Entry type: Person
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Blundell, Madeline Patricia Petrie (Patricia)

(1880 - 1968)

Born	18800317, South Yarra Victoria Australia
Died	19681127, South Yarra Victoria Australia
Occupation	Army Nurse, Matron, Nurse

Summary

Patricia Blundell served in in the Australian Army Nursing Service (AANS) in World War I at Lemnos (Gallipoli), in Egypt, on hospital transports, in military hospitals at Wimereux near Boulogne in France and at military hospitals in England. In 1918 the ship on which she was travelling back to Australia was torpedoed in the Bay of Biscay. After being rescued by the British Navy she reached Melbourne safely on another ship. Before enlisting in 1915, she had gained military nursing experience as matron of Royal Military Hospital, Duntroon.

Details

Patricia Blundell enlisted in the Australian Army Nursing Service (AANS) following about six months at Duntroon Military Hospital in Canberra. She and her brother, Martin Petrie Blundell, are a rare case of an Australian sister and brother serving at Gallipoli at the same time. While she tended the wounded and sick on Lemnos Island, Martin fought with the 4th Light Horse AIF on the Peninsula.

Madeline Patricia Petrie Blundell was born in the Melbourne suburb of South Yarra on 17 March 1880, a daughter of Martin Petrie Blundell, a senior banker with the Bank of Australasia, and Emily Jane (born) Lineker. She was known by her second name, Patricia, and to her family she was Pattie. She came from an affluent family that mixed in the higher levels of Melbourne society and had a holiday home at Mt Macedon.

In 1911, at the age of 31, Patricia abandoned society life to enrol as a trainee nurse at Royal Children’s Hospital Melbourne and after completing her training she continued to nurse at the hospital. In October 1914 she was appointed senior nursing sister (usually termed Matron) at Duntroon under the medical officer, Captain Peter Lalor, a grandson of Peter Lalor of Eureka fame. Her arrival coincided with the completion of the hospital which, for the first few years after Duntroon opened, had operated in tents and temporary accommodation and had relied on male medical orderlies. Like some other nurses who followed she was probably attracted to nursing at Duntroon to gain army experience before enlisting. She resigned from Duntroon at the end of April 1915 to volunteer for the Australian Army Nursing Service (AANS).

Two weeks after completing her enlistment on 5 May 1915, Patricia Blundell was on board RMS Mooltan ready to depart with the complement of nursing and medical personnel to staff 3rd Australian General Hospital (AGH). She was aged 35, her religion was Church of England and she named her mother, Mrs E. Blundell, ‘Noel’, Upper Macedon, as her next of kin. The 3rd AGH was originally destined to be stationed in England but the huge number of casualties on Gallipoli from 25 April 1915 caused a change of plans.

About a month after their arrival in London the nurses and medical staff were sent to Lemnos, a Greek Island off the coast of Gallipoli, to nurse AIF casualties from Anzac Cove. The Australian nurses arrived early in August to find their tent hospital only partly constructed, wounded patients lying in the mud and grave shortages of medical supplies, food and even water. The nurses were housed in tents but had no beds or mattresses and they gave their eating and drinking utensils to their patients. When a further convoy of wounded arrived the nurses used their own soap and tore up items of their clothing to bandage their patients. The conditions for the wounded were so bad, one nurse wrote that her wish was that any soldier casualty she knew would be killed outright in the fighting. Through August huge numbers of casualties arrived from the offensive early in that month but from September most of the one thousand patients treated at any one time were suffering from disease which spread rapidly as the health of the troops in the trenches collapsed. Many were severe dysentery and enteric (typhoid fever) cases. After three weeks’ treatment on Lemnos those who were not declared fit to return to battle

were sent on to army hospitals in Egypt or England for further treatment.

On 11 December 1915, Patricia's brother, 24-year-old Martin Petrie Blundell, 7th Reinforcements, 4th Light Horse Regiment, was evacuated to Lemnos as part of the general evacuation from Gallipoli. While on Lemnos waiting for transport to Egypt, he recorded in his diary and in letters to his mother his visits to the hospital to have tea with his sister Pattie. Eleven years younger than Patricia, Martin was born at Toorak in 1891. He was working as s a station overseer when he enlisted in Rockhampton early in 1915, a few months before his sister. After the Gallipoli evacuation he was on Lemnos until towards the end of December 1915 when he left for Alexandria. In March 1916 he sailed to Marseilles where he was initially posted to II Anzac Mounted Regiment.

