

Alice Gordon Elliott (nee King)

1886-1977



Left: In Malta 1915.



Alice Gordon Elliott; the personification of devotion; a true representation of selflessness.

She was born on 21 August 1886 as the only daughter of William and Mary King of Hobart. Alice was educated at Miss D'Emden's Private School, passing with Credit French and Geography; little did she know these subjects would echo in her future. After working at her graduate school for two years, Alice pursued nursing training at the Hobart General Hospital in September 1908. Alice only had the opportunity to work as a Sister in the hospital for 3 years until 1914.

The War to End All Wars it was called.

Alice did not hesitate in enlisting for Active Service in September 1914 for the Australian Army Nursing Service (A.A.N.S). She was required to be unmarried, trained to the government standard and willing to be pushed further than she would ever believe. She had to pledge *"I will do all in my power to alleviate the suffering of the sick and wounded, sparing them no effort to bring them comfort of body and peace of mind."*

Alice was one of the first two nurses to leave Tasmania for World War One, (with Sister Janet Radcliff), on the HMAS 'Geelong' on 20 October 1914. Alice recounted upon her return that they: *"Arrived at Alexandria Dec. 1914 & posted to Mena House Hotel which we converted into a hospital, close to the pyramids & the Mena Camp of Australian Troops."* An attack on Ismailia on the Suez Canal was Alice's first experience of war casualties in February 1915, along with 10 of the other nurses travelling with the 1st A.I.F Division. Alice recorded in some rough hand written notes that *"This was for us our first experience with the wounded and the sound of guns, so it was quite a gentle breaking in for the distressful days of Gallipoli."*

From April 1915 onwards, Alice and Sister Radcliff embarked on Hospital Ship Duties for 12 months, caring for the casualties from Gallipoli. The Hospital Ship 'Sicilia' was posted at Cape Hellas, where the British 29th Division fought against the Turks. The wounded and sick from these engagements would be carried from Cape Hellas, Anzac Beach and Salonika to Alexandria, while the Sisters treated and ensured the soldier's stabilisation. **It was on this ship that Alice was mentioned in dispatches for her work.**



Alice Gordon Elliott with her Hobart friend Sister Janet Radcliff



Top: Alice Gordon Elliott (centre) with men from the 12th Battalion at Barnes Bay Quarantine Station, including Charles Hazel Elliott, Alice's future husband (right of Alice).

As a result of her marriage, and because it was a requirement for Sisters in the A.A.N.S to be single, **Alice was forced to resign from her duties**. She would *not* be funded for a return ship to Australia and she would *no longer* be paid her nursing wages – all this for love. Despite this, Alice continued to volunteer in England at Harefield Auxiliary Hospital until 1919.

Lieutenant Colonel Charles Hazell Elliott was awarded the Distinguished Service Order and Bar, the Conspicuous Gallantry Medal as well as being the *only* Tasmanian to be awarded the French Legion of Honour. **He died in 1956, 21 years before Alice would pass.**

The couple returned to Tasmania in 1919 where they set up in New Town. Their first and only child was born in 1925 – Charles Gordon Elliott. Alice was the foundation President of the Returned Sister's Association from 1920 and was appointed a Justice of Peace for Hobart in 1924. During the Second World

War, Alice lectured and trained nurses in First Aid and war gasses. When this work became overly pressing for Alice, she served as a special Magistrate for the Children's Court for 16 years.

Alice's life after the war reflected her values of selflessness and devotion to others.

Alice was a primary example of women after the First World War who broke the stereotype of women by stepping out and working for what she deserved. After the war ended, all veterans received the 1914/15 Star for their participation. Alice responded to the Department of Defence after she failed to receive the Star, though it wasn't until her husband Lt. Col. Elliott wrote a letter explaining "*I should like to mention that Mrs Elliott is almost the only Tasmanian Sister entitled thereto, who has not yet received her 1914/15 Star.*", before she received it. Similarly, in 1967 when the ANZAC Commemorative Medallion was presented to any survivors of the Gallipoli Campaign, Alice wrote a letter to the Army Records Office, justifying and explaining her involvement in the war before she was awarded the medallion.

