



DANGER EVEN DEATH

Nurses serving near the front lines were at times in grave danger of losing their lives. Seven Australian nurses were awarded the Military Medal for working under fire in casualty clearing stations on the Western Front.

Transport duty was perilous with enemy U-boats patrolling the sea routes. Ships carrying nurses and invalided troops were hit. Survival depended largely on other ships being nearby.

Severe illness also put nurses in mortal danger. Over 20 Australian Army Nursing Service members died on active service from pneumonia, cholera and other diseases.



On a hospital ship

Nurses wore life jackets at sea when the situation demanded, (AWM AO3430)

R.M.S. MOOLTAN SUNK

NEARLY 300 NURSES ON BOARD.

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ALL SAFELY LANDED.

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LOSS OF THE MAIL.

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MELBOURNE, July 31.

Information was received privately on Monday that the P. and O. Company's R.M.S. Mooltan, 9,505 tons, which left Melbourne for London on June 12, had been lost in the Mediterranean.

The first official information of what had happened was received in a cable message from London to-day as follows:—"Postmaster-General reports mail leaving Adelaide on June 14 sunk by enemy action." During the afternoon a statement was made available from the Navy Office, and great relief was experienced when it became known that the passengers had been saved.

Matron Jessie McHardie White of East Melbourne disembarked from RMS Mooltan the day before it was sunk. (Mercury (Hobart), 1.8.1917)



Margaret Roberts is commemorated on the Roll of Honour, St Peter's Eastern Hill, East Melbourne

One nurse with East Melbourne connections who died during the Great War was Staff Nurse Margaret Roberts of the Queen Alexandra Imperial Military Nursing Service Reserve.

Margaret Roberts

Born in 1870 in a workhouse in Wales to a mother deemed an 'imbecile'

Flourished in a London orphanage run by the Sisters of the Church religious order

Trained as a nurse in London in the 1890s

Nursed in Perth in Western Australia in a Sisters of Church orphanage, returned to England then again to Victoria in 1912

Joined the congregation of St Peter's Eastern Hill, East Melbourne while working at Fairfield Infectious Diseases and other hospitals

Appointed matron of aboriginal settlements at Yarrabah and Taroom in Queensland in 1914

Accepted into the Queen Alexandra Imperial Military Nursing Service Reserve and returned to England at her own expense to enlist

Nursed on Salisbury Plain where numerous Australian troops were treated for respiratory illnesses

Sent to transport sick and wounded troops from Egypt to England on SS Osmanieh

Drowned on 31 December 1917 with other nurses and crew when SS Osmanieh hit a mine close to Alexandria Harbour and sank immediately

Buried in the Hadra Cemetery, Alexandria

Commemorated at St Peter's Church, Eastern Hill, in York Minister and St Asaph's Cathedral in Wales

"We were all talking gaily when ... crash! ... we were thrown off the seat which collapsed under us. We looked instinctively to the left & saw a cloud of grey smoke & water & flying bits of wreckage ... the ship took a violent list ... before I knew anything more we were in the water, going down in a whirl & tangle ... None of the [life] boats got away at all ... [Osmanieh] went altogether in 4 minutes ... We were awfully lucky to be so close in & also to have as many ships around & a calm sea."

(From Osmanieh survivor Dorothy Morfey's account)



M. Dorothea Roberts, Queen Alexandra's Imperial Military Nursing Service Reserve, who was drowned through enemy action on the "Osmanieh" off Alexandria. 31.12.17

Margaret Roberts QAIMNSR, (Imperial War Museum)

Patricia Blundell

Served in Egypt, France and England from 1915 to 1918

Shattered by news of her brother's death in action in France and her sister's death in Victoria the same week, returned to Australia in July 1918 as matron on HMAT Barunga with 800 invalided troops

Survived Barunga's sinking in the Bay of Biscay, south west of Cornwall

Commended in press reports for her 'splendid example, though severely shaken by the explosion'

Re-embarked and reached Australia in September 1918

Still seeking compensation in 1921 for her kit and possessions lost in the sinking.



Patricia Blundell, (Table Talk, 27.5.1915)



Patricia Blundell was among survivors rescued from the sinking HMAT Barunga, (AWM AO1045)



Patricia Blundell's Service Record contained no reference to her presence on the ill-fated Barunga, (National Archives of Australia)

