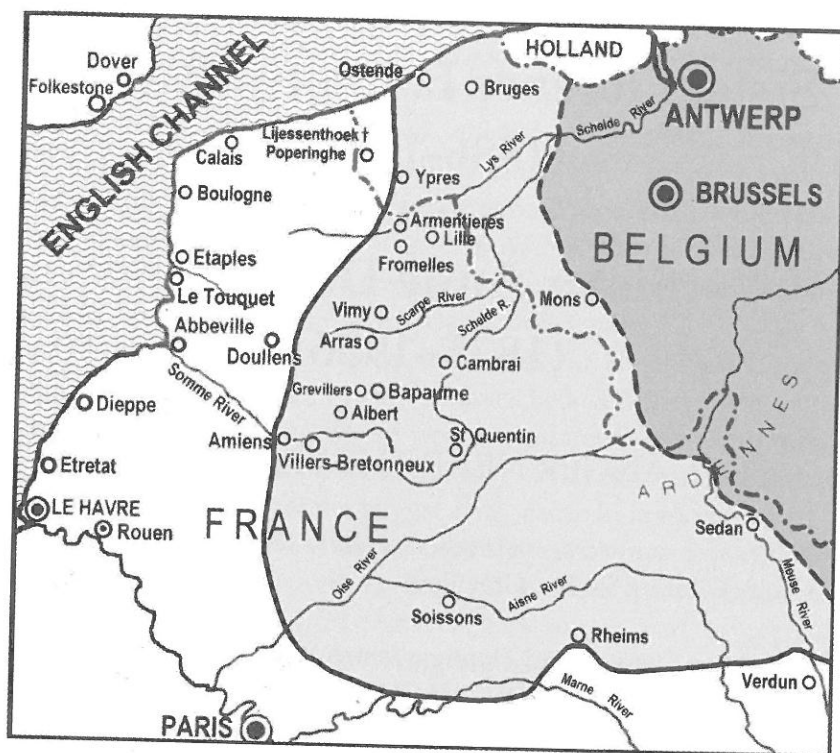


# PART FOUR

## 'ANZAC GIRLS' IN FRANCE



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KILOMETRES

### NORTHERN FRANCE IN WORLD WAR ONE

- Furthest German advance Sept. 1914
- - - - - Frontline on 11 November 1918
- · - · - · - Border between France and Belgium



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Clearing Stations situated close to railheads, which had been established in tents, disused barns or bombed-out farmhouses. Instead of beds trestles were used to hold stretcher cases and as emergency operating tables. With large numbers of amputations performed, surrounded by blood and corpses, working at a CCS was sometimes compared to working in a butcher's shop. The staff were bombed by German planes, often on a nightly basis. Every nurse who worked in a CCS deserved an award for bravery — however, few received this honour. These were not places for the squeamish — nurses and doctors working there needed to be strong physically and mentally and able to cope with the reality that many of their patients would die before they reached a hospital.

Florence James-Wallace had enlisted in the AANS in April, 1915, a month after the Gallipoli landing.<sup>1</sup> Her younger brother had already joined the Australian Imperial Force (AIF), which may have prompted her to enrol in the AANS. On her Attestation (Enrolment) Form Florence gave her age as 29 and her family home as *Athlone*, in the Brisbane bayside area of Wynnum.<sup>2</sup>

As members of the newly formed Third Australian General Hospital (3 AGH) Grace Wilson's nurses believed they were being sent to northern France where trench warfare was causing many casualties. Preparations were made for 3 AGH to work in a British hospital at Etaples, now the largest army camp in France.

Sister James-Wallace had to provide, at her own expense, her uniform as well as a canvas kit bag, a camp bed, a portable canvas bath and a small paraffin stove. AANS nurses had to prepare special meals including nourishing broths for seriously ill patients who could not eat the bully beef provided by the Army. She needed a shipping trunk with her full name and that of her unit painted on it in large white letters.

