

# JESSIE EMILY WAKEFIELD

*'A Local Heroine'*



2017 ANZAC Prize submission  
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If only we saw what she saw. If only we heard, the cries and excruciating screams. Only then we would truly understand the honor and sacrifice this woman possessed, and we would stand in awe, incredibly.

More than 3000 Australian women volunteered for active service as nurses during The Great war. Nursing provided these women direct participation in the war effort, as well as independence and travel opportunity<sup>1</sup>. ANZAC (Australia and New Zealand Army Corps) and AANS (Australian Army Nursing service) nurses worked in hospitals, in casualty clearing stations, on ships and on trains in locations varying from Britain, India, France, Belgium and the Middle-east. They faced many dangers and demands and were constantly exposed to new responsibilities and practices. These women were an essential part of the military and war effort.

There were a tremendous number of casualties during World war 1, if it was not for the nurses who served in these times of need, there could have likely been far more deaths than the listed 17 million (nurse, soldier and civilian deaths) that occurred during the years of 1914-1918. Jessie Emily Wakefield was one of these amazing women who worked tirelessly around the clock to help those in need during a time of great sadness and agony.



Sister/ staff nurse medical equipment used in World War 1<sup>1</sup>

Jessie Emily Wakefield was born on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of February 1885 in Goolwa, South Australia. She was the youngest of four children, her siblings being Gertrude Wakefield, Flora Wakefield and Allan Wakefield. Her parents were Constance Susan (nee Varcoe) and Murat Wakefield, they owned a farm named 'Tadmor' in Currency Creek where they raised their family<sup>2</sup>. Jessie grew up in the country town Goolwa, a town on the Fleurieu Peninsula. Jessie was known as an ambitious and intelligent student when she attended Goolwa Public School<sup>3</sup>.

When Jessie was 21 her father, Murat, died of illness, causing great sadness to her family. As Jessie was the youngest sibling, her father's death saw her new responsibilities and increased her independence. Jessie worked on her family's farm and within the community before enlisting for the war as a staff nurse at age 30, on the 6<sup>th</sup> of August 1915. She was the only woman south of Mount Barker to enlist and serve on the Western Front and in the Middle East. Jessie volunteered for The Great War with minimal background experience in nursing<sup>4</sup>.

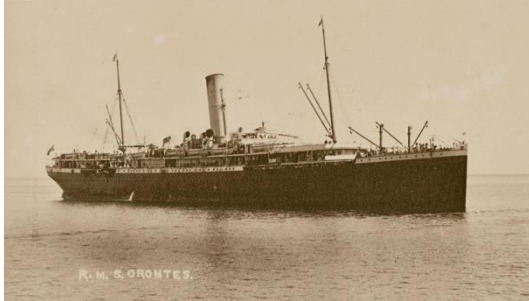
<sup>1</sup> Awm.gov.au. (2017). *Great War nurses | Australian War Memorial*. [online] Available at: <https://www.awm.gov.au/exhibitions/nurses/ww1/> [Accessed 8 Mar. 2017].

<sup>2</sup> Juers, D. (2017). *Alexandrina Library services, HISTORY ROOM*. [online] Alexandrina Local library wiki. Available at: <https://www.alexandrina.sa.gov.au/webdata/resources/files/History%20Room%20News%2088.pdf> [Accessed 5 Apr. 2017].

<sup>3</sup> Kleinig, R. (n.d.). *A guide behind the lines*. 1st ed.

<sup>4</sup> Notes received from the Goolwa History Room. (2017). .

She Volunteered to be a Nurse in the army for a change in environment and for military experience. Before departing for Cairo, farewells were given to Jessie at a fancy-dress football match held for her in Goolwa where she was presented with a travelling rug and the Mayor spoke to her.



