						
School, Victoria . . .	(100 ")	6	"	"	"	10
Evans Head . . .	(40 ")	4	"	"	"	6

Miss M. I. Lang, who had served at Salonika in the 1914-18 War, was appointed Matron-in-Chief. She was attached to R.A.A.F. Headquarters in the Directorate of Medical Services and later was given status equivalent to that of a Director. Her functions were to direct and supervise the service, and to advise the D.G.M.S. on all matters concerning nursing in hospitals and in medical rehabilitation and other units and sick-quarters, and the appointment, posting, promotion and discharge of R.A.A.F. nurses. She was to be represented by a Principal Nursing Officer in each State or Territory of the Commonwealth and in all R.A.A.F. areas, groups and commands as the necessity arose. Miss M. K. Doherty, who became Matron of No. 3 R.A.A.F. Hospital on 16th September 1940, was the Principal Nursing Officer of No. 2 Training Group and for all units in New South Wales and Queensland.

The Matron-in-Chief visited each State to interview applicants and to make selections. She was assisted in New South Wales by Miss Doherty. Members of the nursing service were selected from some of the civilian nurses employed by the R.A.A.F., from the reserve of the Australian Army Nursing Service and from hundreds of volunteers from all over the Commonwealth. To achieve selection a candidate was required

- (a) to be a female between the ages of 21 and 40 years, unmarried, or a divorcee or widow without dependent children under 16 years of age. (A female between 40 and 50 years could be appointed if she fulfilled the other requirements and possessed special qualifications);
- (b) to be registered as a general nurse or masseuse in a State or Territory of the Commonwealth of Australia; and
- (c) to have passed such medical examinations as were approved by the Air Board.

Members of the R.A.A.F. Nursing Service held the following ranks:

Matron-in-Chief: Group Captain
Principal Matron: Wing Commander
Senior Sister: Flight Lieutenant
Sister, Staff Masseuse: Flying Officer

In the early years of the war the lowest rank was Sister and Staff Masseuse Grade II, but from the 23rd March 1943 the first appointment was as Sister or Staff Masseuse. Members entered the Service on six months' probation, after which period, in the absence of an official adverse report, their appointment was confirmed. They were liable to render continuous service either within or beyond the limits of the Commonwealth of Australia, and were promoted on the same principle as male officers of the R.A.A.F. Their appointment was terminated at a prescribed age which varied from time to time, or on marriage.

The outdoor uniform of R.A.A.F. nurses was Norfolk coat and skirt—in winter of air force blue whipcord or baratheia, in summer of drab gabardine—a white blouse, black tie and pin, fawn stockings, black shoes and black kid or nappa gloves, and a dark blue felt hat. A greatcoat of air force blue and a dark blue belted raincoat completed the outdoor uniform. Indoors, nurses wore a white cotton uniform with a shoulder cape of blue velour, white shoes and stockings, a white organdie veil and, when necessary, an air force blue woollen cardigan. Later a mess dress was designed of air force blue silk, with detachable collar and cuffs, and a cape. With this black court shoes and silk stockings were worn. Medical Branch badges were attached to uniforms and capes and officers' badges to hats. When the W.A.A.A.F. was formed a move was made to standardise the footwear of the women's services, and also prevent the fatigue and postural faults caused by unsuitable footwear. A committee was formed, and a comfortable flat-heeled, laced shoe, in multiple fittings, was designed.

When the Empire Air Training Scheme got under way at the end of 1940 52 members of the R.A.A.F. Nursing Service were attached to the

medical staff of the official escort parties which accompanied trainees overseas. Seven nurses were included in escort parties from Australia to the United States, and the rest in parties from Australia to Canada and the United Kingdom.