Florence's parents were Anglo-Irish Protestants from Killarney who, in search of a better life had believed the promises of the Queensland Government, who, to enlarge its small population, had advertised in Ireland for migrants. The Queensland Government had run an advertising campaign praising the sunny climate and the availability of cheap farmland.<sup>3</sup>

wounded Anzacs from Gallipoli.<sup>7</sup> All photos in Florence's Lemnos album were carefully titled in white ink, possibly by James Savage. One memorable photo shows the nurses leaving Lemnos on 14 January 1916 from Mudros Harbour and boarding a small craft, called a lighter, which would take them to the much larger troop ship *Oxfordshire*, bound for Alexandria. As their uniforms were patched and shabby, they were ordered to wear gloves and any headgear available, so they would at least look respectable when they boarded the troop ship.

In Egypt Florence James-Wallace and Anne Donnell lived and worked in a hospital established in a former harem at Abbassia. They served there for eight months before leaving for England on the HMT *Karoola*, arriving at Brighton on 5 October 1916. They were posted to the Kitchener Indian Army Hospital in Brighton where space was at a premium. During an exceptionally cold winter they slept in a rat-infested former school at a considerable distance from the Kitchener Hospital.

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In April 1917, Sister Florence James-Wallace and Sister Anne Donnell and other 3 AGH nurses were sent to the French town of Abbeville, near the mouth of the Somme River. Abbeville's tented hospital received patients who had been wounded in the trenches along the Somme Valley. Amongst them were also soldiers who had been exposed to mustard or phosgene gas, which had blistered their throats and damaged their lungs, in many cases permanently. Attending to these men was harrowing for the nurses. Abbeville Military Hospital was frequently bombed by the Germans, killing several patients as well as nursing and medical staff. The army hospital was left badly damaged and most of the crockery was destroyed. In a letter to her friends Sister Donnell described how all the nurses' cups had been broken, so they had to drink their tea out of jam jars.

During another exceptionally wet cold winter they had to wade through ankle-deep mud between the tented wards and the chilly damp tents which served as their sleeping quarters.

likely that Sister James-Wallace had begun her war diary on Lemnos Island, which may have been the reason for the purchase of 116 professional quality photographs, taken by James Savage. While the album of photographs was saved, the rest of her diary was lost in the hurried escape from Grévillers to Villers-Bretonneux by Army lorry. This was when many of Florence's possessions went missing, never to be found again.

Years later, Sister James-Wallace's important eye-witness account of the conditions at Villers-Bretonneux was given to Colonel Arthur Graham Butler, who had taken up his former medical practice on Wickham Terrace in Brisbane. As a civilian, Dr Butler took time off from his work to compile a history of the Australian Medical Services in World War One.<sup>8</sup>

Florence James-Wallace's account of working at Grévillers and Villers-Bretonneux was considered significant enough for Colonel Graham Butler to include it in the third volume of his medical history, written when he had left the Army.<sup>9</sup>

Dr Butler made it clear that working on Casualty Clearing Stations needed nurses who could cope with horrific conditions, far worse than those seen by doctors and nurses in civilian hospitals. He praised the courage of the nurses under fire and when bombed.<sup>10</sup> Butler, who had been a Medical Officer at Gallipoli and served on the hospital ship *Galeka*, claimed that nurses were far better than orderlies at coping with the distressing work carried out in CCSs. However, orderlies were necessary for heavy work such as erecting tents, digging graves and burying the dead.

CCS nurses needed to be resourceful. They worked under difficult conditions as a lack of beds had the patients on stretchers on the ground or on trestles. Emergency operations were performed with enemy shells screaming overhead and several nurses and doctors were killed or badly wounded by German shells.

The surviving fragment of Sister Florence James-Wallace's diary shows how this Irish-Australian resented the British for the way they had behaved in Ireland. She was indignant at being sent to work with British staff at No. 61 CCS at Grévillers and was relieved to find that most of the staff were Scottish rather than English.

