The Australian
Women's Register

Entry type: Person
Entry ID: AWE5390

Bembrick, Amy Glenthora

(1893 - 1949)

Born	18931026, Grenfell New South Wales Australia
Died	19490613, Hunters Hill New South Wales Australia
Occupation	Army Nurse, Child welfare worker

Summary

Amy Glenthora Bembrick, born at Grenfell New South Wales, served with the Australian Army Nursing Service in World War I in Salonika. After her marriage to Charles William James Gumbley, an Anglican Minister, she was active in Adelaide during the Second World War as ‘camp mother’ for disadvantaged boys.

Details

Amy Glenthora Bembrick was born at Grenfell New South Wales on 26 October 1893 to Alfred Bembrick and Elizabeth (nee Fowler). She was descended through her father from Mary Ann Southwell (1837-74) a daughter of Thomas Southwell, a pioneer settler at Parkwood, a property on Ginninderra Creek then in New South Wales now in the Australian Capital Territory. She was related to Australian Army Nursing Service (AANS) nurse, Gladys Boon, and they shared similar experiences during the First World War.

After her family moved to Epping, Amy Bembrick trained at Western Suburbs Cottage Hospital, Croydon, Sydney. She enlisted aged 23 on 10 May 1917 giving her religion as Methodist and naming her father Alfred Bembrick of Epping as her next of kin. She was recruited following a request from the British Government for Australian trained nurses to staff four British military hospitals in Salonika in northern Greece. In response to the request three units, each of 91 nurses, embarked from Australia in June 1917 and a fourth unit in August. The first three units began duty in Salonika in August 1917. The fourth was delayed in Egypt and reached Salonika later. Altogether 42 Australian sisters and 257 staff nurses served in Salonika.

British and French forces had arrived in Greece in 1915 to fight Bulgarian forces invading Serbia, to regain control of the Balkans and prevent enemy forces taking areas leading to the Suez Canal and the Middle East but they saw only intermittent action over the next three years. Most patients at the military hospitals were British soldiers and Bulgarian prisoners of war. Many were not battle casualties but suffering from diseases including malaria, dysentery and black water fever. The Australian nurses, who had enlisted for service overseas with the expectation that they would nurse Australian soldiers, were disappointed that this was never the case in Salonika. They also felt they had been relegated to the war's sidelines with action on the Balkan front little reported at the time. The final battle against the Bulgarians in September 1918 was not reported in the London Times in any detail until 1919.

All the nurses in Salonika felt the bitter cold and snow in winter and the intense heat in summer in hospitals set up in tents or primitive huts. In winter there was not enough fuel for the braziers to heat the tents and by morning the blankets on patients were stiff with ice. Most nurses suffered from malaria which was endemic and those with recurrent malaria were repatriated to Australia. By August 1918, 46 nurses had been invalided back to Australia. Nurses wore heavy mosquito nets and clothing that covered every part of their bodies in an effort to ward off mosquitoes but they sometimes discarded extra coverings when they made nursing impossible. The sites of some of the hospitals were near swamps which became quagmires in winter and mosquito breeding grounds in summer.

Amy Bembrick sailed on HMT Mooltan on 19 June 1917 for Egypt and arrived in Salonika on the Osmaniah in August 1917. She was posted briefly to 52nd British General Hospital (BGH), then to 50 BGH, a hut hospital at Kalamaria on the outskirts of Salonika where she remained for most of her service. At the beginning of February 1919 she left for England where she obtained three months leave from 25 March to do a course in domestic economy at the Battersea Polytechnic, London. Amy boarded SS Canberra to return to Australia on 23 July 1919 and was discharged on 15 September 1919. She had been promoted from Staff Nurse to Sister in Salonika but this was not ratified until just before she left England. She was awarded the British War Medal and the Victory Medal.

In 13 July 1922 at Woodford Bridge, Essex, England Amy Bembrick, 28, married Charles William James Gumbley, 30, whom she had met while nursing in Salonika. He was then Corporal Bill Gumley serving with the British Army and he later became an Anglican minister. From 1939 to 1945, the family lived in Adelaide where Rev. Gumbley was rector of St Luke's Church of England, Whitmore Square. During this time Amy was 'camp mother' to hundreds of children from needy families who attended annual boys' camps and she also helped in providing free hot lunches for two hundred children during the winter months.

Amy Gumbley died on 13 June 1949, aged 56, at All Saints Anglican Rectory, Hunters Hill, Sydney, where her husband had been rector since 1945. She was survived by three daughters, who all trained as nurses, and a son. She is commemorated on the Grenfell World War I Memorial and the Epping World War I Roll of Honour.

Published resources

Site Exhibition
Canberra Women in World War I: Community at Home, Nurses Abroad, Clarke, Patricia and Francis, Niki, 2015, http://www.womenaustralia.info/exhib/cww1

Resource
Trove, National Library of Australia, 2009

Mettle and Steel: the AANS in Salonika, Wadman, Ashleigh, 2015, https://www.awm.gov.au/blog/2015/01/13/mettle-and-steel-aans-salonika/

Book
Guns and brooches : Australian Army Nursing from the Boer War to the Gulf War, Bassett, Jan, 1992

More than Bombs and Bandages: Australian Army Nurses at work in World War I, Harris, Kirsty, 2011

The Southwell Family: pioneers of the Canberra District 1838-1938, Gillespie, Lyall, 1988

Book Section
Official History of the Australian Army Medical Services 1914-18. Vol. III: Problems and Services, Butler, A.G., 1943

Resource Section
Bembrick, Amy Glenthora, 2013, http://nurses.ww1anzac.com/be.html

Article
S.A. church worker dies in Sydney, 1949, http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article130193044

Archival resources

National Archives of Australia, National Office, Canberra
Bembrick Amy Glenthora : SERN S/Nurse : POB Grenfell NSW : POE Sydney NSW : NOK F Bembrick Alfred

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