

## CHAPTER V of The War Effort of New Zealand

### **New Zealand Army Nurses.**

By MISS H. MACLEAN , MATRON-IN-CHIEF .

The entry of the nurses of New Zealand into the great war dates back to August 15th, 1914, when six of their number were sent with the Advance Expeditionary Force at three days' notice. Eager to go, yet not knowing whither, these nurses set off under Miss Bertha Nurse as matron, and were somewhat disappointed when they found that they were landed far from the fighting front—at Samoa. All however, had afterwards the chance, so hoped for, to go to the other side of the world, and to share to some extent in the dangers and hardships of the troops. For several months it was not thought that New Zealand nurses would be required for our men. The authorities did not then realise the awful need which very shortly arose at Gallipoli for help for the sick and wounded. The nurses, however, made urgent demands to go with the transports, and the New Zealand Nursing Service, which up to the outbreak of war was merely a name, with a Matron-in-Chief as head of a phantom unit, was then rapidly organised, and in a very short time there were hundreds of applications for membership from all over the Dominion.

Many nurses also set off to England and there offered their services, and they, as well as those belonging to the New Zealand Service, did splendid work in many parts of the world. There is not opportunity in this short account to give the history of the many efforts which the nurses made to be allowed to do their share in the national crisis, to accompany the men who were going forth to fight, and to succour them, when sick and wounded.

On April 8th, 1915, the first contingent of fifty nurses under the Matron-in-Chief, Miss Maclean, set sail from New Zealand in the s.s. *Rotorua* , now at the bottom of the English Channel. A picturesque group they made in their



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coats of grey and scarlet, so well known as the British Army Nurses' uniform, varied somewhat to distinguish their special unit, and with a silver badge of fern leaf and a red cross to represent New Zealand. On May 17th this contingent landed in England and proceeded to London, where orders were given them to go on to Egypt to join the New Zealand forces. A busy fortnight ensued in procuring field equipment and again the contingent started off, in the troopship *Scotian*, in company with seventy Imperial nurses (among whom were two New Zealanders), to be later disembarked at Gibraltar and Malta, with nine hundred troops for Gallipoli. On June 18th Alexandria was reached; and now the nurses felt that their long travel was over and that they would be able to commence the work for which they longed. They had heard of the urgent need of help in the hospitals, which were then filling with cases of terrible wounds, and the most distressing diseases, from Gallipoli.

The party was met at Alexandria by the Matron-in-Chief for Egypt and the Eastern Front, and warmly welcomed by the matrons of the hospitals in Alexandria where the shortage of nurses was very great. The contingent of fifty was then divided between Alexandria and Cairo, and the different Imperial hospitals in Alexandria,

the Citadel in Cairo (which is the regular military hospital and which had been the palace of the Empress Eugenie) and the Egyptian Army Hospital, Abbassieh, which had been allotted to the New Zealand troops. It was a surprise to find this hospital run by New Zealanders, and staffed by Australian and English sisters, because the sisters had been so long assured that New Zealand nurses were not needed. This hospital was now staffed by the newly-arrived New Zealand nurses under Miss Bertha Nurse, and here for the next year, were located the New Zealand Nurses' Headquarters in Egypt. The hospital which then provided for only 300 patients, grew until there were 1,000 beds. The nurses had many difficulties to contend with; their quarters were cramped and inconvenient; they were frequently very short staffed, as only a proportion of the nurses arriving subsequently from New Zealand could be sent here; the heat was very trying; and working

in tents and pavilions pitched on the sand tested their endurance. The serious cases of dysentery and of enteric from Gallipoli necessitated nursing skill of the highest order, and brought forth all the loving kindness and patience that accompany the skill of a good nurse.

Contingent followed contingent from New Zealand, and during the next few months another hundred nurses arrived and were posted to the various hospitals. One party of thirty-one accompanied the personnel of the No. 1 N.Z. Stationary Hospital to Port Said, and were under the charge of Miss Marie Cameron. There they remained until October under conditions still more unfavourable than at Cairo. Miss Cameron ably managed the nursing in pavilion tents on the sand. The patients were sent there to convalesce, some seriously ill with enteric and dysentery, and some with wounds.

