

Discovering Greta – War Record

Source: *Discovering Anzacs*, <http://www.discoveringanzacs.naa.gov.au/>

Comments

The centenary of the First World War saw the National Archives of Australia place the war records of service men and women onto the Discovering Anzacs website. Once researchers knew of Greta Towner's existence, this became a primary source of information.

Greta Towner's record reveals:

Greta enlisted on 22nd July 1915 at 24 years of age, with the rank of Staff Nurse. Her war record shows her as being 5 foot 10 inches (178cm) and 11 stone (70kg), dark complexion, grey eyes and black hair.

Greta Towner embarked on RMS Orontes on 31 July 1915.

8th September 1915, registered to the 1st AGH (1st Australian General Hospital)

11th September 1915, began duty at the 1st AGH Heliopolis, Cairo.

Arrived Number 2 Australian Stationary Hospital, Lemnos on 17th September 1915. Departed Lemnos Island on January 24th 1916 to the transport ship, Demosthenes for Australia.

Embarked on the HMAT Kyarra A55, June 1916 from Brisbane. Embarked out of Sydney on HMAT Kyarra on November 17th 1916. Arrived in London in January 1917 and is assigned to No 2 Australian Auxiliary Hospital, Southall in England. This hospital specialised in amputations and the development of artificial limbs.

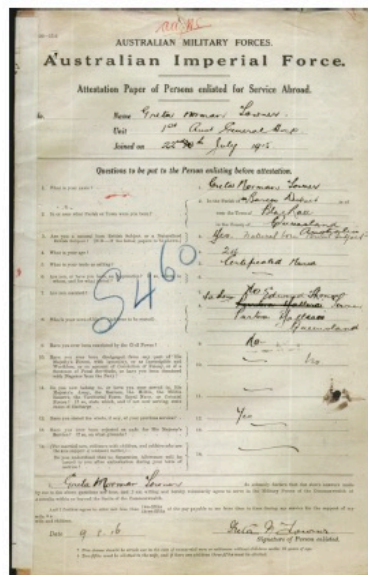
On February 24th 1917, Greta is detached from the hospital at Southall for a posting in France at the British 8th Australian Stationary Hospital based at Wimereux, arriving on the 2nd March 1917; later on 27th September, she is posted for duty with the No 1 Australian General Hospital (1AGH) in Rouen, France.

Her war record shows her being admitted to hospital with 'influenza' twice in 1918, promoted to Sister in that year and she takes a period of leave to the United Kingdom on 8th September until she resumed duties on the 24th September 1918. After her return home on the 15th January 1919, Greta is officially discharged on the 4th July 1919 in Australia.

Comment

Interesting to note is Greta Towner recording her father as Edward Towner, newspaper articles and birth registry records list E T Towner as Edgar Thomas Towner – the same name as one of his sons who is known today as Major Edgar Thomas Towner VC MC FRGSA.

Sister Greta Towner's war record affords us a timeline of her service in Egypt, at Lemnos (only one of 133 Australian nurses to serve there) as a nurse on the vessels, Demosthenes and Kyarra, and serving in both England and in France. Her service period is 3 years 11.5 months.



The service record does not tell of how she felt and what she experienced, however, further research in the hospitals she served at give an indication of the work she would have been involved with and the conditions under which she worked.

Using resources such as Kristy Harris's, *More than Bombs and Bandages* and other historical accounts of nursing in the First World War, including unit diaries accessed through the Australian War Memorial's online collection and the Through These Lines website a more complete understanding of Greta Towner's service can be discovered.

The books *We Are Here Too*, edited by Olive Young and *Kitty's War*, by Janet Butler based on the experiences of Sister Olive Haynes and Sister Kit McNaughton, provide valuable insight into Greta's experiences on Lemnos as the three women nursed together in the 2ASH on Lemnos. These two books also informed the productions of the television series: *The War That Changed Us* and *ANZAC Girls* – both screened on ABC Television in Australia. What follows here is an interpretation of Greta Towner's service based on these sources and her war record.

