

## Matron Ethel Sarah Davidson

Image 1



It was the moment that her world stood still. For one fleeting moment, her heart stopped. This was a world war. Her eyes would see countless bullets, her ears would hear all too many cries and her hands would tend to hundreds of the wounded. But, most of all, her heart would carry hope for all those she met.

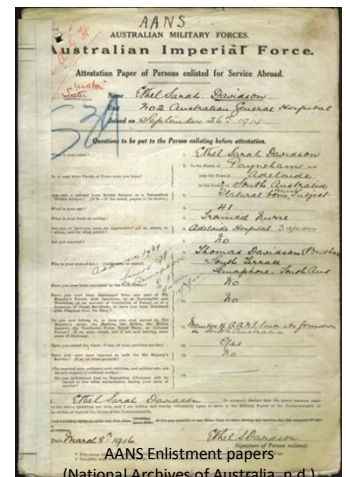
Matron Ethel Sarah Davidson (see Image 1) was born in Tenderton in Payneham, Adelaide on the 19th of June 1872. She was born to William Davidson, a skilled mariner hailing from Scotland, and his second wife Elizabeth Jane. (Abbott, 1981) However, when she was just five years old, Davidson's mother, father, her two younger brothers and younger sister tragically drowned at sea, after her father's

(Returned & Services League of Australia SA Branch, 2015)

Brigantine ship, the Emily Smith, was wrecked in Kangaroo Island, leaving, *"a general feeling of sympathy with the surviving members of the Captain's family."* (The Western Australian Times, 1877) Davidson was the only member of her direct family not on the ship, so had a life of hardship from an early age. She was raised by her six adult half-siblings from her father's first marriage. While her early education is unknown, she decided to become a nurse, doing her initial training at the Royal Adelaide Hospital. Following this, she worked in Prospect as a district nurse, before joining the Central Board of Health and privately nursing. (The Australian Women's Register, 2018)

In 1904, she joined the Australian Army Nursing Service (AANS) as a Sister, with her enlistment papers shown on the right. In 1914 on September 26th, Davidson enlisted in the Australian Imperial Force as a Sister. She left her job as a district nurse in Prospect and left for Egypt with the first contingent on a troopship called the HMAT A9 Shropshire, arriving in December. She stayed in Egypt for a year and eight months, immense terrors. On the 5th of December 1914, she described Egypt to her niece in a postcard,

*"You will see by this we have landed at Egypt... don't expect we will stay here long, only while our troops are here. We are very lucky to be first here."* (Heggie, 2018)



Davidson was one of the first three nurses to leave South Australia for Egypt when the war began. During late 1914, into 1915 and 1916, while Ethel was in Egypt, the Middle East battlefield was a horrific environment. When she first arrived, she went to the Convalescent Depot in the Mena Camp. In this camp, she witnessed harrowing scenes, treating many soldiers with detrimental injuries.

From August 1915 until January 1916, she was acting matron of the Convalescent Depot. From there, later in 1916, she moved to Cairo to work in the 3rd Australian Auxiliary Hospital as the temporary matron there. She dedicated profound service to the hospital,

and for her efforts was mentioned in several dispatches and awarded the Associate of the Royal Red Cross.

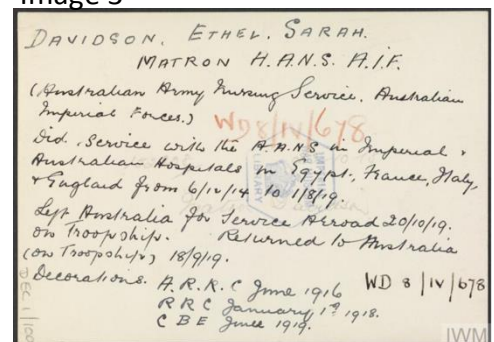
After serving as temporary matron, Davidson relinquished her position on June 24th, becoming head sister. She then left for the A.I.F headquarters in London, where she served for six months. She then embarked to the 2nd A.A.H in Southall, working there for a short period. On February 28th, 1917, Ethel moved the Australian General Hospital in Wimereux in France, serving those on the Western Front.

During the period while she served as a nurse on the Western Front, it was filled with bloodshed. In a newspaper article about Ethel, it explained that she was, *"in the danger zone no less than the troops."* (Davidson, 1929) Yet, for the entirety of the war, she risked her life for our nation.

