

Sister Clarissa Marion Irene Blake

August 11th, 1891-November 29th, 1987



Figure 1 Clarissa Marion Irene Blake portrait (Riverton History Centre)

2022 ANZAC Spirit School Prize

Charlotte Lockwood

Irene Blake, whose birth name was Clarissa Marion Irene Blake, was the fourth daughter born to Walter and Marion Blake on the 11th of August 1891. Irene, sometimes called Rene, was born, and raised in the small country town of Balaklava 92 kms north of Adelaide in South Australia. Her father, Walter is referred to as “the Father of Engineering” in Balaklava. This is because in 1817 he established “Etna” a foundry on Edith Tce in Balaklava

(N.Schopp, 'interview' [interview by Charlotte Lockwood], 29 December 2021) Thanks to Irene's father Walter, and Grandfather Joseph, the Blake family were well known in South Australia with suburbs in Adelaide such as Blakes Crossing and Blakeview being named after their family.



Figure 2 Blake Family portrait presumably taken in 1896 (State Library South Australia)

Irene began her schooling at the Balaklava Public school on the 22nd of February 1897. The Blake family residence, believed to be the house still located at 28 Humphry St Balaklava was built for their family by members of the community. Growing up, Irene and her family, including her 8 siblings, attended the local Presbyterian Church. Once she left school, Blake studied nursing and worked for 3 years at the Adelaide General Hospital (in 1939 it changed its name to the well-known Royal Adelaide hospital).

On the 25th of July 1915, at the age of 23 and after Irene had been nursing in Adelaide for 3 years, she enlisted as a nurse in the Australian army.

Blake began her service in the NO. 2 General Hospital in Boulogne France (Wooroor producer, June 18th 1936), after serving France she also served in England for some time.

On the 1st of March 1915 Irene went to serve in Egypt to work in the Choubrah Infantry Hospital.

On the 13th of September 1915, Irene then went over to serve in the NO.1 Australian General Hospital on the Lemnos Islands.

She then went back to England and began service in the Bagthrope Military Hospital on the 19th of July 1961.

Blake was then sent to the No.2 Australian General Hospital in France on the 18th of February 1917.

On the 23rd of February 1917, she was attached to the No.1 Australian General Hospital in England.

Blake's final place of service during the war was in the No.2 Australian Casualty Clearing station in France. She served there from the 3rd of September 1918.

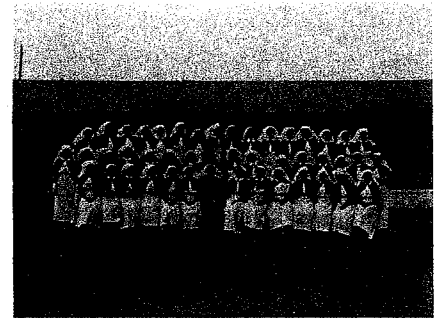


Figure 3 Group portrait of nurses of the 2nd Australian General Hospital, outside their quarters (Australian War Memorial)

On the 1st of October 1918 Irene got promoted to Nursing Sister.

Finally, on the 18th of January 1919 she returned to Australia on the US Navy ship “Ulysses” (Virtual War Memorial). On the 6th of June 1919, Irene was discharged of her duties, due to the ending of the War.

Due to her war efforts, Irene was awarded with various war medals including, the 1914/1915 Star Medal, a British War Medal, and a Victory Medal.



*Figure 4 Victory Medal
(Australian Government
Department of Defence)*

Once the War was over, Blake travelled to India and worked in an Indian hospital for some time. When Irene returned to South Australia she worked as a private nurse for a short period of time. She then travelled to New Zealand to study “the Plunket system of baby warfare at ‘Karitane’ Hospital” (Wooroora producer June 18th, 1936). Once she had finished her course and was a qualified Karitane nurse, Irene then travelled to America where she took a course of psychology. In 1933, Blake opened her own establishment for children in San Anselmo, California, she named it “Karitane”. The aim of “Karitane” was to provide care for children from wealthy families, whilst their parents went traveling. The atmosphere of the home was described as peaceful, and the colour scheme which was bright and cheery. Irene made sure the children were treated with respect. During their time at the home, no words of criticism were said, and no punishments were imposed. Each child would have to take part in daily duties such as wait the table, serve meals, and generally help around the home. It also worked much as a general school, with the children’s lessons and holidays being at the same time as ordinary schools (Wooroora producer June 18th, 1936). At the end of June 1936, Blake got married to New Zealand surveyor, Mr Albert Freeman. They were married at San Anselmo, California and honeymooned in New York City, before sailing off to their future home in New Zealand. Irene died on the 29th of November 1987, aged of 96. She was cremated and now has a memorial plaque at Centennial Park, Adelaide. Irene’s war efforts have been honoured, with her name recorded on various WW1 honour rolls including those at the Balaklava Anglican and Uniting Churches. She is remembered on the Keswick Army Nurses Roll of Honour, and the Balaklava district WW1 Roll of Honour.



