Entry type: Person
Entry ID: AWE5407

Davies, Griselda Dorothea (Tommy)

(1894 - 1931)

Born	18940624, Tuggeranong Homestead, near Queanbeyan New South Wales Australia
Died	19310817, SconeScone New South Wales Australia
Occupation	Ambulance Driver, Volunteer, War Worker

Summary

In November 1915 Tommy Cunningham sailed with her mother to Cairo to be near her fiancé, Major Charles ‘Stewart’ Davies (1880-1946), who sailed for Cairo on 10 November 1915 on the HMAT Ascanius with the 8th Infantry Brigade. After her marriage in Cairo and her husband’s deployment to the Western Front in France Tommy visited wounded soldiers in military hospitals and learned to drive an ambulance.

Details

Griselda Dorothea ‘Tommy’ Cunningham was born on 24 June 1894 to Mary Emily Cunningham (née Twynam) and James Cunningham, pastoralist, at the family homestead Tuggeranong near Queanbeyan, New South Wales. She attended Ascham School, a progressive independent girls’ school in Sydney where she and her sister Mary Paule were keen cricketers, played polo, acted in dramatic productions and were prefects. In April 1912 she made her debut at the Government House Ball, chaperoned by her maternal aunt Phoebe Wesche (nee Twynam) because her mother was grieving her elder daughter Jane’s death from appendicitis. By 1914 Tommy had left school and was enjoying the society of the district, including polo, tennis, horse riding and the young cadets from the recently opened Royal Military College (RMC) at Duntroon to whom her mother regularly extended warm and welcome hospitality.

Once war broke out, Tommy and her sister Mary Paule were inspired by male friends who joined the Australian Imperial Force (AIF), and female friends and family who served overseas as nurses or joined the Voluntary Aid Detachment, in which women with no nursing experience provided assistance in military hospitals. Tommy left home to train as a nurse at Prince Alfred Hospital in Sydney, and quickly fell in love with a young New Zealand-born British army officer, Captain Charles ‘Stewart’ Davies who had been seconded from the British Army to teach at the RMC, Duntroon. ‘In a state of mind… thinking she might never see her fiancé again’ her parents decided Tommy should travel to Egypt (Twynam family papers cited in Horsfield, 106). In November 1915 Tommy sailed to Cairo, accompanied by her mother, on the Mongolia, a ship transporting troop reinforcements to the battle front, to be nearer to Stewart. She married him in Cairo in April 1916 at the Chapel of No. 3 General Hospital, Abbassia. (Horsfield 107-109).

By July 1916 Tommy was in London where she visited wounded soldiers in hospital and wrote letters for those who could not hold a pen. She had hoped to join the British Women’s’ Land Army which had been formed by the Board of Agriculture to ensure food production continued in the absence of three million men who were away fighting, but her maternal grandfather, Edward Twynam, had strictly forbidden it as unsuitable work for young ladies (Twynam family papers cited in Horsfield, p. 197). Instead, Tommy learned motor management so she could be an ambulance driver (Twynam papers cited in Horsfield, p. 114), however this was curtailed by her first pregnancy around April 1917. In early December Tommy gave birth to her first baby, James Stewart Davies, two months prematurely while she suffered from influenza and the baby died 24 hours later. Her husband was able to get one week’s special leave from the front line in France to visit his wife. Fortunately her maternal aunt Phoebe Wesche was on hand in London the rest of the time and able to care for her niece (NLA MS 6749, Folder 13).

She returned home to Lanyon in 1919 and shortly after gave birth to her daughter Sheila. Stewart joined them at Lanyon for Christmas 1919. In 1920 the British army posted Stewart to Khartoum, Sudan and he apparently never returned to his family. Tommy, who was by then using her middle name Dorothea, did not see Stewart again – he abandoned his wife and daughter for life in the regular army. She took up flying and in 1921 bought a property – Fairvale – on the Cotter Road in the new Federal Capital Territory, employing a manager to run it. The property went broke in 1931, forcing Dorothea to sell. Plagued by financial problems, serious injuries after a bad plane crash, and the demons of her war years, she took her own life on 17 August 1931 when convalescing at her younger brother Pax’s place in Scone, New South Wales, Australia.

Published resources

Book
Mary Cunningham: An Australian Life, Horsfield, Jennifer, 2004

Australian doctors on the western front: France and Belgium 1916-1918, Likeman, Colonel Robert, 2014

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

Archival resources

National Library of Australia, Manuscript Collection
Papers of Cunningham family, 1834-1902 [manuscript]

Letters, 1910-1960 [manuscript]

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