

Irene Gertrude Hiller Bonnin – Emily McPherson

Word Count - 1544

Irene Gertrude Hiller Bonnin was born on the 12th of September 1884 to her Australian born mother Katherine Jane, and her London-born father, Alfred Bonnin.¹ She was one of seven children; Katherine Esther, Alfred, William James, Mary Moye, Emmeline Frances, and Constance Josephine.²

Irene was born in Glenelg, Holdfast Bay, and lived at 'Fenton', Robert Street.³ Irene was five foot four and three quarters and weighed eight stone thirteen. When cleared by the medical examiner she was free from any physical disorders such as varicose veins⁴ which would have impacted the long days standing that were expected of World War 1 nurses.

There are no records of Irene's schooling, however, she was a member of the Australasian Trained Nurses Association (A.T.N.A.)⁵ before she joined the war. Irene received medical training at North Adelaide Private Hospital, *Calvary Hospital*, for four years, graduating with the N.A.P Hospital certificate and the A.T.N.A certificate.⁶

Irene was not married when she enlisted into the war at age 30 in 1915, therefore, she listed her older sister Katherine as her next of kin.



Irene's service during World War 1:

Irene's trip began when she took the train from her home in Glenelg to Melbourne, on the 12th of June, 1915.⁸

DATE OF APPOINTMENT -

12/6/15

² Extract from a letter to the Secretary of the Department of Defence, Melbourne, 1919⁹

¹ https://archival.collections.slsa.sa.gov.au/prg/PRG621_Bonninfamily_serieslist.pdf. Page 1.

² <https://www.geni.com/people/Irene-Bonnin/6000000014680513612>

³ <http://ausww1nurses.weebly.com/bo.html>

⁴ <https://discoveringanzacs.naa.gov.au/browse/records/197921/4>

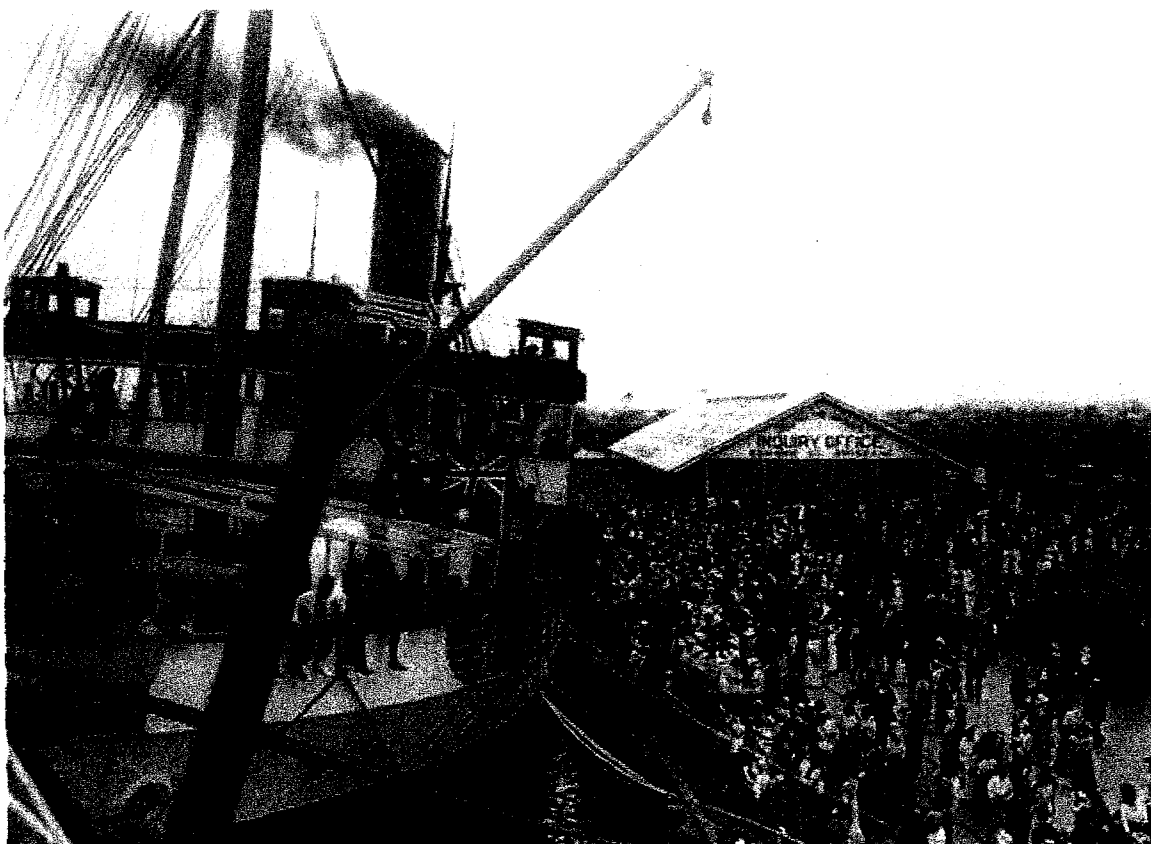
⁵ <https://jmvh.org/article/giving-the-dope-australian-army-nurse-anaesthetists-during-world-war-i/>