Figure 7 Balaklava Uniting Church WWI honour roll (Charlotte Lockwood 20.3.2022)

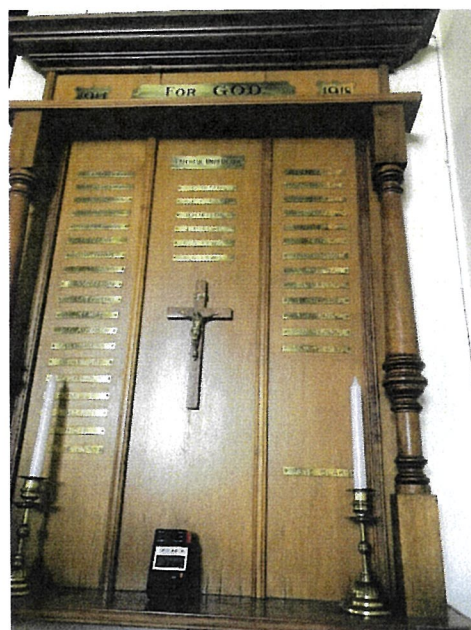


Figure 8 Balaklava Anglican Church WWI honour roll (Charlotte Lockwood 17.1.2022)

“That these women worked their long hours among such surroundings without collapsing spoke volumes for their will power and sense of duty. The place reeked with the odours of blood, antiseptic dressings, and unwashed bodies. The nurses saw soldiers in their most pitiful state- wounded, blood-stained, dirty.”

-Lieutenant Harold Williams, wounded in September 1918 (Australian War Memorial)

This quote from Lieutenant Williams, talks about how the war nurses displayed the ANZAC Spirit through their perseverance. It mentions, how in the toughest conditions, they persevered. Irene Blake was one such nurse, and she reflected the Anzac Spirit characteristics of perseverance and mateship.

Irene persevered by continuing to serve as a nurse not just in the face of the horror and devastation of World War 1, but also despite extra challenges faced by women of her era. When doing my research, I was interested in how little recognition women who served in the war effort overseas were given compared to men. Women who nursed were also paid much less than soldiers, but they still faced many dangers and worked in challenging situations with big responsibilities, dealing with trauma, disease and gore as they served their country and countrymen. Irene was posted to four different countries, demonstrating her perseverance by continuing to start afresh and stoically face new challenges and expectations in a range of locations. Irene’s spirit of perseverance continued after the war when she wasn’t content to just sit back and relax, but dedicated time and effort to develop her nursing skills and care for others. After the War, Irene nursed overseas, she furthered her studies and opened a home for children.

Mateship embodies an attitude that values equality loyalty and friendship. Irene Blake showed mateship by caring for the people she nursed – people who she didn’t know, and

who were in pitiful states, often in horrific conditions. She was loyal to her country by being prepared to risk her life and comforts for the perils of war, in a bid to help the soldiers fighting for Australia's freedom. She was loyal to her patients by caring for them to such a high level that she was promoted to Nursing Sister. Being promoted to this roll also suggests qualities of mateship, for such a position of responsibility would involve good relational skills, cooperating and working with others to a high level and being a good team leader.

Irene Blake's life and service reflect her strength of character and determination as she persevered and displayed mateship, embodying the Anzac Spirit.

(1,217words)

Part B:

When I began researching Irene Blake, I was frustrated and disheartened. I hit many 'dead ends'. My first bit of exciting information came when I saw Irene's name on the World War 1 Honour Roll in the Balaklava Anglican Church. I then contacted local historian Norma Schopp, and later interviewed her. Mrs Schopp helped me access an informative article on Trove about Irene's life, from the local newspaper, in 1939. Later, Mrs Schopp opened the Balaklava Museum and showed me lots of things from Irene's era, many specific to nursing. We also looked through old newspaper articles, which helped get me hooked on finding clues about Irene's life. When I was struggling to find information about Irene, I decided to research her family members, which revealed more information. I contacted the Warden of the Balaklava Anglican church, and the Pastor of the Balaklava Uniting Church, because these churches had honour rolls mentioning Irene. Surprisingly, as exciting as it was to look at old records written in old pen and ink cursive writing, there was no record of Irene's baptism. However, the Uniting Church Pastor put me in contact with several of his parishioners for further information. Through these contacts, I was led to information from the Riverton History Centre. There I found my first portrait of Irene, as well as details about her war service, that filled in many of the gaps in my research.

In researching the life and service of Irene, I was struck by how little information there is about women who served in WWI compared to men. This highlighted to me the importance of documenting the stories of women who have risked their lives for their country, while there are still people who remember them and their anecdotes. It is also important that we tell the stories of these women who bravely and sacrificially faced the dangers and horror of war with the added challenge of doing so as women in a society that often undervalued and underappreciated the contribution of females.

I started this competition because my teacher encouraged me to. As I worked through the holidays, I found my interest in history growing. I hadn't expected to get so excited about discoveries, and I saw my passion growing as I genuinely wanted to find out more about Irene's war service, and to record her story for future generations. I've become more aware of how privileged I am as a woman in this era and am more passionate about the need to have historically accurate accounts of women from Australia's war history. I'm shy when it comes to approaching people I don't know and found it hard to reach out to members of my community, but doing the research helped me to become more confident, and I enjoyed getting to know people in my community who I otherwise may never have spoken to. This assignment has grown my love of history, and my appreciation of the women who served our nation in World War 1.

(500 words)

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