Army nursing service goes to war

New Zealand WW100 is a four-year commemoration of the centenary of World War 1. This year, 2015, marks not only a century since the Anzac Gallipoli campaign, but also since the creation of the New Zealand Army Nursing Service and its deployment to the war. On the following pages, we look at how these nurses served in the war and the effect of traumatic war experiences on the nurses and their practice, and honour the memory of the nurses who died when the Marquette was sunk.

By co-editor Kathy Stodart

In 1914, Hester Maclean was a highly influential New Zealand nursing leader – assistant inspector general of hospitals, matron-in-chief of a proposed army nursing service, and owner and editor of Kai Tiaki, the national nursing journal. These roles put her in a unique position to chart the progress of New Zealand nursing through World War 1.

When news broke in July that Germany had declared war on Russia, Maclean was not afraid to predict what would happen, and to declare her attitude. In a late supplement to the July 1914 issue of Kai Tiaki, she declared:

“This step will probably lead to the greatest European war since the Crimea. Britain must almost inevitably be called to arms to the aid of her allies and Britain’s Dominions overseas will wish to join the Mother Country – fight side by side with her other sons . . . our Prime Minister has announced that the Government will if needed send an expeditionary force from New Zealand . . . there will be no lack of volunteers eager to go. If our soldiers go, our nurses should go . . .”

Following Britain’s lead, New Zealand declared war on Germany on August 4, and an expeditionary force sailed for Egypt in October, but nurses were told they were not needed. Maclean wrote in the October issue that some 400 nurses had volunteered to serve abroad but that the authorities had decided none were to go. This decision frustrated many in the profession, and a nursing deputation, including Maclean, lobbied Defence Minister James Allan for trained New Zealand nurses to be able to go and nurse their own soldiers.

Another formidable nursing leader, Grace Neill, who spearheaded nursing registration in New Zealand, was moved to write a letter, published in Kai Tiaki:

"Why do our trained nurses associations permit the usefulness and professional skill of their members to be ignored by the military authorities acting in New Zealand? . . . it is well nigh criminal to allow hundreds and thousands of our men to be sent abroad without a recognised branch of the service so exclusively pertaining to women as nursing of the sick and wounded. Why, in 1914, do men make tall talk about Florence Nightingale, and then practically ignore the lesson she taught the British Army and their red-tape Medical Service?"

Some nurses did not wait, and made their own way to the Western Front to volunteer for charities or other nursing services. Some wrote letters to Maclean about their war experiences, which she published in Kai Tiaki. Maclean noted the problem of untrained "nurses" at the front:

“The nursing papers are full of protest about the usurpation of the title, uniform and work of trained nurses, by the Society women who have rushed into it as into the excitement of a new fad. We read also that ‘all the out-of-works are rushing into nursing’. Actresses have also been rushing to the front, and charming pictures are published of them in the illustrated papers.”

Eventually, word came from Britain accepting Allan’s offer to send 50 nurses. The New Zealand Army Nursing Service (NZANS) was set up in January 1915, headed by Maclean. She selected the 50 nursing sisters who were to go, and accompanied them to Britain, then on to Egypt, on the Rotorua, in May 1915.

The first contingent of New Zealand Army Nursing Service sisters, with their Matron-in-Chief Hester Maclean (seated centre, left of the captain), en route to the war, on the Rotorua, in May 1915.


Hester Maclean

1915
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...smother the heartache to be going too, “...in August-September 1915, the Maheno made five visits to Anzac Cove at Gallipoli. In extreme heat, while bullets raked the decks, the nurses cared for the ‘poor, torn, mangled fellows’ amid the ‘horrible sickly odour’ of dysentery, disease and decay.” 8

New Zealand supplied two hospital ships to the war effort. The first was the Maheno, known as Hospital Ship No 1, which left New Zealand for Gallipoli in July 1915. Its nursing staff comprised a matron and 13 NZANS nurses.

“...in August-September 1915, the Maheno sank in the Aegean Sea. (See ‘Honouring the Marquette nurses’, p19.) A nurse who survived remembered:

“We were seven hours in the water. I was not in a boat, but my life was saved by holding on to a raft which was occupied by three men. About a dozen were holding on all round, including Sisters Gould, Christmas and myself and one New Zealand boy. We three and the New Zealand boy were the only survivors. It was dreadful to watch these strong men fall off and die, one after another.” 11

The war ended with the Armistice of November 1918. In 1919, most of the NZANS nurses were demobilised and military hospitals started to close. Maclean received the first Red Cross Florence Nightingale medal for her service.

References
5) Madsen, H. (Ed) (1915) Untrained Nurses at the Front. KT. The Jnl Nses of NZ, 8: 2, p73.