

MEDIA RELEASE

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Toowoomba-trained nurse shares memories of war and peace

As Anzac Day approaches, it is fitting to remember the men and women who served as medics, nurses and orderlies during the wars of which Australia has been a part. Thousands of civilian nurses volunteered for active service during the First and Second World Wars. However, not all of the nurses who served war victims did so overseas.

Ninety-three year old Jess Devine was born in 1922, shortly after the First World War, and recalls attending her first dawn service with her father when she was five years old.

“I remember seeing all these young men with leathery faces – from the mustard gas you see,” she said.

Jess’s father, aunt and uncle all served in the First World War. Her aunt Jessie, after whom Jess was named, was awarded the Royal Red Cross Medal for her services as a nurse in various locations through the war including Egypt, France and in charge of the SS Somali.

“I wanted to be like her,” Jess said.

She signed up at the age of 24, the minimum age for enrolment as a nurse with the Royal Australian Air Force (it was 25 years for the Army). She had already completed her general nursing training at the Toowoomba Hospital and her midwifery training at the Mater Mothers in Brisbane. Her rail warrant arrived the day the war ended in the Pacific.

She recalls that while she was doing her obstetrics training in Brisbane, American ships would arrive in town for some “R and R”.

“The captain would ring up and ask if the young men come in and see the babies. They would come in and look at the babies and then they would show us photos of their babies back home,” she said.

With the war ended, Jess moved to Sydney and worked at the Prince of Wales repatriation hospital in Randwick, Sydney, where she nursed “boys” who had come back from Changi and New Guinea.

“They had dysentery, ring worms, tropical ulcers, malignant malaria, all sorts of awful things. I remember all the submariners coughing because they had no cure [for tuberculosis] back then.”

One of her most poignant memories from this period comes from the first Anzac Day in 1946.

“The boys spent the day before polishing their medals. Then at 1am they all got up, strapped on their artificial limbs and helped their mates into wheelchairs so they could travel in to Martin Place [for the service].”

From Sydney Jess travelled to Tasmania and then worked out bush before ending up in St George en route to South Africa. At St George she met and nursed her would-be husband, a local sheep farmer with rheumatic fever. They married and settled on his station nearby.

While she never returned to formal work as a nurse after marriage, she still maintained her registration and helped out where she could, including giving injections to a local old lady so she didn't have to travel miles into St George for treatment.

These days, Jess lives at Akooramak Nursing Home in Warwick but recently spent some time in Warwick Hospital after surgery to repair fractured vertebrae in her back.

"I want to send the nurses in Hanlon Ward a bunch of flowers and let them know that I'm learning to walk again," she said.

Ends

Photo captions:

- 1) Acting Warwick Director of Nursing Anita Bolton and Jess Devine with a photo of her father, aunt and uncle taken in Trafalgar Square during WWI.
- 2) Jess as a young nurse shortly after WWII. Jess trained as a nurse at the Toowoomba Hospital during the war.

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