

Discovering Greta - Uniform

Discovering links with historical objects through inquiry – An ANZAC Nurse, Greta Towner

In August 2015, six Blackall State School students attended the State Library of Queensland (SLQ) White Gloves Day in Barcaldine as part of the SLQ Q ANZAC 100 – Memories for a New Generation project.

The students were hoping to see their first authentic object of Greta Towner's (rather than digital items) – the students went through an inquiry process – How do we know this object belonged to Greta Towner? Does it match the other records we have? How did it come to be in Barcaldine today?

The students inspected and photographically documented the uniform, as it does not reside in Blackall.

The starting point for inquiry was the medal set – much to the students' delight they were a match to the war record – the 1914-15 Star, the British War Medal and the Victory Medal – but where they Greta's? From research into medals and they knew to look on the edges and back of medals for a name – they all indeed had her name! In a direct match to Greta Towner's war record, her 1914-15 Star recognised Greta Towner as a Staff Nurse whilst the British War and Victory Medals recognised her as a Sister. These last two medals would have been released after her promotion to Sister in 1918.

They were indeed a match!



Image 1 - First World War Nursing Uniform - Did it belong to Sister Greta Towner?



Image 2 - the medals matched Sister Towner's war record – but there was no MID oak leaf. An article in 1919 reported Sr Towner as being mentioned in dispatches.



Image 3 - Inscription on 1914-15 Star reads S/Nurse G.N Towner A.N.S. A.I.F.

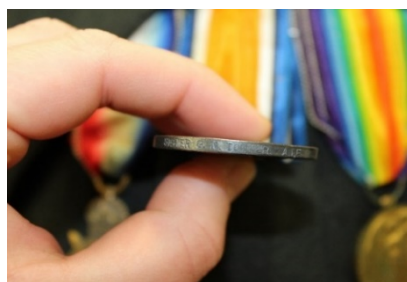


Image 4 – The British War Medal reads Sister G.N Towner A.I.F



Image 5 – The Victory Medal reads Sister Towner A.I.F

Other matches to Greta Towner's War Record included the colour patch with a brass "A" on the sleeve of the jacket. The brown star and green stripe indicated her association with the 1st Australian General Hospital (1 AGH) as recorded in Sister Towner's war service record. (A red stripe was used for the 2 AGH and blue for 3 AGH.)



Image 6 – Sister Towner's uniform showing the colour patch of the 1 AGH and the brass "A" indicating service in the Gallipoli Campaign

The brass "A" related to her service on Lemnos Island. The right to wear this and thus identify as an ANZAC, was granted in 1918 to nurses who served in casualty clearing stations, hospital and transport ships and those on Lemnos, Imbros and Tenedos Islands during the Gallipoli campaign.

The two pips between the Australia badge and button next to the nape of the red cape indicating a rank of Sister (the same as that of a Lieutenant). Again a match to Sister Towner's war service record!



Image 7 – Greta Towner's uniform with the two 'pips' of a nurse ranked as a 'Sister'

These matches boded well for the uniform as being associated with Sister Towner and confidence grew when discussion with the Tambo Heritage Committee, who are the current custodians of the uniform, revealed that a person related to Greta Towner had been given them the uniform.

Once the SLQ conservator began the process of inspecting the uniform and packing it appropriately in a safe storage manner for future conservation, it revealed that the cape had a label. Whilst somewhat damaged it was possible to make out 'Nurse Towner'.



Image 8 – The moment it was sealed – label reading "Nurse ... Towner"

The students were thrilled and amazed that Sister Towner's uniform, some 100 years on not only existed but also was in such good order. They were humbled to have interacted with an object that they felt a connection with and proud that their research had allowed them to question the uniform and confirm its association with Sister Towner – they knew who this uniform represented. Greta Norman Towner – a woman from their town.

A puzzling aspect of the uniform was that the ribbon set on the red cape did not match the ribbons of the medals. There was a sense of anticipation on this, hoping that the third ribbon might be a French one, given that in 1919, the *Sydney Sunday Times* newspaper reported Greta Towner as working in French Military Hospitals. Online research did not provide an answer, but the Australian War Memorial Heraldry department did. It is an unofficial ribbon for the Victory Medal from early-mid 1919 before the ribbon and medal design were finalised and issued.



Image 9 – the ribbon set that held out hope for French Military Service – but indicated Sr Towner getting the ribbon set before the Victory Medal and Ribbon had been decided on.

Did Sister Greta Towner wear this uniform and ribbon set when she arrived back at Blackall train station with her brother Lieutenant Towner VC MC in mid-1919? A newspaper article from July 1919 only reported their arrival not what they were wearing. Would she have ever marched on Anzac Day in the uniform?



Image 10 – Blackall State School students inspecting Sister Greta Towner's uniform

This was the students' first primary source other than objects they had viewed online. It has spurred them on in the hope finding or having others share content related to this Sister Towner, such as photos, letters, postcards and/or diaries. To discover more about this ANZAC.

Students will produce video on Sister Towner's life and their connection with her. Their video will be part of Blackall State School and the Blackall Historical Society's History Pin project, *From Blackall to Battle and Back*, as recipients of a grant from the State Library of Queensland through their Q ANZAC 100 – Memories for a New Generation, History Pin project.

Photos shared by Carroll Abel and Brigid Dendle.

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