

Lieutenant Sister Mary Hamilton McFarlane (SFX11679)



Lieutenant Sister Mary Hamilton McFarlane, AANS, in uniform (c.1941)

Introduction

Lieutenant Mary Hamilton McFarlane was an Australian Army Nursing Service (AANS) sister from South Australia whose dedication and ultimate sacrifice in the Second World War exemplify the ANZAC qualities of perseverance and courage. Born in 1915, she served at sea on front-line hospital ships evacuating and caring for wounded servicemen, and died when the Australian Hospital Ship (AHS *Centaur*) was torpedoed off Queensland in May 1943.¹ From studious country schoolgirl to senior sister at sea, Mary's story reflects Australia's broader wartime experience and the risks borne by medical personnel.² Her studio portrait (see Figure 1) introduces the nurse whose service and sacrifice frame this essay.³



Figure 1: Studio portrait of Mary Hamilton McFarlane, c. 1938

Early Life and Background (1915–1938)

Mary was born on 10 April 1915 in Adelaide, the daughter of John “Clive” McFarlane and Mabel (née Muir).⁴ She grew up in Cowell on South Australia's Eyre Peninsula and boarded at Walford House Ladies' College in Unley, where she was remembered as a

¹ Australian War Memorial (n.d.) ‘McFarlane, Mary Hamilton – Roll of Honour (P11040120)’, Australian War Memorial, Canberra; Department of Veterans' Affairs (n.d.) ‘World War Two Nominal Roll: McFarlane, Mary Hamilton (SFX11679)’, Department of Veterans' Affairs, Canberra.

² Australian War Memorial (n.d.) ‘Centaur (Hospital ship)’, National Capital Authority (n.d.) ‘The Australian Service Nurses National Memorial’.

³ Virtual War Memorial Australia (n.d.) ‘*Mary Hamilton McFarlane*’ (orig. Australian National Archives), c.1938–42.

⁴ National Archives of Australia (n.d.) *Service record: McFarlane, Mary Hamilton; Service No. SX11679.*

bright, gracious student who loved literature and music.⁵ After matriculating in 1934, Mary trained at the Royal Adelaide Hospital and then completed midwifery in Sydney, graduating with distinction.⁶ A rare glimpse of her civilian life shows Mary presented at Court in London with her uncle, Brigadier Percy Muir McFarlane, before the war (see Figure 2).⁷ This worldliness, coupled with compassion and discipline from hospital training, set the pattern for her wartime perseverance.



Figure 2: Mary Hamilton McFarlane at her Court presentation in London, c. late 1930s.

Enlistment and Early Postings (1941)

Mary enlisted in the Australian Army Nursing Service on 21 January 1941, aged twenty-five, and was allotted service number SFX11679.⁸ Posted to the Wayville Emergency Hospital and 105 Military Hospital, Woodside, she nursed soldiers bound for or returning from active theatres.⁹ Superiors quickly noted her clinical judgment and steady leadership; within months she wore the rank of Sister (equivalent to lieutenant).

⁵ Commonwealth War Graves Commission (n.d.) 'McFarlane, Mary Hamilton - War casualty details (2226118), Sydney Memorial (Panel 4)'; Walford Anglican School for Girls (2019) 'An incredible insight into the life of old scholar Sister Mary Hamilton McFarlane (1934), written by Ned Young'.

⁶ Health Museum of South Australia (2024) 'Mary McFarlane'; Virtual War Memorial Australia (n.d.) 'Mary Hamilton McFarlane' (profile by Ned Young).

⁷ Virtual War Memorial Australia (n.d.) *Mary Hamilton McFarlane* - image gallery (includes studio portrait taken at her Court presentation, c. 1939).

⁸ Department of Veterans' Affairs (n.d.) 'World War Two Nominal Roll: McFarlane, Mary Hamilton (SFX11679)'; Australian War Memorial (n.d.) 'Studio portrait of SFX11679 Lt Sister Mary Hamilton McFarlane (C1038828)'.