Greta Norman Towner – Her Service Story (Part 1 – Enlistment and Egypt)

Why Greta enlisted is not known, she was one of over 2 000 nurses that volunteered in the AANS during the First World War, serving here in Australia and overseas in England, India, Turkey, Greece, Egypt, Persia and Palestine as well as throughout Europe in France, England, Belgium, Germany and Italy. Perhaps they volunteered for adventure and travel, for pay, out of a sense of duty – or a combination of reasons. For whatever the reason, Greta and the other well-educated women heard the call to care for the sick and wounded volunteering to nurse.

On the 31st July 1915 Greta embarked from Sydney, Australia on the RMS Orontes. Her embarkation record has her assigned to the 2nd Australian General Hospital – 1-16 and Special Reinforcements however, her war record from Heliopolis, Egypt on 8th September 1915 records her assigned to the 1st Australian General Hospital (1st A.G.H) and on duty with 1st A.G.H on 11th September 1915. Greta Towner's uniform, which survives to this day, shows a chocolate star with a green stripe representing her service being associated with the 1st A.G.H.

The 1st A.G.H was established on January 14th 1915 at Heliopolis, a suburb of Cairo, in the Heliopolis Palace Hotel. Soon the hospital was overrun with patients and a variety of locations were sought to deal with the sick and injured including - an Aerodrome, the Luna Park fun park; the Atelier; the Sporting Club buildings and grounds at Heliopolis, and the Artillery Barracks at Abbassia Depots.

Once Greta embarked from Australia, she became part of the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) and was subject to military law under the *Army Act* as though they were commissioned officers. Thus, on the voyage, she would have spent time learning army procedures and nursing as required.

Greta began her service as a nurse in Egypt, dealing with the sick and injured transported from the Gallipoli campaign and those serving in Egypt and the Middle East. Perhaps she went to see the Pyramids, rode a camel and shopped at the bazaar or visited the famous Cairo Zoological Gardens.

Staff Nurse Greta had started her army service in Egypt, but she was not to stay there...

Greta Norman Towner – Her Service Story (Part 2 – Greta the ANZAC)

On the 13th September 1915, a short entry in Greta's war record marks the start of an experience that would no doubt have stayed with her for her entire life – it reads "*detailed for duty at Lemnos*".

Greta had gone from nursing at the Rockhampton Children's Hospital into the foreign world of Egypt and now onto the Number 2 Australian Standing Hospital (2ASH) at Mudros Bay on the Greek Island, Lemnos – off the coast of where the ANZACs were fighting at Gallipoli. The unit diary records her

arrival on September 17th 1915, after the failed August Offensive and the beginning of winter conditions.

Extract from Lemnos Island 2ASH Unit Diary – Showing the arrival of Greta Towner and other nurses on September 17th to 2 ASH (Source: AWM26/71/2)

Date	Place and Time	Remarks or References to Appendices, &c., Attached.
1915 Sep 17	WMLIDRIS Adm. Hq. 3 Bandaged 38 Rec. Hq. 547 25 Nurses arrived for duty with No 2 ASH. Supt. Nurse - R. Johnson M. H. H. J. H. Staff Nurse - WALSH M'NADONTON WATSON BASSETTI PARKARD POLLOCK PERRY	HYBSON DOYLE WEATHERHEAD STEEL MOCKRIDGE BLAKE HUMPHREY MCDONALD HERBEL TOWNER WEBB WATSON ALLEY

The conditions on Gallipoli had seen diseases such as dysentery, various fevers, rheumatics, gastritis and pneumonia become endemic. The sick and injured were transported to ships and islands including Lemnos Island where just months before the ANZAC's had practised their landings before the landing at Gallipoli on April 25th 1915.

Greta and her fellow nurses at the 2ASH worked in primitive conditions, caring for patients in tents without running water, sewage systems and indeed often with a lack of proper medical supplies to care for the men. The commanding officers did not warmly welcome Greta and her fellow nurses – it was the first time women had served in the 2ASH.

