



JESSIE GEMMELL

decorated



Jessie Gemmell gave Cliveden Mansions, Wellington Parade, East Melbourne as her address on enlistment in 1915, (*East Melbourne Library*)

Born to William Gemmell and his wife Anne (nee Fenwick), Scottish immigrants who prospered during Victoria's gold rushes

Grew up in East Melbourne, Fitzroy and Bendigo; aged eight when her mother died leaving eight children, the youngest aged two

Active in Melbourne's social set in the 1890s until she trained as a nurse at the Alfred Hospital

Shaved five years off her age and joined the Australian Army Nursing Service in 1915; was the only one of her siblings to enlist although her nephew was a medical officer on the Western Front

Gave East Melbourne as her permanent address, and nominated as her next of kin Mrs McEvoy (sister) of Cliveden Mansions, Wellington Parade and later William Gemmell (brother) of Jolimont

Embarked in August 1915 with 10 Australian General Hospital, but bad organisation meant little nursing duty for weeks

Transferred to 1 Australian Auxiliary Hospital, Harefield Park (London), which was immersed in controversy about conditions and rations for Australian troops prompting official investigations and a visit by Prime Minister Billy Hughes

Returned to Australia on transport duty with invalided troops, and nursed at 11 Australian General Hospital in Caulfield in 1916–17



Sister Gemmell on hospital train in England, 1916, (AWM PO2402.004)

Two pretty girls—Miss Jessie and Miss Ida Gemmell—have renounced the gaieties of social life for the nursing vocation, and last month entered upon their course at the Alfred Hospital—an institution already noted for the unusual comeliness of its nurses. The latest recruits hail from Bendigo, and are exceptionally well read, intellectual young ladies, whose many graces reminds one of Coventry Patmore's *The Angel in the House*.

Jessie Gemmell was active in Melbourne's social scene before she trained as a nurse, (*Table Talk*, 25.3.1898, p13)



Jessie Gemmell was matron of 70 General Hospital, Cairo, shown here with a convoy of wounded arriving, (AWM H00899)

Re-enlisted in 1917 for overseas service aged 47

Served as matron of 70 [British] Hospital in Cairo which treated severe casualties from the Sinai campaign

Wrote to the Matron in Chief about her loneliness as the only Australian on staff, the demands of British run hospitals and extremes of heat and cold

Served for the rest of the war in hospitals in Egypt

Invalided to England with 'debility consequent on pressure of work on service in a hot climate and a recent attack of influenza'

Returned to Australia in charge of nurses on a troop ship in 1919

Decorated with the Royal Red Cross (1st Class) for services in Egypt and mentioned in despatches

Suffered the indignity of having her publicly presented 1914–15 campaign medal withdrawn; army authorities deemed her ineligible as she served in England which was not a theatre of war; they were unmoved by interventions and protestations by the Returned Sailors and Soldiers Imperial League on her behalf

Died in 1955 in Heidelberg, Victoria aged 85.

134 FEB 1917
Headquarters,
3rd District Base,
Victoria Barracks,
MELBOURNE.

It is regretted no alteration can be made. Matron Gemmell is not eligible for the award, in the terms of W.O. 117/19.
The issue was made to her on the strength of medal rolls compiled in London and certified correct; her ineligibility was not discovered until a check was made when the British War Medal schedule was compiled by this office.
Matron Gemmell has returned the medal, but even if allowed to retain it she could not legitimately wear the ribbon, and in any case I doubt whether she would desire to wear something which she had not earned and to which she had no right.
Please quote instances of the "others" referred to in Mr. David's letter.

Major,
24.2.22
Officer i/c Base Records.

Jessie Gemmell protested in vain at the removal of her 1914-15 Star, (extract from Gemmell's Service Record, National Archives of Australia)