⁹ Virtual War Memorial Australia (n.d.) 'Mary Hamilton McFarlane'; Australian War Memorial (n.d.) 'Camp Hospital Wayville' (unit entry), AWM, Canberra.

Then came a singular request that would define her war: service at sea.¹⁰ A family photograph of Mary beside her brother, Flight Lieutenant John Norman Muir McFarlane (RAAF), speaks to a family deeply engaged in service (see Figure 3).¹¹



Figure 3: Mary Hamilton McFarlane with her brother, Flt Lt John Norman Muir McFarlane, Royal Australian Air Force (service no. 407442), c. 1942–43.

On the Dutch Hospital Ship *Oranje* (1941–1943)

In July 1941, Mary became the first Australian nurse posted to the Dutch hospital ship MS *Oranje* as liaison sister.¹² The ship's arrival received Australian press coverage (see Figure 4).¹³ A ship image (see Figure 5) shows *Oranje*'s white hull, green band and Red Crosses.¹⁴ Mary embraced the multinational environment, in her diary noting the “spirit of co-operation, goodwill and friendship.”¹⁵ Her letters home capture shipboard

¹⁰ The Age (Melbourne) (1943) ‘Casualty list of Centaur’, 19 May, p.3; Shrine of Remembrance (n.d.) ‘Imagining Centaur’.

¹¹ Virtual War Memorial Australia (n.d.) Mary Hamilton McFarlane — image gallery (includes — portrait of Mary Hamilton McFarlane with her brother Flight Lieutenant John Norman Muir McFarlane, RAAF, c.1942–43).

¹² The Age (Melbourne) 1943, ‘Casualty list of Centaur’, 19 May, p. 3; Shrine of Remembrance (n.d.) ‘Imagining Centaur’.

¹³ Weekly Times (Melbourne) 1941, ‘Luxury hospital ship arrives’, 27 September, National Library of Australia, Trove.

¹⁴ Australian War Memorial (1941) ‘The Dutch hospital ship Oranje off the Western Australian coast’ (Accession 302809/C241582), 21 August 1941; International Committee of the Red Cross (n.d.) ‘Hague Convention (X) 1907, Article 5’.

¹⁵ Virtual War Memorial Australia (n.d.) ‘Mary Hamilton McFarlane’ - diary note; Australian War Memorial (n.d.) ‘Allies in Adversity: Oranje’.

routines, stretcher embarkations, long rosters, theatre work and the small morale-boosters that sustained staff.¹⁶ One surviving letter to her friend Constance Hardingham (Figure 6) captures daily shipboard life and an upbeat tone, “thank you ever so much for your letter... I was thrilled to receive it”, and with her wry admission “I feel so guilty not writing before this late date; my intentions are always good!” it hints at the relentless pace that left little time to write only weeks before her final posting.¹⁷