The nurses learnt new skills in managing their tented hospital – mending tears, re-hooking the walls or tightening and loosening the guy ropes, depending on the weather. When winter set in it was common for tents to collapse on the patients with the nurses pitching in to salvage the situation, including those injured by the collapse. Water was rationed, delivered by ships. The nurses improvised, tearing up sheets for bandages, turning off lamps and sitting in the dark to conserve fuel and propping up patients with rocks when bedding was not available.

Butler, in the *Official History of the Australian Army Medical Services* “believed that the conditions at Lemnos were more crude than any met with afterwards, perhaps than in any other war. The physical discomforts were great.”

Perhaps Greta's bush up bringing helped her cope with the challenging conditions, we may never know for sure, but she did survive her time on Lemnos, leaving the island on the 24th January 1916.

By September/October 1915, No. 2 Australian Stationary Hospital occupied sixty large marquee-tents, and had 1,200 beds and 25 nursing sisters (Butler, 388). On the island, 133 nurses served, Greta Norman Towner is counted in this significant group of women.



Greta's service at the 2ASH on Lemnos Island sees her as part of a select group of Australian women who earned the right to be called an ANZAC along with nurses on, Imbros and Tenedos islands and those on the hospital and transport ships and the men who saw service during the Gallipoli campaign. Greta's uniform signals her as an ANZAC with the small brass "A" central on the 1AGH patch on the upper left sleeve of her jacket.

Greta Norman Towner - Her Service Story (Part 3 – Sea Transport Nursing)

After the December 1915 evacuation of the Gallipoli Peninsula by the allied forces, Greta Towner departs Lemnos Island on the 24th January. Greta's war service record states: 'embarked for Australia per, Demosthenes ex Suez under instructions from D.M.S'. (Director of Medical Services) The ship, Demosthenes, was bound for Australia.

Greta is assigned to Sea Transport duties. A role that would have seen her caring for injured and sick ANZAC soldiers on ships returning to Australia and New Zealand from the hospitals in Egypt.

Conflicting in some way with the war record, The "Cairns Post" reported in June 1916: "Sister Greta, Towner, after spending several months at Lemnos. Island, was granted three months' furlough, returning to Brisbane, but was only in Brisbane a fortnight when she was recalled for duty."

Greta's embarkation records at the Australian War Memorial have her embarking on the ship, HMAT Kyarra A55 in June 1916 out of Brisbane as part of the Sea Transport nursing staff. She is then listed



Chocolate star and green stripe with a brass "A" – matching Greta Towner's service with 1AGH and at Lemnos – the A is for ANZAC. (Image of Greta Towner's nursing uniform by Bridget Dendle)

Sister Greta Towner, after spending several months at Lemnos Island, was granted three months' furlough, returning to Brisbane, but was only in Brisbane a fortnight when she was recalled for duty.

Article in Cairns Post describing Greta's return to Australia.

as embarking on the HMAT Kyarra on November 17th 1916 out of Sydney with the war record showing Greta arriving in London in January 1917.

Greta is assigned for duty at the No 2 Australian Axillary Hospital in Southall, England. This hospital specialised in amputations. The hospital also pioneered the development of artificial limbs.

The numbers in the unit diary can only lead one to imagine what Greta encountered at the Southall hospital that was set up in two local schools. The official unit dairy shows that over the period of January to August 1917 the No 2 AAH cared for 4 436 patients in their 486 beds, performing 611 amputations and supplied 344 artificial legs and 91 artificial arms.

Auxiliary Hospital Southall – Unit War Diary

Source: <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/RCDIG1014485/>

SYNOPSIS OF WAR DIARY OF NO.2 AUSTRALIAN AUXILIARY HOSPITAL, SOUTHALL
TILL END OF AUGUST 1917.

On 4th. August 1916 the St. Marylebone Schools, Southall was taken over by the Australian Imperial Forces and formed into a Hospital, the name given to the unit being the No.2 Australian Auxiliary Hospital.

Patients were first admitted on 1st. September 1916.

The O.C. was Major R.E. Shuter. On his staff were Captain K.R. Shaw Medical Officer and Lieut. L.J. Aspinall Q.M.