In January 1916 Patricia left Lemnos with the 3rd AGH to move to Abbassia on the outskirts of Cairo where the hospital was set up in a huge building that had been the Egyptian Army Barracks. Regarded as one of the best Australian general hospitals organised during the war, it had been fitted out with the help of the Australian Red Cross. Nurses appreciated the better conditions after the bitter winter weather and disease that had undermined their health on Lemnos.

After seven months at Abbassia, Patricia left for Malta to serve on the British hospital ship Guilford Castle which carried patients from Egypt to Mediterranean ports. In October 1916 she was posted to the 3rd Australian Auxiliary Hospital (AAH) at Dartford, Kent, a clearing station for patients from the Western Front and a specialised hospital for shell shock casualties.

In January 1917 Sister Blundell was posted to the 2nd Australian General Hospital in France, a tent hospital on desolate and windswept sea cliffs at Wimereux near Boulogne, to nurse battle casualties. After more than a year nursing at Wimereux she was sent to hospital in England suffering from bronchitis and she remained in hospital for six weeks. Her health had been undermined by her long service, often in appalling conditions at hospitals at Lemnos, Egypt, England, on hospital transport duties and particularly by two winters in freezing conditions in tents at Wimereux.

In April 1918 she returned to nursing and was posted to the 2nd Australian Auxiliary Hospital at Harefield where many Australian casualties received medical and surgical treatment before being repatriated. On 15 April, Patricia heard the devastating news that her brother Martin, a Lance Corporal with I Anzac Corps Mounted Regiment, had been killed in action at the battle of Kemmel during the German spring offensive in Flanders. His body was never recovered. He was killed near the summit of Mont Kemmel while acting as liaison with French forces during an intense bombardment. He was among 5000 casualties of the battle.

On 10 July 1918 Patricia Blundell boarded HMAT Barunga on what she and the 800 returning AIF soldiers and nurses on board hoped would be an uneventful journey back to Australia. Although suffering from debility she was on nursing duty on board the ship. Less than 24 hours after the journey began, Barunga was holed by a German torpedo from a U boat in the Bay of Biscay and began to sink. All on board had to abandon ship, some in lifeboats, others on rafts and some swimming. All were rescued by British destroyers.

Later that month Patricia Blundell left England again on HMAT Boonah and arrived safely in Melbourne. She spent some months recuperating at Osborne House, a military convalescent hospital for nurses in Geelong. When she applied to the Army Medical Board for discharge stating she was 'very tired out', the Board ruled that she had no permanent disability but discharged her as permanently unfit for further service.

Patricia Blundell did not work again as a nurse and she did not marry. Her mother who died in the 1920s left her a substantial legacy which enabled her to live comfortably and make several trips to England before and after the Second World War. She is recorded living at Melbourne suburbs of East Melbourne and Toorak and sometimes at Mt Macedon with her sister Mrs Beatrice Stoving at 'Noel', a French chalet-type house which was destroyed many years later in the 1983 bushfires. 'Noel' was built on land originally part of the estate of early Victorian colonist, Charles Ryan, a grazier and stock and station agent, whose granddaughter, Lady (Maie) Casey wrote of visiting her widowed grandmother and aunts at Mt Macedon in An Australian Story.

Madeline Patricia Petrie Blundell died at 255 Domain Road, South Yarra in 1968, aged 88. She was awarded the 1914-15 Star, the British War Medal and the Victory Medal and is listed on the ACT Memorial.

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

A Brother and Sister at Arms at Gallipoli, Fielding, Peter, 2012, http://www.mhhv.org.au/?p=3628

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

History of the RMC Hospital, 5 Camp Hospital and 21 Dental Unit, Howarth, Ross, 2007

An Australian Story 1837 - 1907, Casey, Lady Maie, 1962

Mount Macedon. Its History and its Grandeur 1836-1978, Milbourne, Jean, 1978

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

The Australian Army Medical Services in the War of 1914-1918, Vol. I, Gallipoli, Palestine and New Guinea, Butler, A.G., 1930

The Australian Army Medical Services in the War of 1914-1918, Vol. II, The Western Front, Butler, A.G., 1940

Newspaper Article
Nurses who have recently left for the war, 1915

Resource Section
Blundell, Madeline Patricia Petrie, Fielding, Peter and Scarfe, Janet, 2013, http://emhs.org.au/person/blundell/madeline_patricia_petrie

Archival resources

National Archives of Australia, National Office, Canberra
Blundell M Patricia: SERN SISTER : POB Melbourne VIC : POE Melbourne VIC : NOK Blundell P

Blundell Martin Petrie : SERN 1080 : POB Melbourne VIC : POE Rockhampton QLD : NOK M Blundell M P

State Library of Victoria
Papers of Martin Blundell, 1915-1916. [manuscript]

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Digital resources



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