Making some sense of war

By Eileen Brown

The series ANZAC Girls, shown on New Zealand television late last year, is among one of the many commemorations of the 100th anniversary of the Gallipoli battles and the establishment of Anzac Day as a World War 1 (WW1) commemorative event. The series was based on the book by Peter Rees, The Other ANZACs: Nurses at War 1914-1918. Both tell the story of Australian and New Zealand nurses and their roles in WW1.

The centenary of the Gallipoli battles, which established so much of the Anzac history, provides an opportunity to look at that war and make some sense of both the time in which it was set and what it means now. Scottish WW1 historian Hew Strachan, in an exhibition currently on at the National Library in Wellington, expresses it well: “The real challenge of the centenary will be whether we take the opportunity provided by the controversies that the First World War still generates... If we can use this war to understand war better, to think through when we may – albeit reluctantly – have to fight and when we should not, we shall have given the commemoration of the First World War a purpose that will honour those who served in it.”

Sending nurses to war

WW1 saw the first organised mobilisation of New Zealand nurses for war service. The Government at the time found the idea of women going to war distasteful. It was the New Zealand Trained Nurses Association (NZTA) – a forerunner to NZNO – that urged the Government to include nurses in the armed forces being sent to Europe. Matron-in-chief Hester Maclean, who established the NZTA, was in the first group of 50 nurses to go to Europe.

The TV series depicted the excitement and thrill of the nurses arriving in Egypt and visiting exotic places. But nothing could have prepared them for what they were soon to experience. Through the nurses’ letters and Rees’ historical accounts of the landing of the troops on the beaches of Gallipoli, the scale of death and injury and the horrific wounds are graphically depicted. New Zealand nurses on hospital ships, close to the entrance of the Dardanelles, received the wounded soldiers and the full horror of war unfolded.

Australian nurse Kath King, on the hospital ship Sicilia, wrote: “Nothing will induce our staff to tell of the horrors they have seen and dealt with, and no-one who has not seen it in its awful reality could imagine a portion of the saddest part of the war.”

The nurses had no option but to deal with what was in front of them and to nurse. “I shall never forget the awful feeling of hopelessness. On night duty it was dreadful. I had two wards downstairs and over a hundred patients and then I had two small wards upstairs and some officers, altogether about 250 patients to look after with one orderly and one Indian sweeper, two Turks and a Frenchman,” wrote King.

Impossible workloads

Nurses lived and worked in some terrible conditions, most especially on Lemnos – an island close to Gallipoli where Australian and New Zealand army hospitals were established in appalling conditions. There were not only impossible workloads for the nurses, but a relentless death toll, devastating injuries and diseases. On top of this, the nurses had to deal with extremes of weather and great personal deprivation.

Maclean was clearly a powerful figure in supporting and advocating for nurses who went to war. Another impressive figure who features in both the book and TV series, is Australian matron Grace Wilson. Much of the credit for nurses’ achievements in dramatically reducing the death rates on Lemnos is attributed to her remarkable leadership in the hospital nursing service.

The establishment of Australian and New Zealand military base hospital camps and wards, which enabled soldiers to be nurses and cared for by their own people, was a strong driver in maintaining the nurses’ motivation. Relationships between the nurses and soldiers were close, and there was great love and compassion. Nurses would write home to soldiers’ parents and provide a very different form of communication from the formal army telegram, of their sons’ last days and hours, and what they said before they died.

Christchurch Hospital nurse Margaret Rogers, who drowned in the Marquette disaster (see article, p19), said in a letter, sent several days before the sinking: “there is no romance about war. It spells suffering hunger and filth... how thankful I am every day that I came to do what I could to help relieve our brave boys.”

Rees describes the nurses responding with courage and intelligence, whatever their personal reaction might have been: “The nurses had been blooded and... Thus began the mutual respect between the Anzacs and the nurses who would care for them over the next four years.”

Facing gender discrimination

Not only did the nurses have to deal with the horrors of war, but also sexual prejudice and gender discrimination. Maclean, when told nursing should be left to male orderlies which was the case in regular military hospitals, responded by saying that the nurses were sent to nurse and would be doing so. The red tape, the military system and working alongside male orderlies and medics, who would ignore them, was all part of the nurses’ experience. Nurses’ pay was lower than male orderlies’. And the discrimination continued when they returned home. A nursing survivor of the Marquette, Gladys Metherell, in a letter to the army chief-of-staff on her return home, drew attention to the discrimination against nurses, compared to returned soldiers, in relation to financial help such as housing loans...

Both Rees’s book, and the TV series, though obviously more limited, provide a strong visual and historical record of the Australian and New Zealand nurses’ experiences. Both fulfill an important purpose, offering the opportunity for serious reflection on war and its impact as we commemorate Anzac Day this month.

Reference


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