Bessie Pocock

I am so anxious to go to the front. I want to be in the thick of the excitement.

AWM PR 05050

Nurses and service personnel outside a hospital building in South Africa in 1900. Bessie is seated second from the left. AWM P01840.003

New South Wales Army Nursing Service Reserve (NSWANSR)

In 1900, 14 NSWANSR nurses led by Matron Nellie Gould, including Pocock, served in South Africa with the New South Wales Army Medical Corps. To be eligible for the NSWANSR, women were to be well-educated, middle class, unmarried and aged between 25 and 40.

Anne Mary "Bessie" Pocock

Anne Mary Pocock was born into a farming family on 20 July 1863 in Dalby, Queensland. Known as "Bessie", she worked for many years as a domestic servant before beginning her nursing training at Sydney Hospital at the age of 27. Once her training was complete, Pocock joined the hospital staff as a Sister. Years later, when the Boer War began, she quickly joined the NSWANSR and proudly followed the British flag into service in South Africa. The NSWANSR arrived in 1900 and Bessie was posted to No. 2 British Stationary Hospital in East London, South Africa. It was housed in an old Agricultural Show building where conditions were primitive. In her diary, Pocock wrote:

> *just 3 huge rooms, 2 with boards on the floor …We had about 500 patients in a very little time … It was very hot here, the building all covered with corrugated iron, flies very bad, everyone required mosquito nets.*

AWM PR 05050

Pocock went on to serve closer to the front, first in Johannesburg, then at Middleburg in the Transvaal, where she was Sister-in-Charge. Here she treated wounded and ill soldiers until she herself contracted typhoid in May 1902. She was invalided to Britain.

The King's and Queen's South Africa medals; the former belonged to Corporal P. Nicholson and the latter to Private C. Cooke. AWM REL17286.002; AWM REL/11942

For her service in the Boer War, Pocock was Mentioned in Despatches and was awarded the Queen's and the King's South Africa medals, which she highly cherished. She was also the envy of her nursing colleagues when she attended the coronation procession in London on 9 August 1902.

When Pocock returned home to Australia in 1903, it was to a federated nation. A decision had been made to have one unified nursing service and Bessie was one of the Boer War nurses who joined the Australian Army Nursing Service Reserve (AANSR) in the lead-up to the First World War.

Australian Army Nursing Service (AANS)

The AANS began as a reserve in 1903 and its members served with distinction in the First World War. To be eligible to join, women needed to be a registered nurse, preferably with some years experience, aged between 25 and 35 and single.

Sister Pocock in front of the sphinx, Mena, Egypt, c. 1915. AWM P01840.010

Associate Royal Red Cross medal. This one was awarded to Head Sister Emma Cuthbert in 1919. RELAWM15022.001

Second time around

With the outbreak of the First World War, Pocock again enlisted, first with 1 Field Artillery Brigade (FAB), then as a nursing sister with 2 Australian General Hospital, Australian Army Nursing Service. She served in hospitals with the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) in Cairo and Ismailia in Egypt, then became matron on board the Hospital Ship *Assaye*. She went on to serve in France, Belgium and England. On 2 May Pocock was awarded the Associate Royal Red Cross for her nursing service; she was later twice mentioned in despatches.

Matron Pocock (second from left) outside Buckingham Palace after receiving her Associate Royal Red Cross medal, London, 1919. AWM P01840.016

After the war

Upon arriving home, Pocock returned to her role as matron at Gladesville Hospital in Sydney, before opening a private hospital *Ismailia* in Chatswood. In her retirement she remained an active member of both the Australasian Trained Nurses' Association, of which she became a life member, and the AANS. Pocock never married and lived with her nieces until her death on 16 July 1946. Her niece, Margaret, lovingly handcopied her diaries for future generations to read.

For your information
The Royal Red Cross is awarded in two levels – First Class (RRC) and Second Class or Associate (ARRC)

For more information:

http://www.bwm.org.au/site/Nurses.asp

http://www.bwm.org.au/site/Boer_War_Medals.asp

Activities

Imagine you could interview "Bessie" Pocock. What would you want to know about her experiences as a nurse? As a woman?

How do you think she would answer these questions? Consider the era, the role of women and her personality. How might these answers help to build up a picture of her life?

Create a timeline of Pocock's life, highlighting important dates.

How would nursing service have changed for Pocock and other nurses between the Boer War and the First World War?

1. Use the Australian War Memorial website to answer the following questions: what achievement does the Associate Royal Red Cross recognise?
2. For what, was Bessie awarded the Associate Royal Red Cross and promoted to matron?