

Stella Lillian Colless



Date/Place of Birth: December 1883, Penrith, NSW

Date/Place of Death: 1978, Northbridge, NSW

Australian Imperial Forces- Australian Army Nursing Service

Enlisted: July 1915

Discharged: 29 January 1920

Memorial Details: Honour Roll, Memory Park, Penrith ; Honour Roll, Presbyterian Church, Penrith

Biographical details

Stella Colless was born on 5 December 1883, Penrith NSW, the fourth daughter of Alfred and Georgiana (nee Jordan) Colless. Alfred Colless had founded the *Nepean Times* newspaper in 1882. After leaving school, Stella completed her nursing training at Royal Prince Alfred Hospital. At the outbreak of World War 1, Stella volunteered to serve on the Hospital Ship *Grantala*, along with two other Penrith nurses: Rachel Clouston and Constance Neale. The *Grantala* served with the Australian Naval and Military Expedition Force in the former German possessions of New Guinea and Rabaul between September and December 1914 before the ship was paid off and returned to its owners. After returning from Rabaul, the nurses were discharged from their duties. The first two Australian General Hospitals had sailed for Egypt and the nurses were told that it was improbable that any more nurses would be sent as the war would soon be over.

Military Service with AANS

Stella Colless enlisted in the Australian Imperial Forces in June 1915. Stella left Australia on the 14 July 1915 aboard the Kanowna which was on its way to England to be converted into Hospital Ship No 2. She returned to Australia aboard the Karoola (No 1 Hospital Ship) on 4 December 1915. In February 1916, the Nepean Times reported Stella's arrival home on aboard the Karoola which had transported troops home from Egypt. The article also mentioned Private K Stanton, another Penrith soldier, who was also working on the hospital ship. Stella continued to serve aboard the hospital ships until October 1916 when she was detached for duty at No 1 Australian Auxiliary Hospital, (1 AAH) Southall. In February 1917, Stella was transferred to 2 Australian General Hospital (2 AGH) at Wimereux for duty and was almost immediately posted to No 3 Casualty Clearing Station (3CCS). Casualty Clearing Stations were normally located near the fighting and provided emergency treatment before transferring the wounded to General or Stationary Hospitals for further treatment. On 21 August 1917, Stella was detached for duty to No 7 General Hospital and then detached for duty with No 10 CCS, No 4 CCS and No 3 CCS. In December 1917, Stella was posted to No 2 Australian General Hospital. In October 1918, Stella was granted two weeks leave and returned to No 2 AGH before taking a further two weeks leave in England January 1919. Stella returned to Australia aboard the Karoa in 1919.

In 1921 Colless began nursing returned servicemen at Randwick Hospital and later the A.J.C. Convalescent Home for returned servicemen at Canonbury, Darling Point. In 1926, this home was converted to a convalescent home for children and later specifically for crippled children. In 1942, the home and its children were moved to Molong to be accommodated at the Fairbridge Farm School and Matron Colless went with them. After her retirement, Colless lived with her family at Northbridge, NSW. She died aged ninety-four on 28 September 1978.

Memorial Details

- Honour Roll, Memory Park, Penrith
- Honour Roll, Penrith Superior Public School
- Honour Roll, St Stephen's Anglican Church, Penrith

Newspaper article refers to Nurse Colless

Nepean Times 24 October 1914, p8 c7

News from Rabaul: In a letter recently received by her relatives, and written from the Hospital Ship *Grantala*, then lying at anchor in the harbour of Rabaul, New Britain, Nurse Stella Colless (daughter of Mr A Colless, proprietor *Nepean Times*) writes interestingly of experiences at the tropical seat of the war since the *Grantala* reached the locality. Inter alia Sr Colless writes: "On Sunday morning we were told that Dr Mcguire and Colonel Paton had invited us ashore to have afternoon tea with them; so after our long sojourn on the ship, you can well imagine our excitement. We were taken to the wharf in a small launch, and there we were met by Dr Maguire, who took us to the town. Everywhere there were armed guards – and imagine our importance when we were saluted, and on being allowed to pass were taken