In October 1941 four R.A.A.F. nurses were posted to Darwin. They found their living quarters cool and comfortable, as were the station sick-quarters. The only complaint they might have had was that their life was a little monotonous. If so, this ceased to be true when Japan entered the war; the possibility of air raids was immediately envisaged, and orders were given that a practice evacuation of the hospital was to be carried out each day; the nurses had their belongings packed and patients were given tin hats and respirators and told to keep these, together with gown and slippers, by their beds. The efficacy of this drill was demonstrated on 19th February 1942. At 9.45 a.m. the air raid alarm sounded and within ten minutes the patients and staff had evacuated the hospital. Senior Sister I. M. Smith described the Japanese attack on the air force station which followed:

As we were going to our trenches we could see high up nine clusters each of nine planes. We were in the trenches for about half an hour when a formation flew over. They came down very low and stayed for 40 minutes which seemed like two hours. The relief was wonderful when we heard the all clear. We all went to our posts and attended to quite a few minor casualties and evacuated the patients safely to the 119th A.G.H. After a short interval we were back to our trenches to undergo a most awful experience.

The planes came over in perfect formation, and let us have it. The noise was terrific. A bomb exploded ten yards from our trench, and believe me, we thought our end had arrived. Although our trench was of rock formation, the vibration caused it to tremble, and the dirt and rubble fell on our backs and tin hats.

When the all clear sounded our S.M.O., Squadron Leader Howle, called for Senior Sister, and was surprised when we all hopped out of our trench in good condition. Apparently, he thought we had been buried when the bomb exploded so close to our trench. We shall never forget the sight which then met our gaze. The huge hangars were burning, also the equipment store, post office and the administrative block of the hospital, dental section, X-ray and dispensary. We went back to the hospital and rescued equipment which we had packed and stored in trenches.

Later we went to our quarters to prepare a meal for the staff and medical officer and found the water and light were cut off. Our home had been strafed and there were bullet holes in our uniforms which were hanging in our rooms. Just as we were going to have a snack the alarm sounded again and the sisters were ordered on to an American truck and were taken out to the bush. Fortunately we had been packed for several weeks previously. We stayed in the bush for two hours waiting to know our fate.

This turned out to be a period of duty at the 119th A.G.H., which, in addition to army, navy and air force patients, was overflowing with civilian patients. The R.A.A.F. nurses helped out at the army hospital until it was decided to transfer the air force station back to Daly Waters.

We went back to the R.A.A.F. Station for the first time since the raids, and boarded a Hudson, and left for Daly Waters (wrote Senior Sister Smith). It was

the first time for many a year that they had had no rain. It was very hot and dusty. We walked about one mile from the aerodrome to the little hotel which was the station sick-quarters, officers' and sisters' living quarters.

There were several patients with dysentery, dengue and malaria and an American airman very ill with blackwater fever. We firstly attended to the patients and secondly to the washing—there were stacks of soiled linen everywhere. It could hardly be called washing as there was not an atom of soap to be had anywhere.

When we first arrived we had an out-patients of 100, but they gradually decreased as conditions improved.

Flies were there in millions. The keeping of food was a problem as there was only one refrigerator for hospital patients and staff, but after the first week the Americans delivered ice daily, their camp being 20 miles away. Things were very quiet for the patients as there was nothing there for their welfare until the Red Cross representative arrived from Alice Springs.

The sisters adapted themselves fairly quickly to tropical conditions but for the first few weeks sandfly bites and minor skin conditions were troublesome.

Medical conditions at Daly Waters improved when No. 1 Medical Receiving Station was established on 25th March 1942. Six months later it was transferred to Coomalie Creek, 60 miles south of Darwin. Many of the men admitted to the unit there had been involved in aircraft and road accidents, some of the former suffering from first and second-degree burns. Such patients required special attention, and placed a heavy burden on the nursing staff in the trying conditions of the Territory. The nurses had to use primus stoves to cook special diets and to boil water for sterilising. Laundry facilities were poor, and on occasions when the mobile laundry was out of order the nurses had to do the washing. Their indoor uniform veils had a tendency to go limp in the heat, and they found it almost impossible to keep them neat. Night duty was exhausting owing to the difficulty of sleeping in the day when it was hottest, and 7 to 10 days' night duty was about the most anyone could stand.

