



ROYAL AUSTRALASIAN
COLLEGE OF SURGEONS

WOMEN SURGEONS OF WORLD WAR 1



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VERA SCANTLEBURY

(1889-1946)



Vera Scantlebury and her brother, Cliff, UMA



Entrance to the Endell St military Hospital IWM

Vera Scantlebury was born in Linton, Victoria and graduated with an MBBS from the University of Melbourne in 1914. After working at the Royal Melbourne and Children's Hospitals, she paid her own way to England and the war.

Dr Scantlebury was only 28 when she was appointed as a Lieutenant and Assistant Surgeon at Endell St Military Hospital. The hospital was the 'brainchild' of suffragettes Louisa Garrett Anderson and Flora Murray. It was established in the old St Giles workhouse in Covent Garden in May 1915 and was accredited by the War Office. When Vera Scantlebury arrived in 1917, the 570 bed hospital was almost entirely run by women and was known as the 'Suffragette Hospital'. Vera wrote to her family:

You do not know that I am in the midst of these very militant suffragettes...

Weaponry at the front caused complex injuries including long bone fractures, head wounds and cases requiring major abdominal surgery. Inexperienced in war wounds, Vera found her first 6 months at the hospital challenging and in May 1917, she wrote:

This work is so entirely different from anything I have ever done – I am so slow both in brain and body.

Closely mentored by Anderson and Murray, she grew to admire their tenacity and kindness:

I have the greatest admiration and respect for these two women – they have struggled against fearful odds and succeeded against the greatest prejudice...they have made this hospital.

Nicknamed the 'Little Lieutenant' by the patients, she was constantly busy and on the 2nd September she mentions:

I did 5 ops this afternoon – one man was frightfully bad – You can imagine how I felt about him – he was frantically shocked.

Vera continued to extend her contract with the hospital and improved her surgical technique at the London School of Medicine for Women. By February 1918, she had evolved into a mature and competent surgeon:

I did a nerve suture pm. Nerve was badly injured. The dissecting has made a difference and I tackled the op with much more confidence...

Vera Scantlebury remained at Endell St until she returned to Australia in 1919. Various honorary appointments such as those at the Women's and Children's Hospitals followed and, in 1924, she visited New Zealand, Canada and the United States to study child welfare. In 1926 she married Dr Edward Brown, later a Professor of Engineering at Melbourne University. Until her death from cancer in 1946, Dr Vera Scantlebury Brown pioneered infant welfare in Victoria and facilitated funding to the Lady Gowrie Child Care Centres.

WOMEN SURGEONS OF WORLD WAR I

PHOEBE CHAPPLE

(1879-1967)



Phoebe Chapple, c1917 AWM P1087.005



Phoebe Chapple's medals AWM REL.02991.001

Born in Adelaide, Phoebe Chapple entered Adelaide University at the age of 16, attaining her BSc in 1898 and an MBBS in 1904. In 1905 she was house surgeon at the Adelaide Hospital.

Dr Chapple was a feminist involved in women's affairs such as the South Australian Women's Refuge. She elected to enlist with the RAMC in early 1917, paying her own fare, and was appointed as Captain to the Cambridge Military Hospital in Aldershot. She wrote:

It was a tremendous experience. I was in the surgical wards in charge of every variety of war ailment and wound. The convoys arrived continually from France and more than 1000 patients were accommodated at this busy centre.

In November 1917, attached to the Queen Mary's Auxiliary Army Corps (QMAAC), Dr Chapple was one of two women doctors sent to the front at Abbeville in France. On the night of 29 May 1918, German bombers attacked the Abbeville camp. Forty women were forced to shelter in the trenches and a direct hit caused the deaths of 9 women and wounded several others. Phoebe Chapple spent that night tending the wounded in the trench.

I think when there is suffering and death at hand, fear absents itself. Fortunately the construction of the tent was zigzag, so the missile was limited in its effects...

Her efforts were rewarded with a Military medal 'For gallantry and devotion to duty during an enemy action.' Some felt this should have been a Military Cross but these were reserved for men. Women did not hold commissions and lacked the same privileges and recognition as their male counterparts. Dr Chapple tolerated this situation but felt that *women were [squeezed] dry like an orange.*

Promoted to Major, Phoebe Chapple spent the rest of the war serving as a doctor with the RAMC at Rouen and Le Havre. Returning to Australia in 1919, she resumed practice in Adelaide's North Terrace and was narrowly defeated when she stood as a candidate in the 1919 Municipal elections. In 1921 she was honorary M/O at the Adelaide Hospital night clinic and she continued to practice from her home 'Tintagel' in Norwood until the age of 85.



QMAAC Funeral AWM E02354

WOMEN SURGEONS OF WORLD WAR I

LILIAN VIOLET COOPER

(1861-1947)



Cleaning boots with Miss Bedford, ATL



Lilian Cooper SLQ

Born in Chatham, England, Lilian Cooper completed her medical course at the London School of Medicine for Women in 1890. She immigrated to Queensland in 1891 and became the first female medical practitioner registered in that state.

In 1896 she was also the first woman to be appointed as an Honorary Medical Officer – at the Hospital for Sick Children.

Described by Clarrie Leggett as... *a tall angular, brusque, energetic woman, prone to bad language*, by 1912 she had travelled overseas and visited the Mayo Clinic, obtained her doctorate from the University of Durham and developed a thriving professional practice.