Orontes ship, 1915

Jessie left Australia on a ship named the 'Orontes' and travelled to Cairo, Egypt, where she began her first 12 months of service by training in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Australian General hospital (AGH) in the 'Reinforcement' section. Due to her exceptional work, Jessie was eventually ranked as a Sister. Jessie was one of 300 Australian Nurses who treated 7400 soldier casualties in Cairo, from the Gallipoli Battles in 1915. Once the 3rd AGH's service had finished in Cairo, Jessie was to be posted to France to continue her nursing duties on

the European front.

Before leaving for Europe, Jessie was unexpectedly called to the British Victoria War hospital in Bombay, India. From the 24/07/1916 until 14/12/1916, with 299 other Australian nurses, Jessie treated Indian soldier casualties from the fighting that was occurring against German empire in French battlefields<sup>5</sup>. After her service in Bombay, Jessie progressed to Abbeville, France. The hospital she worked in was the new headquarters of the Commonwealth lines. Jessie worked treating and clearing the gassed and wounded patients of the 'The battle of Bullecourt' and remaining casualties from 'The battle of the Somme' (the battle of the Somme had occurred only weeks prior to her arrival). During this time, Jessie became both physically and mentally ill, obtaining anxiety, pleurisy and bronchitis<sup>6</sup> due to the things she was witnessing, and the terrible conditions she was working in.

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<sup>5</sup> . National Archives of Australia. (2017). *National Archives of Australia*. [online] Available at: <http://www.naa.gov.au> [Accessed 6 Apr. 2017].

<sup>6</sup> Adelaide Observer (1919). p. Page 11.

In May 1918, Jessie progressed to England where she furthermore worked in casualty clearing. She worked in hospitals across England in London, Southall and Dartford<sup>7</sup>. One hospital Jessie worked in was the Kitchener war hospital, Brighton. Kitchener war hospital was an Indian hospital consisting of 1700 beds and it was predominately run by men; leaving Nurses and Sisters (like Jessie) to feel as though they had minimal authority<sup>8</sup>. In her later stages of her service, Jessie regained her physical illnesses (pleurisy and bronchitis) and was admitted into hospital for two weeks.



Brighton Kitchener war hospital

Jessie's four years of service allowed her to receive the '1914-15 Star' for her service of Casualty clearing in Cairo, Egypt. The British War Medal- 1914-1920: for her recognized service in ranging hospitals throughout her entire service. She also received the Victory Medal for nursing a theatre of war (in France) between late 1916 and 1918<sup>9</sup>.

The ANZAC spirit is known as a suggestive concept which Australian and New Zealand Soldiers and Nurses possessed during the great war. It is said that the Anzac spirit consists of the following qualities; courage, bravery, endurance, initiative, discipline and mate-ship. The Nurses of World War 1 evidently displayed these qualities throughout their service in more ways than one. Jessie Emily Wakefield consistently portrayed the Anzac spirit throughout her time at war. Jessie showed courage by sacrificing her family and friends, as well as the familiarity of her home town for the war. Although, the time when Jessie most effectively portrayed the 'Anzac Spirit' was when she was worked in Abbeville, France from April 1917 to May 1918.

In Abbeville, Jessie gave treatment to severely injured gassed and wounded patients from 'The battle of Bullecourt'. She worked in tents and huts with very basic equipment and with the living conditions being both primitive and uncomfortable. She worked tiring, long shifts due to the number of patients she had to tend to, as the Battle of Bullecourt produced, alone, 10,000 Australian Casualties<sup>10</sup>. As well as treating the casualties of Bullecourt, Jessie treated the remaining casualties from the devastating battle of 'The Somme'. As well as battling personal illness such as anxiety, Jessie was in constant danger of being bombed, gassed, overrun by the enemy or being hit by artillery fire. Her exhaustion and sickness made

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<sup>7</sup> Kleinig, R. (n.d.). *A guide behind the lines*. 1st ed.

<sup>8</sup> "Brighton General Hospital | Kitchener Indian Hospital". *Sikhmuseum.com*

N.p., 2017. Web. 25 Apr. 2017.

<sup>9</sup> Jessie Wakefield service records. (2017). [Paper document] Goolwa History room, Goolwa.