A lesson learned from the Darwin raid was that the nurses' white uniforms were clearly visible from the air, and formed targets for enemy aircraft. To remove this hazard an instruction was given in March 1942 that the white uniforms of nurses serving in forward areas were to be dyed drab, strong tea to be used for the purpose.

In November 1942 four nurses were posted to No. 3 M.R.S. at Port Moresby. The M.R.S., situated in the almost treeless June Valley beside Ward's Airfield, was set up in widely dispersed tented wards. The nurses were also accommodated in tents. Mosquitoes were bad, and the uniform for malarious and potentially malarious areas was issued, consisting of drab, long-sleeved shirts or safari jackets, shoulder straps with detachable rank braid, drab slacks, black boots and canvas gaiters and fur felt hats with R.A.A.F. puggaree and flash. This was to be worn from sunset until after sunrise; during daylight hours the normal indoor uniform was worn.

Work in the wards was heavy, and sleep was often disturbed by enemy aircraft, the nurses having their first experience of an air raid on their second night in Papua. Despite the difficult conditions, their health remained good.

In July 1942 Air Vice-Marshal Hurley had instructed Principal Medical Officers that recommendations for positions and attachment of nurses were only to be made after consultation with the Principal Nursing Officer in the area or group concerned. In the case of No. 2 Training Group and all units in New South Wales and Queensland this was Matron Doherty. The responsible member in the Western Area was Sister N. M. F. Monger, Sister-in-Charge at the R.A.A.F. Station, Pearce; and in South Australia Senior Sister L. E. Dohnt, Sister-in-Charge of the R.A.A.F. Wing, Royal Adelaide Hospital.

By the end of 1943 there were large numbers of nurses serving in operational areas, and in October the D.G.M.S. recommended to the Director of Organisation that the Matron-in-Chief should have an officially accredited representative in No. 9 (Operational) Group, North-Western Area, and each of the capital cities, as she had already in Sydney and Perth. As a result, the establishment was amended to provide for:

No. 1 Training Group—Matron Dohnt was appointed for duty with the Deputy Principal Medical Officer, Adelaide, on 12th April 1944.

No. 2 Training Group—Matron E. E. Ward was appointed for duty with the Deputy Principal Medical Officer, Brisbane, on 21st June 1944.

No. 9 (Operational) Group—Matron A. J. Wheatley was appointed for duty on 24th November 1943.

No. 1 Medical Receiving Station—Matron C. J. McRae was appointed for administration duty when required with the Principal Medical Officer, Western Area, on 29th April 1944.

It was not considered that purely administrative appointments to North-Western Area and North-Eastern Area would be justified as the matron of No. 1 Medical Receiving Station would be able to undertake any administrative duties necessary in the North-Western Area, while the area of the matron in Brisbane covered the whole of Queensland, including North-Eastern Area. The matron at R.A.A.F. Headquarters was responsible for duties in Tasmania as well as in Victoria and the matron of No. 9 (Operational) Group was required to supervise all aspects of nursing in medical receiving stations, medical clearing stations and convalescent depots within that group to which sisters were posted. In May 1944 it was considered that a matron was required at No. 1 Training Group for duty with the Principal Medical Officer, Melbourne, and Matron Wheatley was given this appointment on 22nd August 1944. Her responsibilities included the supervision of nursing in units in Tasmania to which members of the service were posted.

The Matron-in-Chief had one assistant at R.A.A.F. Headquarters, Senior Sister M. G. Greening. With the expansion of the service further assistance became necessary, and on 9th September 1943 Matron N. M. F. Monger was appointed to the staff of the Matron-in-Chief, and in September 1945 Senior Sister J. H. Kelly. Sister Kelly's duties were concerned almost entirely with equipment.