In 1956 Alice Gordon Elliott was awarded the Order of the British Empire by Queen Elizabeth II for her participation in charitable organisations and the dedication of her life to serving others.

After a long year upon the waters, Alice and 60 other Australian Sisters were posted to England. Previously, Alice and several other nurses had been separated from their original units (No. I A.G.H and No. II A.G.H), though combined they created enough for a team at Harefield Auxiliary Hospital in England. The Auxiliary Hospital was for severely wounded soldiers who awaited repatriation to Australia.

In April 1917, she joined the **No. III Australian General Hospital in Abbeville France** where she stated "*...our hospital was set up under canvas, & work began on huts for acute cases and theatre.*" No training would have prepared Alice for the terror and gore or the commitment and devotion she needed for the Western Front. In Abbeville, Alice was given responsibility of the theatre ward of 22 beds under Captain Newton and Major Stewart.

1917 marked the bloodiest year of World War One, with 21,000 Australian deaths— one third of their total World War One fatalities. It was during August of 1917 that Alice was moved once again, to the **No. 1 Australian Casualty Clearing Station in Oersteen Belgium**. The No. 1 Australian Casualty Clearing Station was between Oersteen and Bailleul and the Director of Medical Services named the locality on the map "TASMANIA", which would have been ironic for Alice. The Third Battle of Ypres (Passchendaele) was being fought at this time, and Alice records that it was their busiest season at the Casualty Clearing Station.

"...we were 6 hours at the operating table, off for 4 hrs. rest, on again for 24 hrs., & when 2 relieving teams arrived we worked a 16 hr period; this heavy workload lasted about a fortnight..."

There were 38,000 total Australian deaths during the Third Battle of Ypres. Casualty Clearing Stations were closer to the front line than the General Hospitals; therefore Alice saw more of the initial impact of the wounded soldiers first hand. The torn flesh, obliterated limbs, the sunken spirits.

Many World War One veterans are recognised by their grave in a foreign country, how brave they were in warfare or by the medals they were awarded, but Alice will be known by those she cared for. An excerpt from the Christchurch *Star*, in 3 November 1915 explains the efforts of the nurses in World War One by saying:

"While men fight one another, women tend the wounded, and there be no doubt at all that theirs is the nobler part. Naturally enough the eyes of the world are on the firing line and sometimes the work of the nurses; from the very firing line to the hospitals is overlooked. It was ever thus. Those who scar the tree of life, a great thinker once said, are remembered by the scars, but those who water its roots have nothing by which they may be known. But theirs is the tree."

Her enlistment form described her as 28 years and 1 month old, 5 feet and 7 inches high and 8 stone in weight upon enlistment, but Alice Gordon Elliott is so much more to me. Her skin may have been fair, her eyes may have been grey, her hair might've been brown and she may have religiously identified herself as a part of the Church of England, but Alice Gordon Elliott is so much more to me.

She is devoted, strong, loving. She is the sleepless nights at the operating table, the years of work after forced resignation, the recuperation for retired Sisters, the justice for children in court and the volunteer for training WWII nurses. Throughout these events we can conclude that Alice Gordon Elliott had a heart for others, something that can be treasured and remembered even 40 years after her death. Despite the historical dating of her life, she preaches and teaches a message that can be valued today; devote yourselves to others.



Image of Sister Alice Gordon Elliott and Lt. Col. Charles Hazell Elliott in Tasmania before his death in 1956.

Lest We Forget

Poem written by Rosa Piscioneri in remembrance of Sister Alice Gordon Elliott

*Your works are not forgotten,
Your deeds are treasured dearly,
Though there's no-one here to tell us why.
Why you honestly cared; deeply so,
Devoted to the bloodied and dying,
Why you endured the haunting scenes of war,
Why you never gave up trying.
The world's memory will surely fade,
Though Sister, I promise to remember you,
Alice Gordon Elliott, my hero,
A hero I never even knew.*

- Rosa Piscioneri