⁶ <https://discoveringanzacs.naa.gov.au/browse/records/197921/1>

⁷ <https://vwma.org.au/explore/people/59528>

⁸ <https://discoveringanzacs.naa.gov.au/browse/records/123501/6>

⁹ <https://discoveringanzacs.naa.gov.au/browse/records/123501/6>



3 The HMAT Wandilla A62 departing Melbourne ¹¹

From there, Irene departed Melbourne on the 17th of June¹¹, destined for the Suez on the HMAT Wandilla A62. Irene was not much in favour of the boat trip, as she spent much of it seasick and ill.¹² On Wednesday the 23rd of June, just after midday, the ship arrived at Fremantle. By Friday the 25th, the Wandilla had departed again.

On Saturday the 17th of July, during the early hours of the morning, the Wandilla arrived at the Suez Canal. Irene then travelled by train to Cairo, Egypt until 10:30 pm when she travelled in an ambulance wagon to Heliopolis.¹³

Friendships that formed on the longboat trip from Australia, were to be the constant supports for these women during their first confronting experiences as front-line nurses in the war.

In the days after she arrived before being sent to the front, Irene like many of the other unappointed nurses would have been expected to complete many of the essential preparatory tasks such as sewing, mending, and the making of T bandages.

On the 28th of July, 11 days after she arrived in Egypt, Irene was already on emergency duty. She didn't write much in her journal about what shifts were like, but we can imagine that the sheer shock of what she witnessed during those early duties might have been quite distressing and she was unable to express her feelings in a journal entry. After these first shifts on emergency

¹⁰ <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/H02242>

¹¹ <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/R1907796>

¹² https://archival.collections.slsa.sa.gov.au/prg/PRG621_21_1-2_Bonnin_diary_transcript.pdf. Page 3.

¹³ https://archival.collections.slsa.sa.gov.au/prg/PRG621_21_1-2_Bonnin_diary_transcript.pdf. Page 7.

duty, Irene went back to minor duties until the 7th of August when she moved into surgical wards 10 and 11 with her friend Palmer.¹⁴

Palmer was a close companion whose friendship began on the journey from Australia, and whom Irene sought comfort, throughout difficult and challenging times in the war.

Irene's days, like many of the other nurses, were fairly similar on the days she was not working. She spent them going into town, going on walks, and doing lots of everyday activities.



4 Lady Edith Bridges, head of the Australian Women's League during World War 1¹⁹

Gifts from Australia:

While the Australia Red Cross was valuable in sending and coordinating medical assistance on the war front. A lesser-known group back in Australia, the Australian Women's league headed by Lady Edith Bridges¹⁵, would send packages of care for the Christmas of 1915.

Irene writes: *On the 20th of December, we made our way into the Matrons office to receive a parcel given by the Australian Women's league in response to the Lady Bridges Appeal. It contained nice things such as soap, iodine & brush, stockings, books, chocolates and a red cross brooch.*¹⁶

The discharge of Irene and her life after the war:

Irene was discharged from the war on 9/6/19.¹⁸ She left London on the ship 'SS Ceramic' on 25/1/19¹⁹ and arrived home in Australia nearly two months later, on 14/3/19.

¹⁴ https://archival.collections.slsa.sa.gov.au/prg/PRG621_21_1-2_Bonnin_diary_transcript.pdf. Page 11.