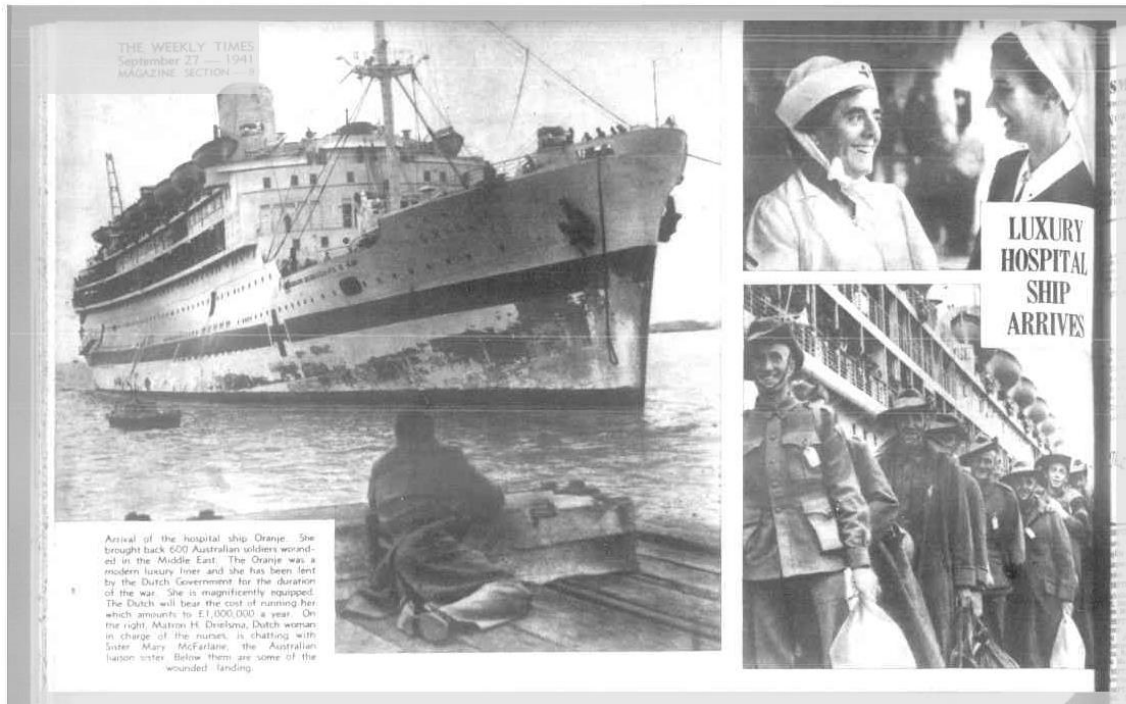


Figure 4: Australian newspapers reported on the Oranje's arrival.



Figure 5: The Dutch hospital ship Oranje in 1941

¹⁶ Virtual War Memorial Australia (n.d.) *Sister Mary Hamilton McFarlane and the Tragedy of the AHS Centaur*; Virtual War Memorial Australia (n.d.) *Mary Hamilton McFarlane*.

¹⁷ Private collection - Letter from Sister Mary H. McFarlane aboard HMNZHS Oranje, 2 April 1943, to Constance M. Hardingham (Adelaide), 4 pp., pencil, “HMNZHS Oranje” letterhead; Australian War Memorial (n.d.) ‘*Collection relating to SFX11679 Lt Sister Mary Hamilton McFarlane...*’ (PR05263); letter from McFarlane to Lt Mollie Humble Monks, 19 April 1943, written onboard AHS Centaur, Australian War Memorial, Canberra; Australian War Memorial (n.d.) ‘*McNab, Flora*’ (C955079); description notes a letter dated April 1943 from Sister McFarlane to Captain McNab, Australian War Memorial, Canberra.

Please forgive the odd
envelope reminds me
to you Matron.

Sy 11679
Sister M. H. McFarlane,
1st Netherlands Military
Hospital Ship's brigade
22nd October.

My dear Con, Thank you ever so much
for your letter, which I was thrilled
to receive.
I feel so guilty not writing to you
before this late date — my intentions
are always good!

It was very bad missing you
at the train — probably my fault —
because I just caught it by a
whisker, — arriving on the platform
7.35 P.M. to find my brother, who
was travelling to, almost tearing
his hair out with rage & firmly
convinced that I would miss the
train.
It was most unfortunate that we

Figure 6: A letter from Sister Mary McFarlane to her close friend Constance M. Hardingham

Transfer to AHS *Centaur* (March–May 1943)

By early 1943 Australia had commissioned its own hospital ship, AHS *Centaur*, to evacuate casualties from New Guinea.¹⁸ Mary was hand-picked as one of twelve AANS sisters and, as the most senior, appointed second-in-charge under Matron Annie “Buff” Jewell. She helped fit out wards, secure equipment for heavy seas, and run casualty drills.¹⁹ A photograph of *Centaur* at Sydney, brightly lit and clearly marked under international law, illustrates the ship on which Mary would make her final voyage (see Figure 7).²⁰ Australian newspapers soon profiled the nurses of *Centaur*; a page from *The Australian Women’s Weekly* (see Figure 8) includes Mary’s photograph and details of service.²¹

¹⁸ Anzac Portal; *The Age* (Melbourne) (1943) ‘New Hospital Ship: Transformation of *Centaur*’, 15 March, p. 2. Trove, National Library of Australia.