The full Hospital accomodation on 1st. September 1916 was 237 beds. On the 25th. of the month the Beaconsfield Schools about 400 yards away was taken over increasing the accomodation to 432 beds. On 9th. October this was further increased to 470.

From 1st. September 1916 to 31st. December 1916 the number of admissions was 3991, with two deaths.

~~At~~ At the end of the year there were remaining in hospital 450.

On November 28th. 1916 Lieut. Col. T.M. Martin C.M.G. was appointed Officer Commanding vice Major R.E. Shuter who was detailed for Transport duty to Australia.

In November the Hospital which till then had been a Clearing Hospital, commenced to specialize in the fitting of artificial limbs and since then till the end of August 1917 the number of artificial limbs supplied has been as follows:-

Artificial Legs. 344.

Artificial Arms. 91.

The total number of amputations dealt with till the end of August 1917 is 611, of which 46 are double amputations.

During January 1917 two deaths occurred and another on February 19th. since then there have been no deaths at the Hospital.

On 15th. February accomodation was increased by 19 beds bringing the total accomodation up to 489 beds, the number remaining to date.

From 1st. Jany 1917 to 31st. August 1917 the total number of admissions was 4436.

In the Infirmary (a detached building of 27 beds) ~~is~~ an operating theatre with all lighting and sterilizing convenience has been equipped. The money for this being generously given by The ~~Commonwealth Bank of Australasia~~ Colonial Bank Of Australasia Ltd, London.

An X-Ray department has also been installed in the Infirmary which is under Captain Nisbet.

Greta Norman Towner - Her Service Story (Part 3 – Greta on the Western Front)

On February 24th 1917, Greta is detached from the No 2 AAH at Southall for a posting in France at the 8th Stationary Hospital based at Wimereux, arriving on the 2nd March 1917. The 8th Stationary Hospital was a British hospital, one of over ten hospitals in the French sea side town, it was the headquarters of the Queen Alexandra's Imperial Military Nursing Service (The British Army nursing service).

It was common for Australian nurses to be assigned to British hospitals. In 1919, The Sydney paper, *The Sunday Times*, reported "*The Imperial Government... lent Sister Towner to the French, and she saw service in the French military hospitals*" perhaps it was during this time with the British that she nursed in French military hospitals. Inquiring into the 8th Stationary Hospital unit diaries may support the newspaper article.

In 1919, The Sydney paper, *The Sunday Times*, reported "*The Imperial Government... lent Sister Towner to the French, and she saw service in the French military hospitals*" perhaps it was during this time with the British that she nursed in French military hospitals. Inquiring into the 8th Stationary Hospital unit diaries may support the newspaper article.

Later, on 27th September, 1917, she was posted for duty with the No 1 Australian General Hospital (1AGH). The No. 1 Australian General Hospital was based at the racecourse in Rouen from 17 April 1916 until 7 December 1918. In total, 1AGH admitted 90,298 patients (sick 46,187; wounded, 41,111) — an average of 2,913 per month — with 11,488 examined by X-ray department (Butler p780). It was one of about 15 allied hospitals in the town.

Rouen, 1917 and 1918, Greta was caring for the wounded and diseased from the Western Front — a period that included many significant battles at the Somme, including at well-known places such as Ypres, Morlancourt, Mont St Quentin and Menin Road. (Note: her brother, Edgar Towner, in 1918 was twice mentioned in dispatches and awarded the Military Cross at Morlancourt and the Victoria Cross at Mont St Quentin.)

Kirsty Harris in her book, *More than Bombs and Bandages*, allows us to understand the possible conditions and experiences Greta faced. Greta would have dealt with the European winter that saw the medicines and thermometers freeze, the nurses taking to cutting off the tip of their gloves to be able to take a pulse without removing them. Hot water bottles froze if left out in the open and the procedure of shaking off the ice on the blankets of their patients in the mornings became common.

In addition, the nurses were dealing with medical conditions that civilian nursing in Australia had not prepared them for – trench foot, frost bite, G.S.Ws (gunshot wounds), shell-shock and poison gassings.

All of these conditions required much attention from the nurses – gas patients were left gasping for air as their eyes ‘glued up’ requiring constant bathing as did the blisters caused by some forms of gas.

