

## ***GALLIPOLI NURSES.***

***1915.***

Today I will tell you about Australian Nurses who were there on the 25 April 1915 and those who served on the Isle of Lemnos until the troops on Gallipoli evacuated.



When the Gallipoli Landing was planned by the British Army it was said that there would only be a few casualties and only one Hospital Ship would be needed. It was decided that no Nurses would be aboard this ship as women were not allowed to be anywhere near the Front Line.

There were only two Doctors on the ship and they said that they needed Nurses so it was decided that a party of eight would be allowed to go. The Generals said that the wounded would

be treated in Constantinople when the Turks had been routed in a few days.

So it was that seven Australian Nurses and a Matron would set sail aboard ***The Gascon*** bound for Gallipoli on the 25 April 1915.

This is the story of one of those brave ladies who would witness the carnage, the suffering and the failure of the Anzac force on that terrible day.

Sister Muriel Wakeford enlisted in November 1914 much against the wishes of her family. Her father referred to her as a whore and refused to

ever speak to her again, The Government and the Australian Press wrote that there was no need for women to go to War as it would all be over by Xmas.

Four days after Muriel enlisted she was aboard ship and when she arrived in Cairo she was sent to the Hospital Ship, *The Gascon*.

*The Gascon* arrived at Gallipoli one hour before the dawn landing and stopped 100 yards off the beach, did not drop its anchor and turned off its lights.

At dawn, Muriel, in her crisp white veil and grey Nurses uniform, was standing on the deck with a pair of field glasses, as the first boats, manned by young Anzacs pulled on their oars and rowed toward the beach.

The eight Nurses watched, in horror, as the Turks opened up with machine guns and Anzacs began to fall. Soon the beach was littered with dead and wounded men and there were many floating in the water.

Muriel would write an account of all this action and would send articles to the *Illawarra Mercury*, the newspaper in Wollongong where her family lived.

She wrote;

*The wounded came in an endless stream. Our ship could only take 400 and it was soon filled to capacity. No one was in charge of getting the wounded to the ship. It was chaos on the beach. There are stores, mules and wounded men in the same area. It was total chaos.*

The two Doctors and the eight Nurses set about tending to the wounded and there were many amputations and many deaths. By midday, Gallipoli was ablaze and the sky was grey with smoke.

At 4pm there were 560 wounded men on board *The Gascon* and the Captain ordered that the ship leave for Alexandria. There were now hundreds of wounded men still on the beach with no Doctors and no medical supplies or pain killers. The barges that had been taking goods ashore were now being used to bring the wounded to any ships that were available. There were no plans for the evacuation of the wounded. While the men would receive treatment on *The Gascon*, there was no one to treat them on the other ships so wounds became infected and there were many deaths. One ship had brought mules to Gallipoli and there was one Vet to oversee them. He did his best to treat many wounded men.

Muriel and the Nurses worked 24 hours a day for the five days that it took for the ship to reach Alexandria. Each day six men died and were buried at sea. There were not enough pain killers or bandages.

Muriel would ignore the Censor and write to the *Illawarra Mercury* and they published her letters in full. At this time the Australian Press was only writing articles about Australian and Allied victories in the War.

Safely back in Cairo, Muriel met and fell in love with a young Australian Soldier and their romance had to be in secret because if discovered, would mean that Muriel would be sent back to Australia at her own expense.

Muriel and many other Nurses would make regular trips on *The Gascon* in the coming months bringing hundred of wounded Anzacs back to Cairo and Alexandria. They worked long hours and were indeed; *Australian Heroes.*

Muriel wrote many letters to *The Illawarra Mercury* and they managed to bypass the Censor. They were all published and would give Australians some idea of what was really happening on Gallipoli.

She wrote;

*7<sup>th</sup>.May1915, we have just returned from another trip to Gallipoli with 500 wounded men. The fighting, we could see, was still terrific and we seemed to be in the middle of it. One shell almost hit our ship even though we were clearly marked as a Hospital Ship. We could hear the continuous fire of rifles and machine guns and at night the whole area seemed to be ablaze. We are so close yet I feel no fear.*

In September, Muriel was to return to Australia with a shipload of amputees and would go to see her family. Her father would not speak to her and the rest of her family was upset when she informed them that she was to marry her soldier and that he was a Catholic.

Muriel returned to Cairo in December 1915 and she served there until many of the Nurses would go to London and then to France to work in Military Hospitals there.

Her Soldier, Lt. Raymond Sergeant, would serve in France and the couple were married in June1916.Muriel was forced to resign and not allowed to work as a Nurse again. She lived in London for the rest of the War and her husband managed to survive the chaos.

They would return to Australia in 1921 with a two year old son. Her father died in 1919 and was never reconciled with his daughter.

Muriel and Raymond lived in Australia for two years before returning to London. She fought with the Australian Government to be awarded her service medals that she felt that she and her fellow Nurses were entitled to. The Australian Public supported the Nurses and the Government finally gave in and reluctantly awarded Service Medals to all the Nurses who had served overseas in the War.

Muriel would not return to Australia until 1962 and her family was there to greet her at the wharf as her ship came in. Her nieces and nephews saw her as a War hero and one, Neil Wakeford, would write;

*I feel enormously proud of the work that Aunty Muriel did over there. She was so brave. It is quite emotional really because I did not realize what had happened at Gallipoli until I had read her diaries. It must have been a tragedy.*

Aunty Muriel Wakeford in her crisp White Veil and her Grey Uniform with a Red Cape, standing on the deck of *The Gascon* at dawn on the 25 April 1915 was truly an *Australian Hero*.

*(John Imrie, September 2021)*