¹⁹ Shrine of Remembrance (n.d.) ‘Imagining *Centaur*’; *Centaur Association Inc.* (2017) ‘Newsletter, May 2017’ — “Jewell’s Deputy Matron on AHS *Centaur* was Captain Mary Hamilton McFarlane, from Cowell in South Australia”.

²⁰ Australian War Memorial (1943) ‘Sydney, NSW. Port side view of the hospital ship *Centaur*’ (Accession C241449); Australian War Memorial (2023) ‘The sinking of the *Centaur*’; Department of Veterans’ Affairs (n.d.) ‘The sinking of the *Centaur*’ (Anzac Portal).

²¹ Nesbit, B. 1943, ‘Men of *Centaur* mourn loss of gallant nurses’, *The Australian Women’s Weekly*, 29 May, p. 9, National Library of Australia, Trove.

Torpedoed at Dawn (14 May 1943)

Centaur sailed from Sydney on 12 May 1943. Just after 4.00 am on 14 May, off Point Lookout, North Stradbroke Island, a Japanese submarine fired a torpedo; the ship's fuel tanks exploded, and *Centaur* sank within three minutes.²² Most people were asleep and had little chance to escape.²³ Of the 332 aboard, only 64 survived; 11 of the 12 nurses were lost. Eyewitness recollections placed Mary among those heard calling out in the darkness after the sinking; by daylight her voice had fallen silent. She was twenty-eight years old.²⁴ A local report carried the shock home, declaring that “the whole civilised world was horrified” and listing “Sister Mary H. McFarlane... believed to have perished,” while recalling her top-of-class training and service at sea (Figure 9), turning a national calamity into an immediate loss for Cowell.²⁵ Today, a memorial plaque at Point Lookout marks the location of the sinking and helps readers visualise the site of the disaster (see Figure 10).²⁶

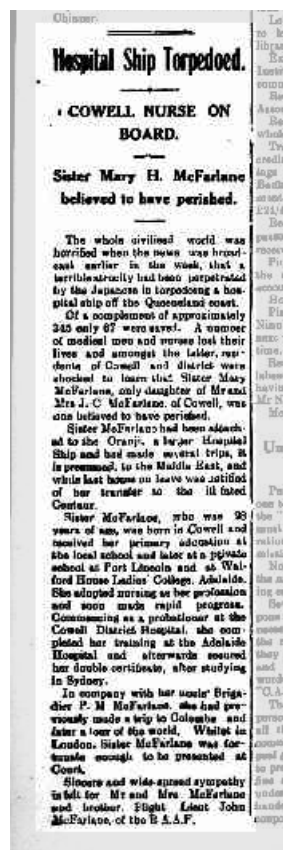


Figure 9: Newspaper clipping reporting the sinking of the Australian hospital ship AHS *Centaur* in 1943.

²² James, K. (2023) 'The sinking of the *Centaur*', *Australian War Memorial* (blog), 2 May; Department of Veterans' Affairs (n.d.) 'The Sinking of the *Centaur*', *Anzac Portal*; *The Telegraph* (Brisbane) (1943) 'Hospital ship sunk—299 lives lost near Brisbane: torpedoed without warning; went down in 3 minutes', 18 May, p. 1.

²³ State Library of Queensland 2012, 'Sinking of the AHS *Centaur*', John Oxley Library blog, 14 May.

²⁴ Department of Veterans' Affairs (n.d.) 'The sinking of the *Centaur*', *Anzac Portal*; *The Age* (Melbourne) (1943) 'Casualty list of *Centaur*', 19 May, p. 3.

²⁵ Australian War Memorial 2023, 'The sinking of the *Centaur*', Australian War Memorial (blog), 2 May; Department of Veterans' Affairs (n.d.), 'The Sinking of the *Centaur*', *Anzac Portal*.

²⁶ Commonwealth War Graves Commission (n.d.) 'McFarlane, Mary Hamilton — War casualty details (Sydney Memorial, Panel 4)'.