to the Officers' Mess Room. Here we were greeted by a number of officers, who were so pleased to see us that it seemed they could hardly do enough for us. Their mess-room was formerly the German Club, and I believe they had some amusing experiences in taking possession of this. Colonel Paton sent word to the Secretary of the Club to call and see him. When the Secretary arrived the Colonel told him he wanted to take possession of the Club. the man said he did not think it would be convenient at once – it was then 10 am – so the Colonel said they would have to make it convenient at noon. At this the secretary nearly had a fit on the spot, but they had to get out, and our fellows are now in possession ... They had prepared afternoon tea for us in elegant fashion – we had chocolate ice-cream, for instance; and then dozens of different types of cake. All the cooking is done by the officers' orderlies, and they seem delighted at our appreciation of everything. The house (late German Club) is a large weatherboard cottage, and there are three very large rooms built upon blocks about 6ft from the ground, with a veranda all around, about 8ft wide.

All the outhouses and kitchen are built away from the house. They (the Expeditionary Force) have taken possession of numbers of ex German Government houses, which had been occupied by officials. In these houses our officers are now living. The houses are well furnished and are really very comfortable. They have taken possession of one of the very large stores for the troops, and they (troops) seem very much at home in their new quarters. After tea we were taken to see the sights of the town. Rabaul is a very pretty place and well laid out. There are fine broad streets, with rows of trees in the centre; and hundreds of natives strolling about, dressed in little more than the scriptural fig-leaf, and a piece of red cloth, in keeping with the tropical climate probably. A small portion of the main street is inhabited by Chinese; their dwellings take up about 200 or 300 yards of the street, and in that space there are between 400 and 500 Chinese, and other Asiatics. They (Chinese) have a small temple elaborately fitted up. We next went to view the Botanic Gardens. These are really wonderful; mostly tropical plants and shrubs, some very wonderful trees among them. The Germans, it appears, had been doing a lot of experimenting in botanical affairs here.

Sister Colless concludes with reference to the patients on board, most of whom were about to be sent back to Sydney at time of writing , as the "Grantala" was about to leave Rabaul for some other destination.

The "Grantala" arrived at Rabaul soon after the taking of New Britain by the Australian Forces. The ship's company were in splendid health and spirits, and very fully occupied.

Newspaper article refers to Nurse Colless

Nepean Times 26 February 1916, p6

Home Again: Sister Stella Colless returned home again on Wednesday by No 1 Australian Hospital Ship after voyaging to Egypt, where a full complement of sick and wounded Australians were taken on board. Private K Stanton, AMC, also returned. Both these Penrithites expect to leave Sydney again shortly by the hospital ship.

Newspaper article refers to Nurse Colless

Nepean Times 24 Nov 1917, p2 c4

Sister Colless Under Fire: Sister Stella L Colless, daughter of Mr A Colless (proprietor “Nepean Times”) and Mrs Colless writes as follows: – “As you have probably heard, Fritz has been paying a great deal of attention to C.C.S.’s (Casualty Clearing Stations). He visited us many nights, and dropped bombs all around. Once he managed to drop one in our camp. Thank goodness, most of the staff were late on duty, so there were very few people about. The bomb fell in our compound, between the officer’ mess and ours. One officer and a batman were killed. Goodness, knows, what would have happened to us if we had been in our tents, as they were simply riddled with holes. Fritz always came between 9.15 and 9.45, and it was rather weird lying in bed waiting for him to arrive. There were many searchlights about, and as soon as the planes were sighted, there was a perfect shriek of guns – anti-aircraft and machine guns – and the sight was perfectly fascinating – the plan, lit up by the searchlights, with shells bursting all around, then little streaks of light from the machine guns. One night we were working in the operating theatre, when we heard guns, so rushed to see what was happening, when suddenly Fritz darted apparently overhead. Immediately we heard a report as if a bomb had fallen on us. The first thing I knew I was being hurled on to the ground by one of the M.O.’s, and a steel hat put over my head. When all the excitement was over I found myself amongst about a dozen men on the ground, in my clean white cap and apron. Well, Fritz continued bombing all round for several days, and did not think he was having much success with us; so last Tuesday, 21/8/17, he commenced putting some H.E. [High Explosive] shells into our compound. During the morning we were working in the theatre with pieces of shell flying round; at least, we commenced when one of the M.O.’s insisted on our leaving the place. Fritz continued shelling the camp. One fell into the Q.M.’s Stores, and one into a ward, which, thank goodness, was empty. When things became too hot they decided to evacuate the patients, and until they could arrange for us to be got away we were sent to a dug-out, and the M.O.’s and orderly’s carried on in the wards. I do wish you could have seen us, about 20 women huddled together in a dug-out, which I should think had been built for two men. The dug-out belonged to some officers of a camp behind us. They were awfully good to us. We were quite glad when the cars arrived to take us away. We were sent to -, and it was a treat to get away from the guns, etc. Of course, we had to leave the camp as it was, and also had to leave a guard. Unfortunately two of our orderly’s were killed during that night. Since then things have been very quiet: I am very pleased to have had all this experience – still I shall be quiet happy not to have any more. We are now at a beautiful camp, which is a good many miles further away from things. They have been here for nearly two years, and have nice gardens and huts to live in .”