The instruction of trainee nursing orderlies in general nursing procedures had been the responsibility of senior medical orderlies, but at

the beginning of 1943 this duty was taken over by members of the nursing service. It was decided also to train members of the W.A.A.A.F. as sick-quarters attendants and nursing orderlies, and their training likewise became the province of the nursing service.

Training was carried out in the wards of hospitals and sick-quarters until March 1943 when an establishment was made for a sister tutor at the medical training section, R.A.A.F. Station, Laverton, and simultaneously three tutor sisters were selected for advanced training in R.A.A.F. hospitals. Their number was later increased to eight, all being occupied on full-time training. In August, when a special unit was established for the training of medical personnel at "Larundel", Victoria, a senior sister and a sister were included on the teaching staff. During the nurses' period at "Larundel" over 600 men successfully completed the courses held there for medical orderlies.

The training of W.A.A.A.F. personnel interested in nursing was carried out in three phases, in each of which the nursing service participated. An initial general nursing course of three weeks' duration for girls without any experience was instituted in May 1943, and carried out at both the training centres. The second phase of training, consisting of lectures on elementary anatomy and physiology, hygiene and general nursing, was given at all units by a medical officer and members of the nursing service. After completing twelve months' service and passing the Phase 2 examination, sick-quarters attendants were posted either to No. 1 Hospital, Wagga, New South Wales, No. 3 Hospital, Concord, New South Wales, or to No. 6 Hospital, Heidelberg, Victoria, where Phase 3 of their training, a three-months course in advanced nursing, was held. Lectures were attended daily and practical experience gained in the wards under the supervision of a tutor sister. On satisfactorily completing this course a W.A.A.A.F. sick-quarters attendant was eligible for remuster to nursing orderly.

In February 1944 the Air Board approved of the inauguration of a medical air evacuation transport unit and in the following month No. 1 M.A.E.T.U. came into existence. Nurses were included in its establishment and applicants for air evacuation duties were called for from nurses within the service who were:

- between the ages of 21 and 30;
- at least 5 feet 4 inches in height;
- not more than 130 pounds in weight;
- medically fit A4B;
- recommended by the commanding officer of hospital or senior medical officer of unit to which the sister was attached at the time of application.

When applications closed 100 sisters had volunteered, and the first 15 were selected and posted to the Medical Training Unit for two weeks' special training. Senior Sister N. I. Kendrick, an original member of the R.A.A.F. Nursing Service, was appointed Sister-in-Charge.

Later a second medical air evacuation unit, No. 2, was formed, and nurses were included in its establishment also.

Both the outdoor and working uniform of nurses serving in medical air evacuation units were the same as that for malarious areas, except that a blue field-service cap could be worn instead of a hat, and, for high altitudes, a blue fur-lined flying jacket with rank braid on shoulder straps was added. Several types of combination flying suits had been tried, but none proved so successful or comfortable as the slacks and shirt, worn with a jacket if necessary, while the cap was ideal for working in the aircraft.

The aircraft of the M.A.E.T.U's flew into forward areas while fighting was still going on to bring out the wounded, but it was not until the war was over that there were any casualties among the nurses of the units. Sister M. E. Craig of No. 2 M.A.E.T.U. was killed when the aircraft in which she was flying with wounded men crashed between Biak and Merauke in Dutch New Guinea on 18th September 1945. Sister V. B. Sheah of No. 1 M.A.E.T.U. was killed in an aircraft accident on 15th November 1945, while tending wounded servicemen on board an aircraft which left Jacquot Bay for Rabaul.

The M.A.E.T.U's made an outstanding contribution to the air evacuation of former prisoners of the Japanese. Sister H. A. Cleary, who took part in the work, has described the airlift of former prisoners to Singapore:

It was my privilege to be one of the first of three R.A.A.F. Nursing Sisters to fly our boys from the various prisoner-of-war camps back to Singapore. The other sisters concerned were Senior Sister M. A. Braid and Sister M. H. Wroe. We were only allowed to take 35 pounds of baggage, including medical kits.