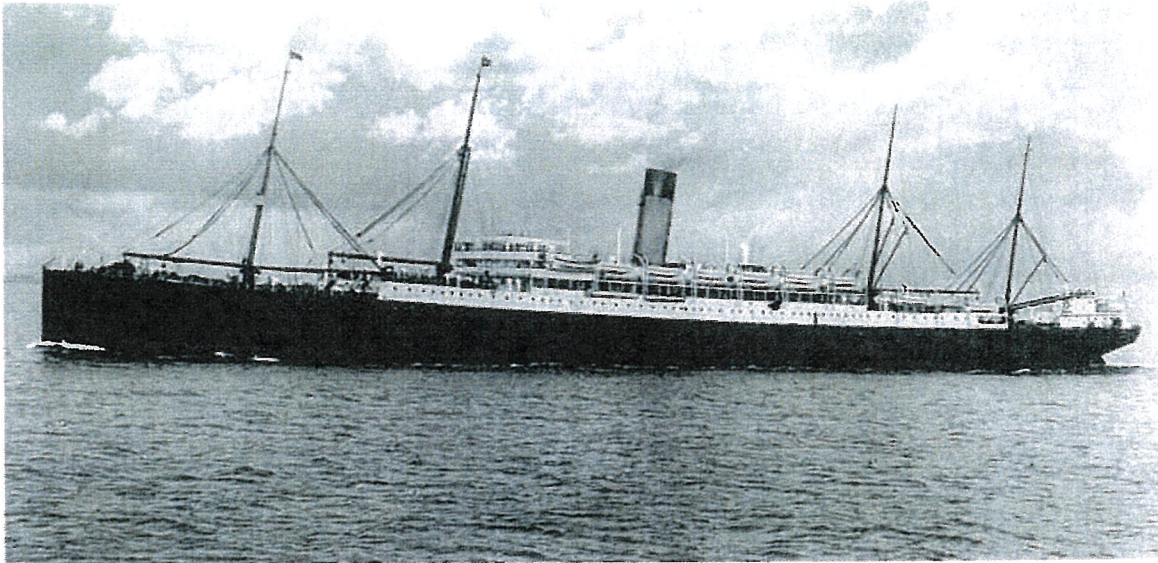
¹⁵ <https://www.womenaustralia.info/exhib/widows/bridges.html>

¹⁶ https://archival.collections.slsa.sa.gov.au/prg/PRG621_21_1-2_Bonnin_diary_transcript.pdf. Page 21.

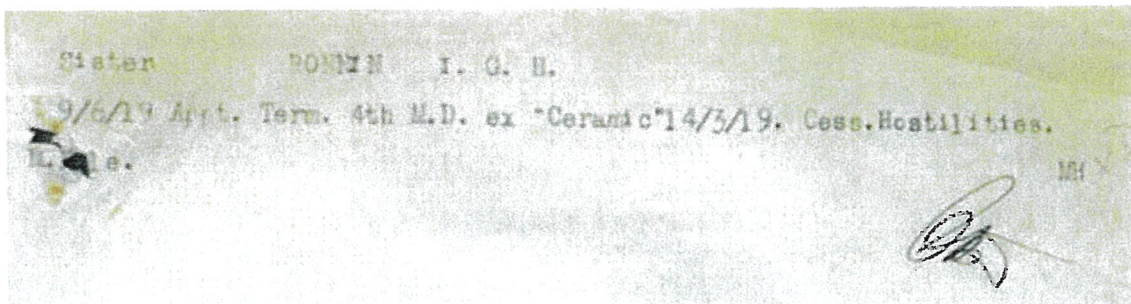
¹⁷ <https://www.womenaustralia.info/exhib/widows/bridges.html>

¹⁸ <https://discoveringanzacs.naa.gov.au/browse/records/123501/17>

¹⁹ <https://discoveringanzacs.naa.gov.au/browse/records/123501/24>



5 The ship 'SS Ceramic'²⁰



6 An extract from Irene's war papers²¹

A.M. Form D.2.

2. Sister BOWEN returned to Australia ex "Ceramic" and disembarked in this District 14/3/19. Recommendation has been submitted that this Sister's appointment in the A.I.F. be terminated to date 9/6/19, owing to "Cessation of Hostilities".