22.3.1918. Off at breakfast time. Went down the Ham-Noyon road to the next village, could only see a few yards ahead through the fog. Met a boy who told me the road further on had been shelled badly, lorries blown up, men killed. Still no one seemed to know what was happening. Slept soundly, too tired to be disturbed by noise.

About 2 p.m. we wakened to the sound of 'Girls! Get up quickly, Get dressed. Leave everything behind'. Matron Baird entered our Nissen Hut and asked, 'Are you up girls? The Germans are advancing. Train goes in 20 minutes, take only what you can carry.' Exit all of us with suitcases, boots, rugs, haversacks, bags etc, The rest of the Sisters are in the same plight waiting at the Mess Hut. Dinner half eaten, I feel jolly hungry. Bright sunshine, clear sky. Troops, wagons, lorries, ambulances, gun-carriages, pack-mules all clattering down the road past the Hospital. Guns still crashing and shells whistling. Two big guns of ours made a good deal of noise.

Some of the Medical Officers meet us and we tramp down to the Station, feeling very disgusted at being sent away when we feel the patients need us. We ask what is to happen to them. Why can't we stay with the patients? Everyone asks questions at the same time and as a result get no answers.

We find a Medical Officer with 10 Orderlies and 20 Labour Corps men who are to stay here and get the patients away. The M.O.s march off. We wait for the train and hear it will not be at the station for half an hour.

I get a reluctant consent from Miss Baird to go back to the tented hospital and pack, promising to be only 20 minutes. Orderlies are carrying things on wheel stretchers. Two Sisters come with me, and we tear up to our quarters and pack, helped by the boys, who work like Trojans, perspiration streaming down their faces. They take my trunk and valise and roll up my bed and blankets. As I have no time to put my name on it I never see that precious bundle again. [The bundle probably included her Lemnos diary] I dash into the Mess Hut, collect a little food, pack another Sister's belongings and tear back to the station. It is now nearly 3 p.m.

planes and the Bosche above us. We move on so don't see the end of the fight.

We drive past men and lorries and limbers [gun carriages] and dead horses and men by the roadside. We pass two dead Germans lying in the ditch, with their [crashed] plane not far away. They were the ones firing on those on the road and were shot down.

We pass through Nesle, Roye, Marchlepot, Caulnes, took the wrong road and almost arrived at Peronne. We drove through desolate country, saw old shell holes, former trenches and rusty barb wire entanglements. In the bright moonlight we heard bombs not far away, it got very cold and we were covered in dust, hands, faces, clothes. We went through villages that were now just rubble and a few stone walls, trees that looked like sentinels, charred trunks and a limb or two still standing.

Got to 47 CCS Rosières at 10 p.m. Equipment including Army boots and knapsacks piled everywhere. Patients pouring in. Received very kindly and given tea and bread and butter. Found an old nursing colleague there on Night Duty. No beds available so had to camp in her bed.

23.3 1918. Lots of spare Sisters about, so my friend and I decided to go and see the French and German trenches a mile up the road. The fields between the trenches were a mass of shell holes overgrown with grass and in a semi-circle were rusty barbed wire entanglements. Troops and lorries were running up and down the road as were streams of French refugees.

Was told I was to do night duty, so was off to bed when the call to be 'Ready in 20 minutes to go' reached me.

Miss Baird was to take seven of us Sisters to a railhead. Four of us Australians, a South African, a Scottish and an English Sister so the Colonies were well represented! The Colonel of 61 CCS, Miss-Baird and five of us nurses departed in an Ambulance, the other two followed in a lorry with our belongings. The small town of Villers-Bretonneux was our destination. We got out at the railhead siding and found the whole place smashed beyond recognition.

with the worst stretcher cases carried there to be dressed. Those near death we kept in what we called The Hut. Two of us were kept busy dressing outside and feeding new arrivals. Later more M.O.s and orderlies arrived and we had a double-size tent full of officers, some very badly wounded indeed.

About 10,000 wounded men passed through our hands during five days. It was like a scene from Dante's *Inferno*. The wounded kept pouring in, arriving in lorries and ambulances and too few trains to get them away. Thousands of Indians and Italians from the Labour Corps were being sent down the line. The only Australians I saw were men running the engines of goods trains.