Figure 10: Memorial plaque at Stradbroke Island showing Centaur's sinking site and recounting the 14 May 1943 attack

Outrage and Remembrance

Australians were outraged that a clearly marked hospital ship had been attacked. Government posters urged citizens to “Work, Save, Fight — and so Avenge the Nurses!” (see Figure 11).²⁷ Prime Minister John Curtin condemned the attack as a breach of law and “common humanity”.²⁸



Figure 11: Australian government poster after the Centaur tragedy

²⁷ Australian War Memorial (n.d.) *Work, Save, Fight and so Avenge the Nurses!* (ARTV09088), Australian War Memorial, Canberra; Department of Veterans' Affairs (n.d.) *The Sinking of the Centaur*, Anzac Portal; State Library of Queensland (2016) 'Avenging the Nurses: Government's response to the sinking of 2/3 Australian Hospital Ship Centaur', John Oxley Library blog.

²⁸ Otago Daily Times 1943, 'Enemy outrage', 19 May, p. 5; Gisborne Herald 1943, 'Enemy barbarity', 19 May, p. 6; Hawke's Bay Herald-Tribune 1943, 'Enemy outrage', 19 May, p. 4.

Mary's name appears on national and local memorials: the Cowell Honour Roll (see Figure 12),²⁹ the AANS memorial panels in Brisbane (see Figure 13),³⁰ and the Commonwealth War Graves Commission certificate for the Sydney Memorial (see Figure 14).³¹ Personal remembrance is seen in the Centaur Memorial Scholarship booklet held by Mary's friend Constance (see Figure 15),³² and in a plaques and family memorials that honour her service (see Figure 16).³³



Figure 12: Mary McFarlane's name inscribed on the Cowell WWII Honour Roll, South Australia

²⁹ Australian War Memorial (Places of Pride) (n.d.) 'Cowell War Memorial', Canberra; Australian War Memorial (Places of Pride) (n.d.) 'Cowell Memorial Plaque for Sister Mary McFarlane', Canberra.

³⁰ Anzac Square & Memorial Galleries (n.d.) 'Australian Army Nursing Service (1939–1945)' (WWII Gallery plaque), Anzac Square, Brisbane; Monument Australia (n.d.) 'Australian Army Nursing Service – Anzac Square' (memorial bench/plaque).

³¹ Commonwealth War Graves Commission (n.d.) 'McFarlane, Mary Hamilton - War casualty details (2226118)', Sydney Memorial (Panel 4); Australian Cemeteries Index (n.d.) 'Mary Hamilton McFarlane - Sydney War Cemetery, Wall Panel 4'; Australian War Memorial (n.d.) 'Lieutenant Sister Mary Hamilton McFarlane - Roll of Honour'.

³² Private collection - Centaur Memorial Fund for Nurses, "Lest We Forget" (c.1944) booklet retained by Constance M. Hardingham (friend of Mary H. McFarlane); Deakin University Library (n.d.) Lest we forget - booklet produced to commemorate the sinking of Centaur and raise money for a post-graduate nursing scholarship, Fusion: Deakin Exhibits Online; Victorian Collections (n.d.) Booklet, Lest We Forget - 28-page booklet published as a fund-raiser for the "Centaur" War Nurses Memorial Fund.

³³ Private collection - Photograph of memorial plaque for Sister Mary H. McFarlane, AANS (image credit: Ian Smith), c. 2024; Commonwealth War Graves Commission (n.d.) 'McFarlane, Mary Hamilton - War casualty details (Sydney Memorial, Panel 4)'; Australian War Memorial – Places of Pride (n.d.) 'Cowell War Memorial' (listing includes Sister M. H. McFarlane).