7 An extract from a letter to the Melbourne Department of Defence regarding Irene's return to Australia²⁴

During the 1920s and 1930s, after Irene returned to Melbourne, she continued to be a nurse. For some years during that time, she was the matron of St Ives Private Hospital in Vale St, East

²⁰[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/SS_Ceramic#/media/File:Starboard_view_of_White_Star_Liner_SS_Ceramic_at_sea_\(crop\).jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/SS_Ceramic#/media/File:Starboard_view_of_White_Star_Liner_SS_Ceramic_at_sea_(crop).jpg)

²¹ <https://discoveringanzacs.naa.gov.au/browse/records/123501/8>

²² <https://discoveringanzacs.naa.gov.au/browse/records/123501/5>

Melbourne.²³ Irene also worked at the ANZAC Hostel, Mosely Street, Glenelg.²⁴ This Hostel is now KAPARA Aged Care Facility.²⁵

For her retirement, Irene returned to Adelaide and was admitted to the Adelaide Repatriation Hospital on 19.3.1959.²⁶ Irene died on the 27th of February 1971, aged 86 years, and was buried in the North Road Anglican Cemetery, Nailsworth, South Australia.²⁷

Throughout the war, Irene served in Egypt, France, and England. She received the 1914/15 Star Medal, the British War Medal, and the Victory medal.



8 Irene's personal medals ³¹

The badges and medals were an important recognition of their service and it was with sadness that she in fact lost her returned soldiers' badge in 1925 while travelling in QLD²⁹

Irene received a bracelet from during the war with her name, rank, A.A.N.S (Australian Army Nursing Service), and A.G.H, (Australian General Hospital) engraved on it.

²³ <https://discoveringanzacs.naa.gov.au/browse/records/123501/15>

²⁴ https://cdn.holdfast.sa.gov.au/general-downloads/Discover/Bay-to-Battlefield-Booklet_A5P-74034_WEB.pdf. Page 15.

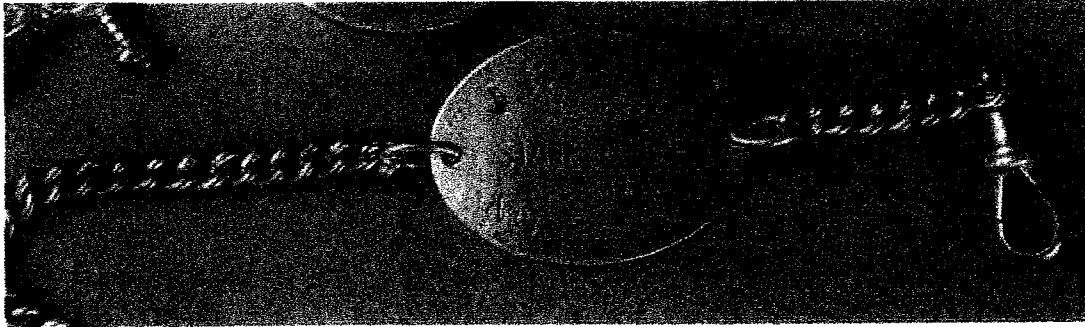
²⁵ <http://www.daytrippa.com.au/adelaide-metro/full-guide/business/6536>

²⁶ <https://discoveringanzacs.naa.gov.au/browse/records/123501/21>

²⁷ <https://vwma.org.au/explore/people/59528>

²⁸ <https://collections.slsa.sa.gov.au/resource/PRG+621/24/1/3>

²⁹ <https://discoveringanzacs.naa.gov.au/browse/records/123501/15>



9 Irene's Staff Nurse Name Bracelet ³⁰

The Anzac Spirit:

The Anzac Spirit is the mindset of the soldiers who fought at Gallipoli. There was not a military victory, but the men on the fields and the women in the hospitals showed great courage, endurance, initiative, discipline, and mateship.

Irene showed the ANZAC Spirit with many different characteristics including:

Comradery

Before even reaching the front, Irene helped out her fellow South Australian recruits/enlisted service people, with a little laugh for a good time:

- *Thursday 24th June - Coaling all night. Went ashore Forgot to say ever so many of our men took the ships boats & cleared off. Mr Haslam had an awful night trying to get them—We bought fruit for the boys & sent it down to the S.A. boys from SA. Nurses.³¹*
- *Wednesday 7th July - Meeting in drawing room after breakfast as usual. Capt. Bennett gave a few remarks! Did not play many games, too hot. S.A. Army Med. Boys sent us up a lovely case of cool drinks & sweets awfully good of them. ³²*

Mateship

The nurses pulled together to ensure no one was left without care and medical treatment. This commitment to making it work, whether it was their assigned job or not, is an example of true mateship during the war.