Determined to offer her medical services to the war effort, in 1916 Lilian Cooper joined the Scottish Women's Hospitals and with her companion Josephine Bedford, was sent to Agnes Bennett's unit in Ostrovo. Nicknamed 'Miss Spare Parts,' Josephine Bedford was in charge of the ambulance drivers. Agnes Bennett noted:

Our girls (drivers) are really good but they are a tiresome part of the unit too. I am thankful to have Miss Bedford in charge of them. She is such a help, so is Dr Cooper.

When Agnes Bennett decided that a forward Dressing Station closer to the Serbian front was needed, Dr Cooper was the obvious person for the job and the Dressing Station opened at Dobraveni in Macedonia just before Christmas 1916. It was only 6 miles from the front and a dangerous location – subject to air raids, with the only escape route being a 16 mile walk down the mountain.

The conditions were appalling by anyone's standards: they make their own mess house from petrol cans.... The wards and staff quarters were tents; the temperatures were sub-zero... One sister recorded that her hands were often too cold to write and the tea froze in the cup if they were slow at drinking.

During the next 8 months, the 40 bed Dressing Station admitted 152 patients and the tenacious Dr Cooper – *a familiar, heroic figure working in appalling conditions in knee breeches and rubber boots* – performed 144 operations, with just 16 deaths.

Severely ill with bronchitis, Dr Cooper eventually left both the unit and returned to her practice in Brisbane. Both she and Josephine Bedford received the Serbian order of St Sava in 1917. After the war, Dr Cooper's practice focussed on the health issues of women and children and she was the first female FRACS, joining the College as a Foundation Fellow (no. 128) in 1927.

WOMEN SURGEONS OF WORLD WAR I

SCOTTISH WOMEN'S HOSPITALS



SWH at Royaumont, France, 1914, AWM H18905



Washing, SWH Ostrovo, ATL



Entrance to Hospital at SWH Ostrovo, ATL

In 1914, Elsie Maud Inglis (a Scottish doctor and campaigner for Women's rights), established the Scottish Women's Hospitals (SWH) with support from the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS) and the American Red Cross.

The organisation attracted women from many different backgrounds and countries, raising money from donations. Professional medical staff such as Agnes Bennett and Lilian Cooper (who paid their own fares from New Zealand and Australia) received an Honorarium of £200 a year but non- medical staff such as orderlies and drivers were not given a salary.

In 1914 Dr Inglis offered the services of her organisation to the British government but their response was – *My good lady, go home and sit still*. However, the French, Serbian and Russian governments were more positive and the first SWH unit was set up at the Abbaye de Royaumont in France under the French Red Cross. Other SWH units followed and a total of 14 medical units were established on foreign soil, confirming Elsie Inglis' adage that:

The ordinary male disbelief in our capacity cannot be argued away. It can only be worked away



X-Ray Tent at SWH Ostrovo, ATL



Road making,
SWH Ostrovo, ATL

WOMEN SURGEONS OF WORLD WAR I

AGNES ELIZABETH LLOYD BENNETT

(1862-1960)

Agnes Bennet IWM

Agnes Bennett was born in Sydney and completed a Science degree at the University of Sydney in 1894. After working as a governess and teacher, she took out a bank loan to fund her study at the Edinburgh University Medical School. There she was mentored by Dr Elsie Inglis who later founded the Scottish Women's Hospitals.

When war broke out in 1914, Dr Bennett had a successful medical practice in Wellington, New Zealand but in early 1915 she decided to offer her services to the French Red Cross. When her ship docked at Alexandria en route to Europe, she made a 'snap decision' to help with wounded at Gallipoli and was attached to the NZMC in Egypt, working at Pont de Koubbah and Choubra. She was tenacious and resourceful – to alleviate the shortage of beds, she purchased them from laid up Nile steamers and put the bunk springs on legs. But, as she recorded:

The old stretched springs were devastating to both patient and nurse...

Arriving in London, she offered her services to the Scottish Women's Hospitals and in August 1916, was appointed commander of the 'America Unit', based close to the Serbian front in Ostrovo, Macedonia. The unit was a 200 bed field hospital with a barn as an operating theatre, an X-Ray tent and a fleet of Model T Ford ambulances. The hospital treated seriously injured Russian, Serbian and Italian patients:

We now have 160 cases, all very bad and terribly hard work, 10 of the staff are hors de combat, and we can only just keep going, but we can't refuse these poor mangled things, it is all too terrible. I think the compound fractures are the worst, we try to save them but there have been 10 amputations in two days... Agnes Bennett, 25 September, 1916

As the Bulgarians who had invaded Serbia in 1915 had a reputation for rape and execution, hospital staff were issued with revolvers. They were also plagued by flies (so bad at times that the main meal was delayed until nightfall), wasps, snakes, mice and in Winter, an armed guard was posted to fend off wolves. Winter conditions were particularly harsh – supplies were low and the cold so intense that surgeons operated in woollen mittens rather than rubber gloves. And the fighting was coming closer:

The bombardment is continuous and sometimes seems so close that I feel very anxious... Agnes Bennett, 2 January 1917

Agnes Bennett became very ill with malaria and resigned her post at the hospital in October 1917. When she recovered she worked at the Glasgow Royal Infirmary dealing with victims of the influenza epidemic. Returning to New Zealand after the war, Dr Bennett practiced at St Helen's and specialised in maternal and infant health.



Agnes Bennett outside tent. Winter 1916, ATL