Got back to the Schoolhouse about 11 p.m. Bright moonlight. Fritz started to bomb what was left of the town of Villers-Bretonneux. One bomb fell beside us with a deafening sound. We dived into an archway, the air seemed full of fumes and gas. Two other sisters behind us fell flat on the pavement. However none of us were hit and we managed to get to the Schoolhouse which now served as a Dressing Station.

26.3.1918. Still more 'walkers' and stretcher cases, they seem to be everywhere and some were there from the day before, feeling the cold, thirsty, dirty and many covered with blood. We had a frightfully busy morning. Hospital trains came in, but could not cope with the numbers.

At 12.30 we were sent up to the school to pack, had a hurried lunch at the Corner Cafe, finished packing up the Dressing Tents, heard a shout that the train was going, ran down the hill, passed through the Hut where our very bad cases were as we had left our haversacks there. We were too hurried to think of the effect our leaving would have on them.

I will never forget the expression on their faces when they saw we were going.

'The staff are leaving us and going', I heard one man say.

I went back to tell him we were going on a [special staff] train and they would be departing as soon as the hospital train arrived. They looked as if they thought their last hope had gone, poor

the Brisbane suburb of Wynnum. They donated the album to Queensland's Fryer Library of Australian Literature.

The 3<sup>rd</sup> Australian Division later covered itself in glory when, together with New Zealand troops, they recaptured Villers-Bretonneux but suffered very heavy losses in the process.

Discharged by the AIF at the end of hostilities, Sister James-Wallace returned to her family home in Wynnum to recover her strength. Due to her rheumatism and arthritis, brought on by cold damp conditions on Lemnos and in the winters of 1917 and 1918 in France, Florence could not immediately return to full-time nursing. She concentrated on regaining her health and nursed privately on a part-time basis, employed by local families.

It is not known how Colonel Graham Butler made contact with Sister James-Wallace, possibly at a reunion of former Anzacs and medical staff.

After Colonel Butler had been demobilised, he returned to his private gynaecological practice on Wickham Terrace and then took on the mammoth task of compiling an official history of the medical services in World War One. Dr Butler's history included an account of the disastrous evacuation of the wounded from Gallipoli and how the shortage of fully staffed hospital ships contributed to the deaths of large numbers of Anzacs. Aware that the war correspondent Charles Bean had virtually ignored the role of nurses, Dr Butler included in his narrative several stories written by nurses, including the one written by Florence James-Wallace.

Sister James-Wallace owned two albums of war photos. The first one was composed of small rather blurred photos taken by herself in Egypt. The second album held the photos taken by Private James Savage with informative titles underneath them.

Many of the Lemnos nurses bought a half dozen or so photos from Private Savage and some of these remain in private hands today. Florence seems to have been unique in acquiring such a large and valuable collection of photos. Her vividly written account of the danger of working near the front line is a testimony to the courage of nurses who continued to work in CCS under German bombardments. Apart from the normal war medals, marking her



Of the War and our work I feel I cannot write. We have our busy and our slack times and I have been fortunate to be left in the one ward and we are a happy trio — Sisters Linklater, Yeaman and myself. Have been happy [here] I am delaying applying for my leave. I'm afraid when I come off night duty that I'll be moved to fresh faces. It is hard always being tossed around and adapting oneself to strange people and especially does it hurt when they wear two stars and yet you know in your heart that if experience counts you are more entitled to them than they are. I'm afraid this distinction will cause dissention — its not 'a fair go' as the boys say.

After working for almost five months at the Kitchener Hospital, with Indian orderlies and British doctors from the Indian Army, Anne Donnell and several other sisters were allowed a fortnight's holiday, so she toured Ireland and Scotland. On her return Anne fell ill with bronchitis. As there were rumours their unit would soon be transferred to France, Anne was worried that, as she was listed sick, she would be left behind.



