

The Australian Women's Register

Entry type: Person

Entry ID: AWE5400

Macfie, Ethel

(1872 - 1952)

Born 1 January, 1872, Birmingham Staffordshire England

Died 22 July, 1952, TecomaTecoma Victoria Australia

Occupation Army Nurse, Nurse

Summary

In 1917 Ethel Macfie volunteered for overseas duty with the Australian Army Nursing Service in World War I. She nursed in British hospitals in Salonika until after the end of the war. Before enlisting she had nursed briefly at Canberra Hospital. Ethel Macfie was born in Birmingham, England and migrated to Australia with her family in 1885.

Details

Ethel Macfie was born in Birmingham, Staffordshire, England. In the 1881 English census, she is recorded as aged nine and living in London. She migrated to Australia with her family in 1885 and appears to have lived in a number of colonies including Tasmania where a younger brother was born. By the time of her enlistment her father, Matthew Macfie, whom she named as her next of kin, was living in Armadale, a suburb of Melbourne and a brother was living in Sydney.

Ethel Macfie trained as a nurse at St Margaret's Private Hospital, a maternity hospital in inner Sydney. She was employed as a nurse at Canberra Hospital then a very small hospital with only a few staff under Matron M K Charles-West. Ethel is named on a list of officers employed in the Federal Capital Territory as temporary nurse paid at the rate of three guineas a week. When she enlisted on 15 May 1917, Ethel gave her age as 40 years and 6 months but it appears she would have been 45; her religion was Church of England. Her enlistment was noted in *The Newsletter: An Australian Paper for Australian People*, a free trade weekly, published in Sydney by journalist and former politician, John Haynes, who had started the *Bulletin* with J. F. Archibald. She was described as the daughter of Matthew Macfie and sister of Hector Macfie of Sydney.

Less than a month after enlisting she joined RMS Mooltan in Melbourne as a staff nurse with the Australian Army Nursing Service bound for Suez. The following month she boarded the *Osmanieh* at Alexandria and disembarked on 14 August 1917 in Salonika, Greece. She was recruited in response to a request from the British Government for Australian trained nurses to staff four British military hospitals in Salonika in northern Greece. Three units, each of 91 nurses, embarked from Australia in June 1917 and a fourth unit in August. The first three units began duty in Salonika in August 1917; the fourth was delayed in Egypt and reached Salonika later. Altogether 42 Australian sisters and 257 staff nurses served in Salonika.

British and French forces had arrived in Greece in 1915 to fight Bulgarian forces invading Serbia, to regain control of the Balkans and to prevent enemy forces taking areas leading to the Suez Canal and the Middle East. They saw only intermittent action over the next three years. Most patients at the military hospitals were British soldiers and Bulgarian prisoners of war; many were not battle casualties but suffering from diseases including malaria, dysentery and black water fever. The Australian nurses, who had enlisted for service overseas with the expectation that they would nurse Australian soldiers, were disappointed that this was never the case in Salonika. They also felt they had been relegated to the war's sidelines with action on the Balkan front little reported at the time. The final battle against the Bulgarians in September 1918 was not reported in the *London Times* in any detail until 1919.

All the nurses in Salonika felt the bitter cold and snow in winter and the intense heat in summer in hospitals set up in tents or primitive huts. In winter there was not enough fuel for the braziers to heat the tents and by morning the blankets on patients were stiff with ice. Most nurses suffered from malaria which was endemic and those with recurrent malaria were repatriated to Australia. By August 1918, 46 nurses had been invalided back to Australia. Nurses wore heavy mosquito nets and clothing that covered every part of their bodies in an effort to ward off mosquitoes but they sometimes discarded extra coverings when they made nursing impossible. The sites of some of the hospitals were near swamps which became quagmires in winter and mosquito breeding grounds in summer.

After she arrived in Salonika Ethel Macfie was taken on the strength of the 50th British General Hospital (BGH), a hut hospital at Kalamaria on the outskirts of Salonika, and she later nursed at 42 BGH, a tent hospital at Kalamaria and at 52 BGH, also at Kalamaria. She was in Salonika until after the war ended.

In March 1919 she was given six months unpaid leave in England for family reasons presumably to visit English relatives at New Barnet but in July she was recalled to duty at 3rd Australian Auxiliary Hospital in Dartford preparatory to returning to Australia. She returned on the *Katoomba* disembarking in September and was discharged the following month. She stated she was in good health and unaffected by her service. Although she had been promoted Sister in Salonika her final rank on discharge was Staff Nurse, AANS. She was awarded the British War Medal and the Victory Medal and is commemorated on the ACT Memorial.

Ethel Macfie died on 22 July 1952 at her home at Tecoma in the Dandenong Ranges outside Melbourne after previously living in the suburb of Ivanhoe.

Published resources

Site Exhibition

Canberra Women in World War I: Community at Home, Nurses Abroad, Clarke, Patricia and Francis, Niki, 2015,
<http://www.womenaustralia.info/exhib/cww1>

Resource

Trove, National Library of Australia, 2009

Mettle and Steel: the AANS in Salonika, Wadman, Ashleigh, 2015,
<https://www.awm.gov.au/blog/2015/01/13/mettle-and-steel-aans-salonika/>

Resource Section

MacFie, Ethel, 2013,
<http://nurses.ww1anzac.com/mca-mcn.html>

Book

Guns and brooches : Australian Army Nursing from the Boer War to the Gulf War, Bassett, Jan, 1992

More than Bombs and Bandages: Australian Army Nurses at work in World War I, Harris, Kirsty, 2011

Book Section

Official History of the Australian Army Medical Services 1914-18. Vol. III: Problems and Services, Butler, A.G., 1943

Archival resources

National Archives of Australia, National Office, Canberra

[MacFie Ethel : SERN SISTER : POB Birmingham Staffordshire England : POE Sydney NSW : NOK F MacFie Matthew](#)

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