- *July 2nd - it was a most terrible night!! July 1st was a big offensive & of course, all-day Sunday pts were pouring in. New tents & wards opened; wards made surgical / some kind of tarpaulin stuff on the floor & some mattresses. We admitted 110 during the night!! I can tell you we were somewhat in a whirl in the morning!³³*

Family connections

³⁰ <https://collections.slsa.sa.gov.au/resource/PRG+621/24/1/3>

³¹ https://archival.collections.slsa.sa.gov.au/prg/PRG621_21_1-2_Bonnin_diary_transcript.pdf. Page 3

³² https://archival.collections.slsa.sa.gov.au/prg/PRG621_21_1-2_Bonnin_diary_transcript.pdf. Page 5

³³ https://archival.collections.slsa.sa.gov.au/prg/PRG621_21_1-2_Bonnin_diary_transcript.pdf. Page 34

Letters and gifts from home kept her spirits raised, but she was always willing to share her gifts with another in need. Irene often wrote in her diary about what letters she was expecting from whom, and you could tell by the way she wrote, that she was always excited to read about what was going on at home in Australia.

- Sunday Aug 27th - Very few home letters, only Nat & Con, only got Con's dear one this time—Nat's will turn up soon I suppose.³⁴
- Tuesday Sep 12th - Birthday in France! No letters but lovely parcel from dear old Em—all sorts of things. Bradford one of my old night orderlies saw me & told me he was off up the front the next day so gave him the socks, paper, milk, chocolate & a cake of soap out of the tin box which he much enjoyed³⁵

Perseverance

Irene pushed through tough times and supported the other nurses while doing so. She did not give up when things got tough or when she was overwhelmed, but she stayed on and helped so many men recover.

- 20th May - Rouen, France: We are going to stay here indefinitely & everybody is most sad as here it will be impossible to nurse our own boys except a few stray ones. For myself I like the English just as well (if not more) & what does it matter who we nurse we are all helping one another. At least "thems my sentiments!"³⁶

The impact of Irene:

Irene was a very important part of the war, not because she was a highly regarded person, but because she helped so many soldiers recover from injuries that potentially could have killed them. She saved families from grieving their loved ones. This is what the Anzac Spirit encompasses. Caring about other people and putting yourself on the line for them.

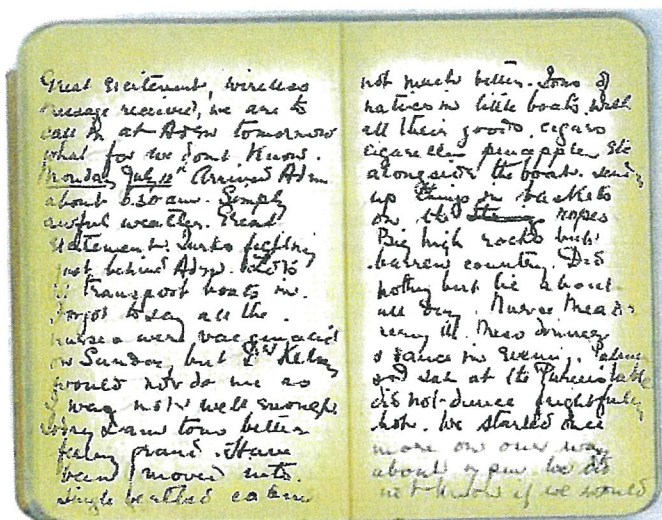
Irene would have been living in uncertainty and angst, but her life was remarkable nonetheless. She defied common stereotypes by not marrying, and then she joined the war as an independent woman. She put herself through circumstances that many people then, and many people now, would never. Irene endured extreme depression and homesickness, but she pushed through, and stayed on, creating new friends, and taking part in the Australian legacy.