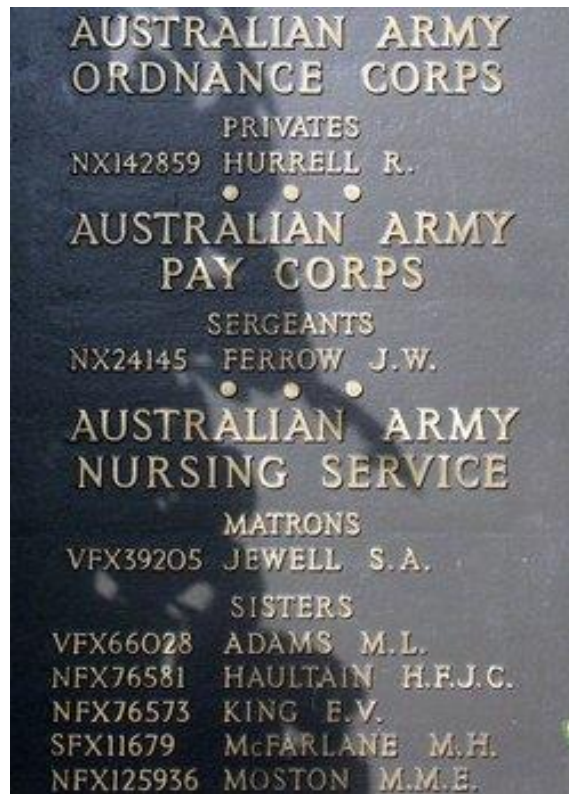


Figure 13: Plaque at Brisbane’s Anzac Square Memorial Galleries honouring Australian Army Nursing Service members, including Sister Mary H. McFarlane

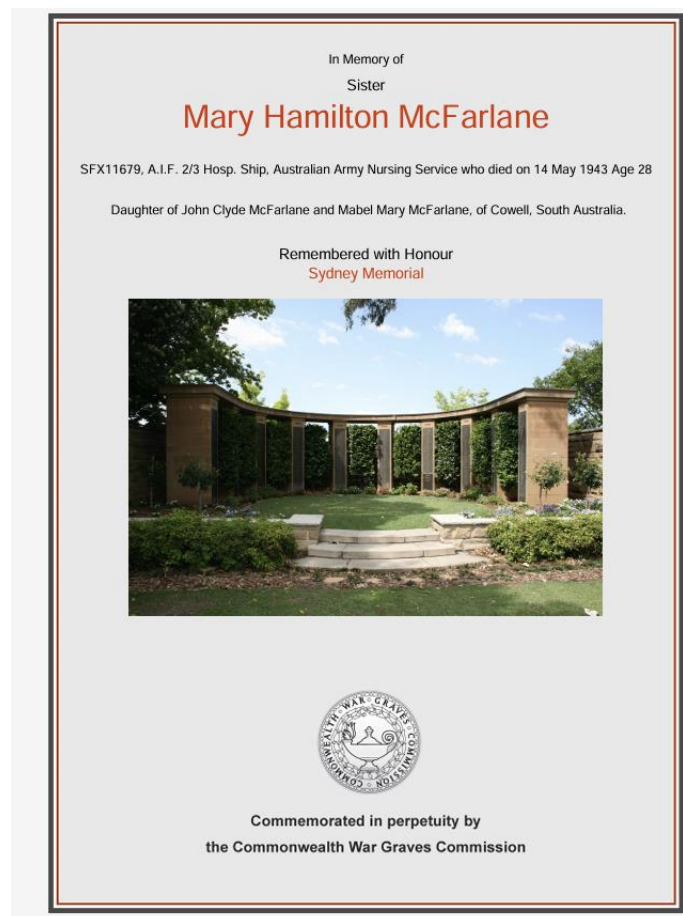


Figure 14: Memorial for Sister Mary Hamilton McFarlane, Australian Army Nursing Service; honoured at the Sydney Memorial.