In October they set forth on that ill-fated expedition to Salonika, when on the 23rd, the transport *Marquette* was torpedoed in the Aegean Sea, almost within sight of Salonika. Ten of the thirty-six nurses were lost, and eighteen of the medical orderlies. This was the greatest disaster experienced by the New Zealand Army Nursing Service, and it was the first of many that during the war befel the nurses of the British armies. Perhaps it was the worst of nurses' experiences not only because of the terrible loss of life in proportion to numbers but because of the long drawn out suffering of those many hours in the water—hours during which strong men succumbed or became raving mad. The accounts given by some of the survivors show the sufferings endured during those awful moments which lasted from 9 a.m. till the time of rescue at 4 p.m. One account by a surviving sister may be quoted:—

"At 9 a.m. on October 23rd," she wrote, "I was on the top deck of the *Marquette* walking with Captain Isaacs and Sister Sinclair. The morning was cold, and we had our coats on. He exclaimed: 'I wonder what that is coming

towards us.' I said, 'It looks like a torpedo, does it not?' Surely enough the crash came then, and we realised what it was (it was just a straight, thin, green line in the water and the swish could be heard distinctly). I should think it was only about fifty yards away when we saw it. We donned our life belts and got to our stations; everyone seemed to be doing the same thing. All realised what had happened and were calm and collected—no panic, no sound in fact, save of orders being given. Luckily the steamer took quite seven minutes to go down. The launching of the boats was a decided failure. On the port side one was launched on top of the other, crushing and injuring some; also, the ship by this time had a huge list to port side. On the starboard side (I was there) the first boat launched tipped, and those who were not shot out into the sea then, had to get out as soon as it touched water, as there was a huge hole in it. People clambered round her from all sides until she finally submerged. Then we all ducked for our lives. I swam about for hours, but as I had crushed my right arm between the boat and the ship somehow or other I was feeling very sick and sore. I really did not mind much what happened. After I realised what was going on I saw some men hanging on to wreckage, and called to them to ask if I might also hang on, and they said it was no good, there were already too many there. Then one of the crew saw me and came along to me with a piece of board, to which I clung for some time. Then he said to me, 'Look out, sister, there is a shark right behind you, paddle for your life.' I did so, though I'd rather drown than be eaten by a shark. I did see the fin of something showing above the water near by; but they have since told me there are no sharks in the Mediterranean. It must have been the ear of a mule, I think. Anyhow we got out of its track, and made for a submerged boat in the distance, where already several men were. We got into this, and immediately it turned turtle, and continued to do so every five minutes of the remaining number of hours we were in the water. My rescuer died soon after this from cramp or exhaustion. I was sorry I could do nothing for him. Sister Rae came up afterwards, hanging to the lifebuoy of one of our New Zealand boys. She asked me if she could come into the boat. I said, 'Yes, sister, but you had better be hanging on to something else, as this boat keeps turning turtle, and it is such hard work clambering over and into it



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again.' She held out for a while, but soon after showed signs of exhaustion and died. I wondered if I should be the next. Men died on all sides. Some lost their reason and went away from us all. We could see ships pass and repass in the distance, but they took no notice of us. They could neither see nor hear us, but we could not realise that, and thought that because they were neutral they would let us die! Late in the afternoon one stopped and seemed to look at us, turned back, and steamed away, then stopped again and lowered a boat, but picked it up and steamed away.

"Luckily for us our own English patrol boat saw her movements and became suspicious, journeyed over to see, and caught sight of one of our boats in the distance (we were about seven miles from all this.) She then informed two French destroyers; and all three came to our rescue, and soon we all were picked up and looked after well by these kind men who patrol the danger zone every day. Many died even after the boats were in sight; it seemed too much for them.