Appendix

³⁴ https://archival.collections.slsa.sa.gov.au/prg/PRG621_21_1-2_Bonnin_diary_transcript.pdf. Page 35

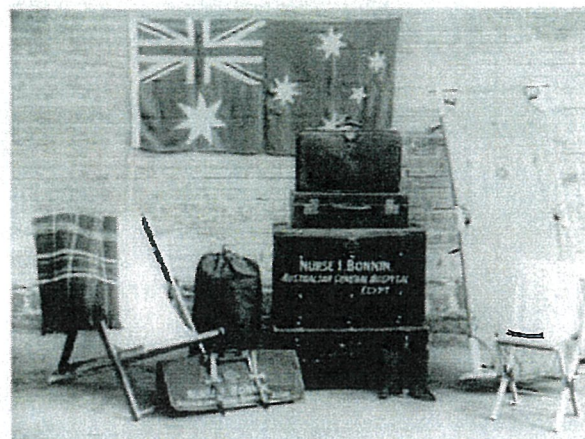
³⁵ https://archival.collections.slsa.sa.gov.au/prg/PRG621_21_1-2_Bonnin_diary_transcript.pdf. Page 36.

³⁶ https://archival.collections.slsa.sa.gov.au/prg/PRG621_21_1-2_Bonnin_diary_transcript.pdf. Page 33.



0 Sample page from Irene's 1st diary, dated Monday 12 July 1915

37



PRG 621/22/8

11 Irene's luggage to go to war ³⁸

RETURNED SERVICES LEAGUE (WAIKERIE)
SUB BRANCH INC.

Fully Licenced Bar Military Museum
Meeting Room for Hire Bingo

Waikerie RSL Sub Branch cordially invites locals and visitors to enjoy its facilities and also inspect the comprehensive military museum (for a gold coin donation)

OPENING TIMES
Monday: 2pm to 6pm Tuesday: POKER 7pm to 11pm
Wednesday: 2pm to 6pm
Thursday: 2pm to 10pm - BINGO - Eyes down at 7pm.
Members' Draw and Raffle.
Friday: 2pm till 6pm
Last Sunday of the Month: 2pm to 6pm - Casual Afternoon Snacks
Other times by arrangement

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**ANZAC DAY
ORDER OF SERVICE**

PARADE ASSEMBLES
7.45am MARCH COMMENCES

8.00am MC WELCOMES GATHERING

READING
PARDRE'S ADDRESS
FLORAL TRIBUTES

ODE
LAST POST
ONE MINUTE SILENCE
ROUSE & FLAG RAISING
LEST WE FORGET

PRAYER AND BENEDICTION
NATIONAL ANTHEMS

Please observe COVID-19 requirements for check-in and social distancing

12 & 13 Promotional brochure and order of service from the 2022 Waikerie RSL ANZAC Day service

³⁷ https://archival.collections.slsa.sa.gov.au/prg/PRG621_21_1-2_Bonnin_diary_transcript.pdf

³⁸ <https://www.samemory.sa.gov.au/site/page.cfm?c=9034>

All pictures below were taken at the Waikerie RSL Museum following the 2022 ANZAC Day Memorial Service.