Because of lack of information regarding the situation in Singapore, several paratroopers were on the Dakota to jump with rations and equipment should we be unable to land. The aircraft would then return to Labuan to await further orders. However, our landing at Singapore was uneventful. We were the first Australians to arrive; this was about ten days after the surrender of the Japanese.

The British, who preceded us by a few days, were dismayed to find sisters arriving and feared for our safety owing to the presence of 40,000 armed Japanese who were still on the island, and thought we should return to our base at Morotai. However, we impressed on them that we had vital work to do, so accommodation was found for us at one of the hotels. When I say accommodation, conditions were very primitive. We slept on the floor on a blanket, having no lights or water for toilet facilities, and rations as you can imagine were very scarce, but the main point was that we stayed.

On the night of our arrival we met many Australian prisoners. They were hungry for news, especially of home, and we talked incessantly, answering their innumerable questions. The next morning we went out to visit Changi prison camp to see the Australians, especially those who were so ill. . . . It was impossible to realise all they had been through. I recall that one of the worst cases we saw at Changi was an Englishman who weighed less than 4 stone.

I had thought when evacuating battle casualties from the front lines that we were doing an important job, but here was something much bigger, and it was our aim to get the prisoners back to civilisation and decent conditions, where they could be nursed to health as quickly as possible. And so our work began. More suitable accommodation had to be found, and preferably as near to the Kallang airport as possible. By this time another five sisters had joined us and later still four more arrived. We flew British servicemen and Dutch civilians as

well as our Australian boys from the camps in Java, Thailand and Sumatra to Singapore, where many of them spent some time in hospital before returning to their homeland.

So many things seemed to be happening, as we were flying every day, always without normal navigational or radio aids. On the short trips we would do a shuttle run, while on the longer trips, on which sufficient fuel had to be carried for the return flight, an overnight stay was necessary. Varied were the places in which we were accommodated, from an Indian medical detachment to a Thai officers' mess. The planes were loaded beyond capacity. The Dakota has a loading capacity of 27, and we often had as many as 46 on board, which did not leave much room for moving around, but it seemed so hard to leave anyone behind even for only one more day. Most of the evacuees were suffering from malnutrition and dysentery, so the general conditions within the aircraft can well be imagined, and practical nursing as we know it was impossible.

There is one other aspect of my stay in Singapore that stands out in my memory. It was the formal signing of the surrender. Thousands of Asians lined the streets for miles along the route to the building. Allied servicemen who had arrived since the surrender were most spectacular in their different uniforms, and of course the air forces of the Allies were in evidence over the area, flying in formation displays during the actual signing of the document. After the arrival of Lord Louis Mountbatten and party six high ranking Japanese officers were brought forward and taken into the building and ceremoniously stripped of their swords. Although we missed witnessing this climax, the occasion was memorable with the crowds, the Japanese arrogant even in these circumstances and everywhere feelings running high.

Although the entire air lift took only about one month, with such consistent flying and early rising, it seemed much longer. However, it was a most rewarding experience.

Membership of the R.A.A.F. Nursing Service had expanded from 45 in December 1940 to 616 in December 1945. At the end of hostilities plans were made for demobilisation. This was arranged on the points system, sisters being given three points for each year of age on enlistment plus one point for each month of service to the end of the war in the Pacific. First postings for demobilisation were made from the 3rd January 1946 when fourteen members of the service were released.

In September 1948 a peace-time service was formed. The nursing of members of the R.A.A.F. in the period between the end of hostilities and the formation of the peace-time service in 1948 was performed by sisters of the R.A.A.F. Nursing Service who volunteered to serve in the Interim Air Force. A number of these sisters were appointed to the permanent service.