"We were then transferred to the *Grantully Castle* hospital ship, in Salonika harbour, where all were goodness itself to us. Some of us who were fit went ashore in Salonika for a couple of days. It is a filthy evil smelling town, and not by any means a desirable place of abode. In two days we were ordered back on board and taken to Alexandria, where we still are, trying to get equipped; but in Egypt that is no easy matter as things are so dear."

Long after, the fate of two sisters was learnt. A boat in which were the bodies of several soldiers and two sisters was found by a British warship, and brought into Salonika, where the dead were given a naval funeral. These sisters were Margaret Rogers and Helena Isdell. The other sisters who were lost were Marion Brown, Isobel Clark, Catherine Fox, Mary Gorman, Mona Hildyard, Mabel Jamieson, Mary Rae, Lora Rattray. All accounts of the disaster emphasise the splendid heroism and quiet obedience of the sisters. A medical officer wrote, "of their conduct as a whole no words can express our admiration. They mustered quietly and quickly at their alarm posts, and cheerfully, and without the least confusion or panic, passed along the deck to their boats,

and never once during the long day did I hear any of these sisters who were able to stick it out make any complaint."

When after the rescue and return to Alexandria volunteers were called to start again for Salonika, there was no lack of response, and disappointment was keen when it was finally decided that the nurses after all were not to accompany the Stationary Hospital. But the effect of the long immersion and the shock has never left some of the sisters. The matron, Miss Cameron, has been totally incapacitated ever since and it was with the greatest pleasure that the news of

the award to her of the Royal Red Cross was received. With two or three exceptions, the nurses who went through this terrible experience remained on duty for the whole term of the war, some of them serving cheerfully on hospital ships passing over the very waters under which are the bodies of their companions. Several of these sisters have received decorations and have been mentioned in despatches for their good service. In memory of those who lost their lives on this occasion, and of Sister Hawken who died of enteric at Alexandria, of Sister Cooke who was killed by accident, and Sister Lind who died of phthisis contracted on barge duty in France, and Sisters Wishaw and Tubman of influenza, has been established the Nurses' Memorial Fund to help nurses who from sickness or other cause have been unable to provide for their declining years.

Another hundred nurses were sent from New Zealand in hospital ships—the *Marama's* first commission and the *Maheno's* second commission—at the end of 1915 and the beginning of 1916. Of these some were landed in Egypt, and some were sent straight to England, where, until the New Zealand Head-quarters were moved to England, they served in Imperial hospitals.

In Egypt the sisters who had first arrived and had been sent to Imperial hospitals had made their mark, and were so valued that they were retained. The British Matron-in-Chief, Miss Oram, R.R.C., greatly appreciated the New Zealand sisters: "they were always ready for anything and were so adaptable and resourceful." The surgeons found them well-trained and careful. The nurses were sought after by the

matrons of the various Imperial hospitals. When directed to open a new hospital, one British matron said: "I will not mind doing it if I may have some New Zealand sisters." They were given responsible positions and justified the trust thus placed in them. One matron said when so promoting them: "You girls deserve it, for you have helped me through a most trying time and I always feel I can depend on my New Zealand sisters in any emergency. In fact I consider them the backbone of my hospital."

The New Zealand sisters served in virtually all the fields of war. Some were with our own hospitals and hospital ships, and, therefore, their work will be chronicled in other pages; and others were on the staff of many Imperial ships—ships going to the Peninsula, to German East Africa, Mesopotamia; on the run to and from France in all the appalling days of the great fighting; bringing refugees from Siberia; with Indian troops to Bombay; on transport duty to and from New Zealand—on hospital trains in Egypt, and running up to Palestine—fighting against sea sickness, heat strokes, and cold—never complaining. Some were stationed in East Africa; in India; away on the desert at Ismailia; at El Arish. They

came back worn and tired, but ready still to carry on. An account by a sister of duty on hospital ship in the Persian Gulf is well worth recording:—