Gunshot wounds required surgical procedures where nurses assisted often as anaesthetists, whilst others took on pharmacist roles – dispensing medicines.

The men with trench foot required layers of mud soaked putties and socks to be pulled away from the gangrene rotting feet of the men with trench foot. Greta’s experiences on Lemnos Island with frostbite might have stood her with some knowledge of treating these conditions – however, it is likely that she saw many men’s feet amputated due to both trench foot and frostbite. Did her experiences at the 2AAH, Southall see her take on a surgical role in amputations?

Influenza, coughs, colds and lice infestations added to the challenges of nursing the men from the Western Front. Nurses were also dealing with conditions such as shell shock and those who had self-inflicted wounds.

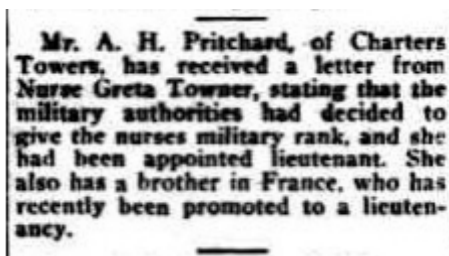
After the horrors of Lemnos Island, Greta continued to serve on the Western Front – these experiences must have affected the bush girl from Central Western Queensland.

Greta Norman Towner - Her Service Story (Part 4 Bouquets and Brickbats during the War)

In April 1918, Greta is recorded as being admitted to the 8th General Hospital with influenza for two weeks and again in December 1918. She returns to her duties each time after the bouts of influenza - one can only wonder as to whether she had a lucky escape (twice) from the ‘Spanish Flu’.

Caused by an unusually virulent virus, the 1918-1919 influenza pandemic (known as the Spanish Flu), killed around 50 million people worldwide and what made it especially deadly was the fact that it killed healthy young adults, not just those with compromised immune systems. This flu killed more people than died in the First World War. (ABC, Radio National <http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/rearvision/the-influenza-pandemic-of-1918-1919/3137536> (viewed 29 August 2015))

Greta’s record combined with newspapers of the time do show us something of Greta’s skills and the pride held by both her and those at home. On the 1st October 1918, Staff Nurse Greta Towner is promoted to Sister. Evidence found to date, that Greta did in fact write at least one letter home during her service is found in the *Cairns Post* in 1917, it is to an Aunt and Uncle who had helped raise her older sister, Olive: the article reads;



Cairns Post article – evidence Greta Towner wrote at least one letter home

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Mr. A. H. Pritchard, of Charters Towers, has received a letter from Nurse Greta Towner, stating that the military authorities had decided to give the nurses military rank, and she had been appointed lieutenant. She also has a brother in France, who has recently been promoted to a Lieutenantcy.

Mr A.H Pritchard gave Greta’s sister, Olive, away at her wedding to Herbert Foxlee in 1910. According the wedding report in the Charter’s Towers paper, *The Northern Miner*; A.H Pritchard was an uncle with whom Olive spent some

time with growing up in Charters Towers, Queensland. A.H Pritchard’s wife, was Caroline Ann, Thomas Towner’s daughter and her uncle was Gresley Lukin, editor of the *Brisbane Courier* newspaper.

Sister Towner's war record records on the 8th September, 1918, a period of leave from 4th September, 1918, until she resumed duties on the 24th September, it records that during that time Greta travelled to the United Kingdom. An interesting note is that on September 6th 1918 her brother, Lieutenant Edgar Towner, is transferred to the 2nd Red Cross Hospital at Rouen, France, after being wounded in the Battle of Mont St Quentin, later he is awarded the VC for his actions. After his injuries, Edgar has three weeks leave to the UK starting September 14th 1918. Did the brother and sister cross paths whilst on leave?

Greta Norman Towner, the country girl from Blackall in Central Western Queensland survives her nursing service with AANS in the Australian Imperial Forces. After being permitted to return home on the 15th January 1919, Greta is officially discharged on the 4th July 1919 in Australia. She had served just one month under four years.