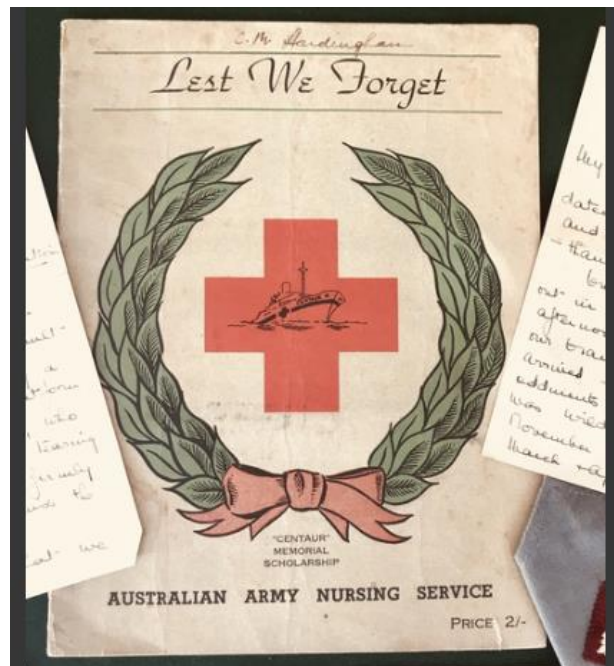


Figure 15: Centaur Memorial Scholarship booklet kept by Constance M. Hardingham, honouring Australian Army Nursing Service members who died in service.



Figure 16: Gravesite plaque for Matron Mary McFarlane. The inscription commemorates her as a “gentle, kind, loving sister.”

ANZAC Spirit: Perseverance and Courage

Perseverance shaped Mary well before the war. She left Cowell for a demanding city boarding school, then undertook rigorous nursing and midwifery training, graduating top of her class. In the 1930s and 1940s, women were expected to leave paid work on marriage and formal service options were mostly nursing, making her advanced training and seagoing role rare.³⁴ At sea she endured long rosters, heavy weather and the emotional toll of wounded men. Her 19 April 1943 letter to Mollie Monks stays upbeat,

³⁴ Veterans' Affairs, Anzac Portal (n.d.) 'Australian women and war'; Parliamentary Education Office (n.d.) 'Marriage bar abolished'.

noting night duty, a shipboard picnic, sleeping in a deck chair, and the queue for “the one nurse’s shower”, showing humour and standards kept high amid hardship. Chosen as *Oranje*’s first Australian liaison sister, then promoted to senior sister and deputy to Matron Jewell on *Centaur*, she earned trusted leadership through effort over time.

Mary’s moral and physical courage is unmistakable. She left the safety of civilian wards for service at sea, despite the dangers faced by unescorted hospital ships. That same resolve kept her steady with patients in pain and colleagues under strain. It was tested at 4 am on 14 May: jolted from sleep, she pulled on a lifejacket, found an exit, jumped into burning, debris filled water, and endured the darkness and cold until her strength failed. The nurses had rehearsed emergency plans, turning fear into preparedness.³⁵ Survivors’ accounts explain why Australians honoured the *Centaur* nurses as heroes who “served with courage” to the end.³⁶ The George Medal awarded to Savage acknowledges the courage and sacrifice of Mary and her ten fallen colleagues.³⁷ Figures 17³⁸ and 18³⁹ show two memorials, Len Shillam’s 1948 Brisbane bas relief and the Australian Service Nurses National Memorial in Canberra, which preserve their service and sacrifice.



Figure 17: Bas-relief monument to the *Centaur* nurses, Brisbane (sculptor: Len Shillam, 1948)

³⁵ Australian War Memorial 2013, ‘The Last Post Ceremony commemorating the service of (NFX125936) Sister Myrle Mary Eileen Moston...’ (transcript), 6 June; James, K. 2023, ‘The sinking of the *Centaur*’, Australian War Memorial (blog), 2 May; Department of Veterans’ Affairs n.d., ‘Ellen Savage — Stories of Service’, Anzac Portal; Shrine of Remembrance n.d., ‘Imagining *Centaur*’.

³⁶ Australian War Memorial (n.d.) ‘Sister Ellen Savage’, Australian War Memorial, Canberra.; The Australian Women’s Weekly (1943) ‘Men of *Centaur* mourn loss of gallant nurses’, 29 May, p. 9; National Capital Authority (n.d.) ‘Australian Service Nurses National Memorial’.