"We arrived at the bar up the Persian Gulf (on the way to Basra), in five days. The heat was intense. The ship drew too much water to proceed further, and we received a wireless saying a small ferry hospital ship would come alongside. There are seven ferry ships 'doing' the river, and embarking to the bigger hospital ships at the rate of one a day. In June, 10,000 sick men were sent from Basra, in July, 15,000, while in August, 10,000 are expected to be sent. We embarked our 500 patients, and 79 of them were put on deck. The heat was appalling, and many men were very, very ill, so that we were taxed to the utmost, and, before we had finished our day's work which was usually at midnight, we were soaked through and through—even our white dresses were wet to the knees. Is there any wonder we were run down in a few days? The men have much to put up with, and we all think it

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worse than the Peninsula. It is appalling! We had many heat strokes amongst the patients, stewards, engineers, and crew, and the only way to save their lives was to get them into packs or baths, give them plenty of iced drinks, with stimulant, and to keep going till you saw signs of consciousness. We lost twenty-one patients in four days; and some of them were ill only for four hours. In a few days we were very run down. They gave us champagne, and had special beef tea made for us. If we showed our faces for a breath of air, the men would rush and get us chairs and bring cool drinks. We got nasty pains in the left side, and could at times barely lift our feet to get to our cabins to lie down for a quarter of an hour, for otherwise we would never have carried on. The O.C. has a slight heat stroke and has been sent off the ship for six weeks. On our arrival at Bombay we were not fit for much, but very pleased we managed to stick to it. There really was too much at stake: the 500 lives in our charge were more important than our own; and that was the spirit of the nurses on the ship, also of the medical men. In my ward there were 200 lbs. of ice used. My right hand got chilled as a result. Many of the other nurses and orderlies became septic, and had to have their hands opened."

Another sister wrote an account of her work at the No. 15 General Hospital, Alexandria. She was nursing under canvas as supervising sister in charge of tents containing 260 beds, with nine orderlies to help. During the days of the big convoys from Gallipoli they were attending to 166 to 190 dressings a day. Some of the "gun-shot" wounds were terrible, but there was nothing so bad as the frost bite. The hospital was very busy until the evacuation of Gallipoli, and this sister, up to the end of February, 1916, had 3,500 patients in her field of tents.

Another account of hospital ship duty runs:—"We arrived at Gallipoli for the Suvla landing on August 6th, 1915. We could see the fighting quite distinctly, and a few shells burst in the water quite near to my ship, but no damage was done. The hospital ships were used as casualty clearing stations, so you can imagine the state of the patients when we received them. The operating theatre was busy night and day. Hundreds passed through the out-patients' department. We

dressed the minor cases and passed them on to trawlers which took them to Lemnos Island. The weather was frightfully hot and the flies swarmed in with the patients. We worked between the beach and Lemnos Island (a distance of 40 miles) with an occasional run to Malta or Alexandria. We found the dysentery cases the most trying to nurse—how those poor men did suffer." In all accounts given at the time by the nurses it was the sufferings of the men that were emphasised; there was never a word of complaint about their own hardships.

A few words about the Serbians from another sister on hospital ship duty:—"We took over 300 sick Serbians, and, oh! the condition of them was pitiful; you could hardly believe men could get so low and live; they were so dirty, too, poor things,

and the body lice were awful. I had 62 patients in my ward when we left Valova and three days later when we arrived at Bizerte, there were only 40 left. It was pitiful and heartbreaking—there were over 60 deaths in a three days' run!"

The lighter side of the nurses' work in Egypt was experienced by the sisters at the Convalescent Home at Aotea, where three New Zealand sisters and some V.A.D. workers made a home for the men in Egypt—"The home away from home," which for rest and quiet enjoyment was most highly appreciated by the men. The matron said: "We try to run this Home as far as possible without rules and regulations." The Home was established in 1915 and was closed early in 1919. The sisters always received a warm welcome there to partake of home-made scones and New Zealand butter.

A privilege much enjoyed by the sisters was the opportunity of visiting the places of interest in Egypt, such as Assouan; and, in the later days of their sojourn there many had leave and went to the Holy Land and saw Jerusalem.