<sup>10</sup> Tulloh, E. (2012). *History alive 9 for the Australian curriculum*. 1st ed. Milton, Qld.: John Wiley & Sons Australia, pp.232, 234, 237, 239, 242.

no difference to the demand of her task, and no matter how ill she felt, she always showed a shining face and gave gentle care to her patients<sup>11</sup>.

During this time, practically on front line, Jessie endured all the negative aspects of war that were taking place around her, yet persisted to be the best nurse that she could have possibly been. She treated her patients with the utmost respect and care. Jessie put aside her fear and instead, put each of her patient's wellbeing before her own. Jessie only returned to Australia when the hospital she was working in closed, if it were not for that- Jessie would have continued to endure the horrible conditions of war voluntarily, as she did for the previous four years. Throughout her service, Jessie saved thousands of lives and changed just as many with her good nature and kindness. Jessie is now regarded as a 'World War 1 Heroine' in Goolwa and the southern Murray lands. She is now a prominent aspect of an exhibition about influential women entitled 'Women of the river country'. Jessie is an inspiration to many, including myself.

Jessie returned home on the 18<sup>th</sup> of August 1919 to a town hall full of family, friends, admirers and Goolwa soldiers who had been nursed by her whilst at war. On the 11<sup>th</sup> of October, Jessie Wakefield married Alan Edward Woods in St Johns Church, Adelaide. In 1926, their daughter Elizabeth Mary was born. Jessie died on the 22<sup>nd</sup> August 1956 aged 70 years old in Woodville Park, Adelaide, South Australia. She was cremated at the Centennial Park cemetery, Adelaide<sup>12</sup>.

May her legacy live forever more.

Lest we Forget.

Word Count: 1348

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<sup>11</sup> Room, L. (2017). *Goolwa Library Local & Family History Room / SA Community History*. [online] Community.history.sa.gov.au. Available at: <http://community.history.sa.gov.au/goolwa-library-local-family-history-room> [Accessed 13 Mar. 2017].

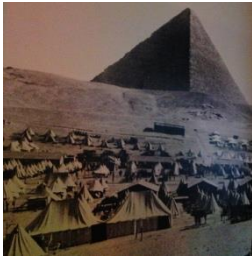
<sup>12</sup> Kleinig, R. (n.d.). *A guide behind the lines*. 1st ed.

**Sources:**



'Sister/ staff nurse medical equipment used in World War 1'

Photograph taken at the Melbourne Shrine of Remembrance. Taken on iPhone 5c. (2017). [image].



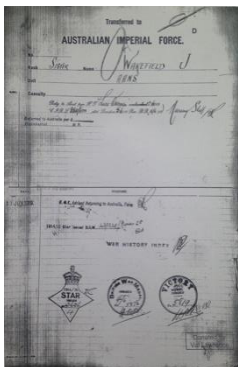
'Photograph of tents and huts in Cairo, 1915'

Photograph taken at the Melbourne Shrine of Remembrance. Taken on iPhone 5c. (2017). [image].



Photo Graph of Sister Jessie Emily Wakefield (cover photo).

Photograph of Jessie Wakefield. Taken in Adelaide, 1920. Sourced from the Goolwa Library History room. Taken on iPhone 5c. (2017). [image].



(Foot-note 9)

'Jessie Wakefield service records- received medals'

Jessie Wakefield service records. (2017). [Paper document] Goolwa History room, Goolwa.



'Brighton Kitchener war hospital'

Alicia Crowhurst, 2017 Anzac Prize submission



Kitchener War Hospital Brighton. (2017). [image] Available at:

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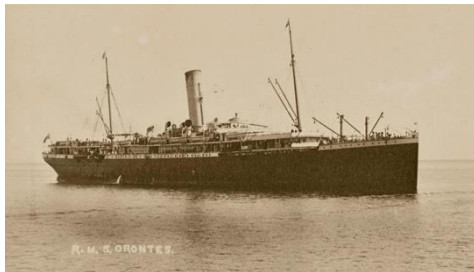
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