³⁷ Australian War Memorial (n.d.) ‘Sister Ellen Savage, GM’, Australian War Memorial, Canberra; The Sydney Morning Herald (1944) ‘George Medal for nurse’, 19 August, p. 4, National Library of Australia, Trove; The Canberra Times (1944) ‘George Medal for Sister Savage: Heroine of *Centaur*’, 19 August, p. 3, National Library of Australia, Trove.

³⁸ Anzac Square & Memorial Galleries (n.d.) ‘*Centaur* Memorial Fund for Nurses (Sculpture)’, Anzac Square, Brisbane; State Library of Queensland (2017) ‘Len Shillam’s 2/3 AHS *Centaur* Memorial, 1957’, John Oxley Library Blog; *Centaur* Memorial Fund for Nurses (n.d.) ‘Our Mission’.

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Figure 18: Australian Service Nurses National Memorial, Canberra

Conclusion

Lieutenant Sister Mary Hamilton McFarlane did not live to see peace, but the measure of her twenty-eight years is clear. She prepared diligently, served generously and faced danger without flinching. Her practical letters, light-hearted diary lines and leadership at sea reveal a nurse who made others' burdens lighter while carrying heavy loads herself. When *Centaur* went down, Australians saw not just a ship but the loss of healers; the nation's response, mourning and resolve, acknowledged what Mary and her comrades had stood for. In perseverance and courage, she embodied the ANZAC spirit.

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Research Process

I began my research process by scanning potential South Australian service personnel across the AWM Roll of Honour, the DVA World War Two Nominal Roll, Virtual War Memorial Australia and Trove. I built a short-list using clear criteria: (1) strength of primary evidence (letters, photographs, service papers), (2) capacity to illuminate broader wartime themes, (3) local commemorative links I could visit in Adelaide. Mary McFarlane stood out as a South Australian AANS nurse with surviving letters, photos, contemporary reports and lasting memorials, which would allow me to produce a thoroughly sourced essay told through a woman's perspective often missing from ANZAC stories.

I then developed focused research questions: Who was Mary before enlistment? What did she actually do at sea on *Oranje* and *Centaur*? How was her death reported and later commemorated? To answer these, I mapped a timeline (birth, schooling, training, enlistment, *Oranje* service, *Centaur* service, remembrance) and kept a source log. For every source I recorded its origin (who created it, when, where), purpose (why it was created), context (what was happening around it), and then judged reliability and usefulness before it entered my draft.

I verified Mary's identity and service particulars first. The Department of Veterans' Affairs nominal roll established her service details (SFX11679). The Australian War Memorial (AWM) Roll of Honour and the Commonwealth War Graves Commission confirmed death and commemoration without a grave. I then moved to primary evidence that could let Mary "speak": her studio portrait; her 2 April 1943 letter to Constance Hardingham on HMNZHS *Oranje* letterhead; and her 19 April 1943 letter to Lt Mollie Monks. These letters supplied her shipboard experience and tone. I searched Trove for contemporary reporting, collected photographs and posters, ensuring each image had an archival identifier and caption that tied directly to a claim in the text.

To deepen context, I studied secondary sources. The AWM encyclopedia entry on *Centaur*, Shrine of Remembrance essays, and histories of the Australian Army Nursing Service helped explain protected hospital-ship markings, Hague Convention rules, casualty evacuation at sea, and the specific risks nurses faced.

I broadened the lens by researching Mary's family, particularly her brother, Flight Lieutenant John Norman Muir McFarlane (RAAF 407442). Following his training photographs and service notes showed military service as a family commitment. Where records conflicted, such as AANS appointment in January 1941 versus enlistment details in February, I triangulated DVA, AWM and Virtual War Memorial Australia, then explained the most plausible reconciliation in my notes.

Finally, each year I attend the Adelaide Dawn Service at the South Australian National War Memorial on North Terrace with my family. Hearing the Ode and the Last Post and watching wreaths laid set the tone I wanted for this essay. For this project I also visited West Terrace Cemetery, walking the AIF Section and the Cross of Sacrifice and reading badges, unit plaques and epitaphs. Those visits shaped how I wrote about remembrance. Ultimately, I hope this research honours Mary and tells her story with accuracy and heart.

HaSS word Count: 498