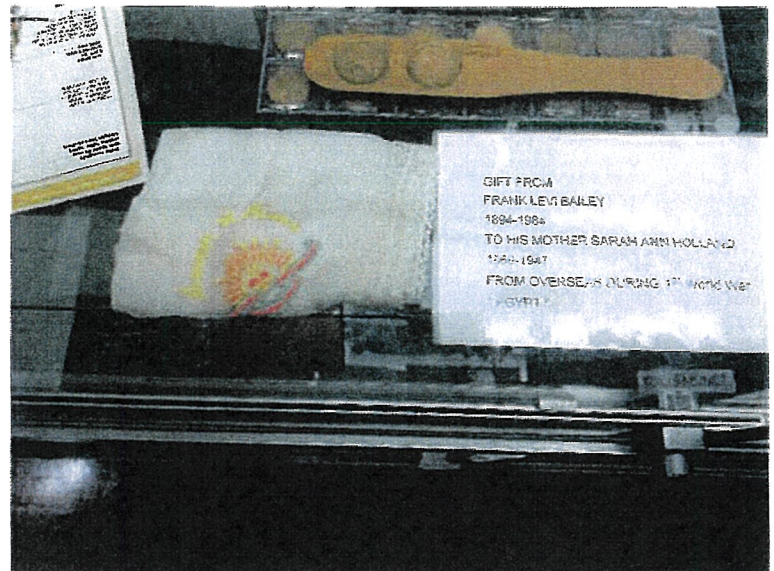
14 World War 1 tags



15 A Red Cross 'Heartiest Christmas Greetings' box



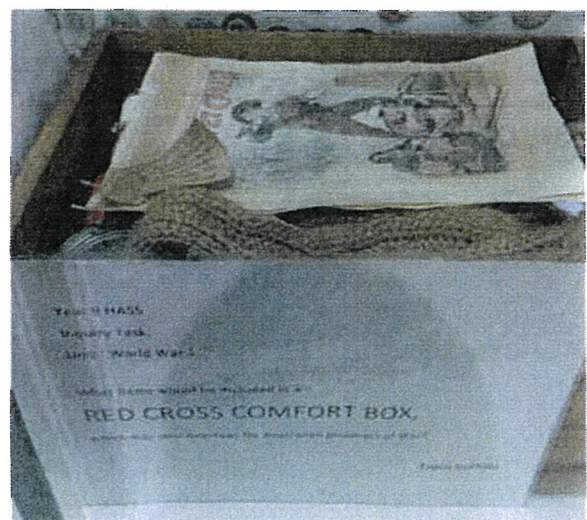
16 World War One medical stretcher



17 Handkerchief likely to be similar to one Irene sent to her sister



18 Medical Orderly uniform



19 Example of a World War One Red Cross comfort box as created by Waikerie High School student Tegan Griffiths and displayed at the Waikerie RSL

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Part B

Word Count - 428

To create and research my ANZAC Prize, I used a variety of both primary and secondary sources. I initially began with websites, but as I got deeper into my research, I used primary sources like the Waikerie Returned Services League and a transcript of Irene's diary from during the war.

I used websites such as SA Memory, Discovering Anzac's, and Virtual war memorial Australia. These websites are all authentic, as I cross-checked the information to ensure it was reliable and credible. The website Discovering Anzac's was particularly beneficial as it included the amazing primary sources of Irene's enlistment papers. Furthermore, the papers displayed small details of her enlistment that were noteworthy to me but not significant enough for a website. There was a specific paper of Irene's, that was especially beneficial to me. I discovered that in a letter Irene wrote, she was confirming that she had lost her Returned Services Badge. It was a personal part of her life that I had the privilege to read about and include in my project, all because her War papers were easily accessible.

For a significant part of this project, I used a transcript of Irene's diary. It allowed me to understand the timeline of her journey and where she was sent to serve throughout the war. It evidently portrayed how Irene was feeling and thinking. Irene wrote down many things that she may have thought were unimportant, but those small things helped me figure out how she spent her days. These details helped me imagine her as a person with a story and not a name on historical documents.

During the course of this project, I made my way into the Waikerie RSL. This showed me some personal items and field artefacts from World War One. I found a medical stretcher and some medical patches, as well as a handkerchief bought by a soldier in Egypt. This was very similar to the way that Irene, who was also posted in Egypt, decided to purchase a handkerchief for her sister.

Irene worked at North Adelaide Hospital which is now Calvary Hospital. I contacted Calvary asking if they had any of Irene's documents, but they are yet to get back to me. I thought this would be a credible primary source because it would show more of her journey and life after the war.

Throughout my research of Irene, it was clear that the transcript of her diary from the State Library and her enlistment papers from Discovering Anzacs were the most beneficial for my Anzac prize.

Irene Gertrude Hiller Bonnin, Born 12th of September 1884

This is a timeline showing the places Irene travelled and served in throughout World War 1.

17th of June:
Boarded the Wandilla A62.

30th of March 1916:
left Cairo on the boat Alexandrina.

5th of April 1916:
The Alexandrina arrived in Marseilles.

Nurses were then split up to go to five different places in France: Rouen, Havre, Boulogne, Etaples, Le Treport.

Irene was sent to Rouen.

28th of October:
Irene was told that she would be leaving France.

Irene took a train to Dartford – No 3, Australian Auxiliary Hospital.

In this convalescence hospital, Irene was one of only two sisters to 48 beds.

1915

12th of June 1915:
Irene departed Adelaide bound for Melbourne on the train.

17th of July:
Arrived at the Suez Canal. Took a train to Cairo and arrived at 10:30pm.

3rd of April 1916:
The Alexandrina passed Sicily.

12th of April:
Irene arrived in Rouen, France, by train.

8th of November:
Arrived by boat in South Hampton, England.

1916

1917

1918

1919

Irene was discharged from active service on the 9th of June 1919.