14.3.1917. I could cry at getting sick at this stage — for the fear of being left behind. I have been in the Sick Sisters Ward for 4 days and it's a perfect haven of rest and with the sweetest of sisters looking after us. I have a companion in distress, Sister Mary McIlroy, and its laughable the efforts we make to get well. I take anything they give me, even cod liver oil, and pray for blue sky and sunshine.

However, Sister Donnell recovered in time to travel to France with her unit, including her friend Sister Mary McIlroy. On 10 May 1917 she wrote,

says I am to stay inside out of the cold. Her intentions are good, but the weather will have its way — and there is no shelter from it until we take possession of the huts.

No. 38 Stationary Hospital on the outskirts of Calais was bombed almost each night. Many locals had been killed by German bombs so the municipality built air raid shelters for the survivors. However not *one* single bomb shelter was provided for staff or patients of the army hospital. Patients suffering from shell shock were terrified of bombs making life even harder for the nurses. Anne was nursing British and Australian soldiers. Many of her British patients told her they would rather be serving at the front line than waiting to be killed by German bombs. At least on the front line dugouts provided some protection from shelling. The nurses were moved into the main hospital where their only protection from shattered windows, broken glass and falling plaster was for them to sleep *under* their beds after shells landed on one wing of the hospital.

3.9.1917. At 10pm the siren gave warning that Fritz was here. Then for two hours he carries on with his frightfulness up in the sky. The barrage from our Anti-Air-Craft unit is tremendous. It's the most powerful one around... It thunders louder than the rest and has twice frightened Fritz away. Mary (McIlroy) is excited by the air raids ... but I feel indignant that men can happily murder those below them. The night sky...is certainly a sight to see — apart from the numerous searchlights it is ablaze with flashing lights and bursting shrapnel, ...the flashes look like puffs of smoke. Shrapnel comes pattering down like heavy raindrops on the roof. The sudden flashes as the [machine] guns go off almost blinds me. Once when Matron and I were standing at the window, there was a loud whizzing noise very close [to us]. 'That's a shell case' says Matron calmly.

The next morning I find a shell hole only a few yards from our room. A patient digs down and brings up a heavy brass shell case. I will bring it home as a souvenir.

more she insisted. I said 'I am not frightened Matron'. 'Well,' she replied, 'Why are you *under* the bed?'

Those Aerial Torpedo Bombs! It's an act of Providence that we are still alive this morning and can see where four German bombs plunged into the earth — right beside our Hospital, only missing us by 40 yards. Fortunately the bombs fell on soft boggy ground so went deep down before exploding so there was less flying shrapnel. Four more bombs fell from another plane, trying to get us 'Australians. They were close but landed on the other side of the Canal.

This is the new barbarism of the Hun to bomb helpless wounded men in hospitals. However, the pilot who aimed for us was shot down only ten minutes later by one of our A.A.C. from [adjacent] guns at Dunkirk. Apparently the pilot was one of Germany's best airmen — so was buried with military honours.

7.9.1917. We are kept alert I can assure you. Fritz has promised us nine more nights of air raids to 'take advantage' of the full moon. The air raid warning sounds again at 9.30 p.m. The Colonel, thinking Nissen huts are the safest place, so sends us over there. It's great to think our planes are up there to meet Fritz... How I hate these night [raids.] If I get to sleep I dream of guns, bombs and aeroplanes. It is silly to have this fear yet I don't believe anyone who claims they are not afraid. When I hear the drone of planes overhead... a band tightens around my head — my senses are dulled, whether from the noise or fear, I cannot say...I await my chances under the tumultuous noise of falling bombs and shells.

31.10.1917. Such excitement we are going to evacuate, pack up and be prepared to quit at 24 hours notice. You can imagine that there is not a single regret unless it is to leave the beautiful air raid shelter that is almost finished. Whilst waiting for this to happen some of the girls are going to nurse at Rouen and others are to off to nurse at various CCSs. Nurses due for leave can take it early [as Anne did]. I hate to confess it to you but [that nightly bombing] of Calais did take it out of me a bit.