From Wimereux, she transferred to the 2nd Australian Casualty Clearing Station in Trois Arbres in March. This area was just behind the front line where the British Second Army fought, so bombing was frequent with, *"bomb proof shelters built for the Sisters who slept there,"* (Through These Lines, 2012) and a constant heavy workload. Ethel's next rank was near Genoa as temporary matron of the 38th British Stationary Hospital in January 1918. For her incredible devotion and service there, Davidson was mentioned in dispatches and awarded the Royal Red Cross 1st Class. (Commonwealth of Australia Gazette, 1918) It was at this hospital she heard of the war's end. Her fellow matron described how people, *"proceeded up and down the streets, blowing whistles and singing at the top of their voices,"* (The Telegraph- Brisbane, Qld, 1932) upon hearing the news.

Two months after the conclusion of the war, in January 1919 she worked at the 2nd A.A.H. at Southall. For her hard-work, she was awarded a Commander of the British empire award (a CBE) on the King's Birthday on June 3rd, 1919. Davidson served Australia for the entirety of World War One, as shown in her service record (right), and continued to remain connected to her patients long after the war's conclusion.

Image 3



Service Record  
(Imperial War Museum, 2018)

After returning from war in December 1919, she worked at the Military Hospital in Keswick. In 1924, she became matron of the 4th Military District, and remained matron of the Military Hospital until 1933. Between 1922 and 1926 she was president of the Returned Nurses Association of South Australia.

Davidson passed away of cardiovascular and renal disease in Semaphore on April 21st, 1939. Her strong presence in the war effort was recognised by the Adelaide News, who upon her death reported that, *"her death, almost on the eve of ANZAC Day, has cast a gloom over Keswick Hospital. She will be mourned by large numbers of patients and hundreds of returned soldiers."* (The Adelaide News, 1939) Ethel Sarah Davidson will forever be held in our history and in our hearts, for the incredible service which she dedicated to Australia.

For Ethel Sarah Davidson's dedication and service, Lest We Forget.

## Part Two

ANZAC. It is a term frequently associated with our national identity, but what is the essence of this ANZAC Spirit which we so often describe? ANZAC stands for the Australian New Zealand Army Corps, however the idea of ANZAC Spirit encompasses various attributes such as courage, perseverance, mateship and resourcefulness. Matron Ethel Sarah Davidson possessed all of these qualities, but particularly, she displayed resourcefulness. She displayed this quality in the face of understaffing and in immensely dire conditions.

Firstly, Ethel was resourceful through understaffing. Being one of the first three nurses to leave for Egypt from South Australia, before she even reached her destination in Cairo, Ethel found out that they were under-resourced, and that in terms of nurses they were extremely understaffed. This meant Ethel had to be inventive to treat an influx of patients. Upon arriving, she described this understaffing, explaining that, *"We had barely reached our destination when we found that the numbers would have to be largely increased."* (Australian Nurses in World War One, 2013) However, even in the face of understaffing, Ethel was, *"an exceptionally able leader and organiser,"* (The Rising Sun, 1939) and worked tirelessly utilising her capable nature to work hard and cover for the lack of staff. She even created a strong reputation of the resourcefulness of Australian nurses among her colleagues, such as the matron in chief at the war office who described that, *"she would have as many Australian nurses as they liked to send her,"* (Davidson, 1929) based on her experience with Ethel and her fellow nurses.

Ethel was evidently resourceful through the dire conditions of the war. Ethel described serving, *"in the hospitals and on the field,"* (Davidson, 1929) and through this field work particularly, she had to help patients without the basic nursing tools available in most medical facilities. In a time in which many women did not even work, Ethel spent significant time dedicating her life to service to her country. Just as the soldiers fought bravely in battle, as a nurse in many high positions Ethel served Australia with ingenuity, even in situations of adversity. As a nurse, she had to be creative to face the hardship of war. She herself recognised the immense struggles of being a nurse in the war, later describing that, *"Not everyone thinks of the deeds of devotion and the arduous work wrought in behalf of the soldiers and of the country at large by the nursing staffs."* (Davidson, 1929) This shows that Ethel approached her service to Australia with a strong sense of resourcefulness, because she devoted herself completely to her nursing to accommodate for the dire conditions.

Matron Ethel Sarah Davidson clearly possessed the ANZAC spirit through her unparalleled resourcefulness. In the face of understaffing, dire conditions and the task of working in high positions, Ethel utilised all of her skills to face these issues. Ethel truly epitomises the ANZAC Spirit and her resourcefulness in service to Australia is something that we will truly never forget.

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