In a later letter home, Sister Colless says: “I wonder will they ever get conscription in Australia? I cannot see why so many of our noble boys should be killed, and the large number of eligibles left who are doing nothing towards defeating the Hun. There does not seem any chance of Australia being able to keep up the voluntary replacements at the present rate of casualties.”

Newspaper article refers to Nurse Colless

Nepean Times 14 June 1919, p1 c1-3

A Nursing Sister’s Work in France:

Bombs on Hospital: Sister Stella L Colless (daughter of Mr A Colless, proprietor “Nepean Times,” and Mrs Colless), of Penrith, who returned home recently, has had a lengthy service with the Navy and AIF, and has gained an insight into many phases of the Great War, which is denied even to many “diggers.” She being under a bombardment and of being exposed to the dangers of Hun air raids, which, unfortunately, did not discriminate very nicely between the fighting forces and the life-saving and nursing sections of the army. Her nursing adventures, if related in detail, would no doubt contribute appreciably to the history of the AMC in the Homeric struggle.

That Awful Winter: Sister Colless’s first war work was on a hospital ship “The Grantala”, attached to the Australian navy that went to Rabaul. She continued there until December, 1914, when she returned to Sydney, and re-enlisting, went away in July, 1915, on the hospital ship “Karoola.” Sister Colless continued on the hospital ship work until September, 1916, when she disembarked in England, doing hospital work there till the following January, when she went to France. That was the time of the cruel winter of which “diggers” who experienced it still speak with a shiver, even if they happen to be crossing the Equator when speaking of it. A man’s laundry would freeze on the trees if he was foolish enough to leave it there for the purpose of drying, and the amount of clothing that was necessary to keep the biting cold away from his body added materially to his burden, which didn’t make route marches over bad country any the easier. After serving at Base Hospital, Sister Colless joined the nursing staff at No 3 Casualty Clearing Station, just outside Bapaume. This was at the beginning of April, just after Fritz had made a “ruekwartz” movement on the Somme front. It will be remembered that the old Squarehead, after having been badly hammered for some months, decided to advance towards Germany, home and beauty a few miles. When he did so, the British army, including the Australians, moved well past the great slaughter ground that had been so miserably racked and torn from July, 1916, to March 1917. Sister Colless went over much of that historic ground, viewing such sacred (to Australians) places at Pozieres, Mouquet Farm, and Grevilliers. Her first experience of heavy CCS work was during the great struggle at Bullecourt in April and May, when the staff was kept extremely busy. A wounded man usually receives his most critical treatment at the CCS, and is evacuated as soon as convenient to the base; but when there is a fierce “stunt” in progress, the resources of the CCS are taxed to the uttermost, and the medical and nursing staffs are kept working at high pressure. And so it was in this case.

Round Ypres: At the end of July, Sister Colless, with the whole CCS staff, moved up to the Passchendale front, where there was more hot work in progress. The staff had a most strenuous time for several months, and had as many as ten surgical teams working at a time in a theatre. (A team comprises a surgeon, an anaesthetist, a sister and an orderly.) Many blood-transfusion operations were carried out, and quite a number of remarkable surgical feats were accomplished. During the early stages of the war, blood-transfusion was not known, or, at least, was not put to practical use. According to Sister Colless, many noble lives have been saved by its introduction, and on many occasions she has seen men brought back to the CCS practically lifeless through loss of blood; but after being treated, one could immediately see the colour returning to their pale, ashen faces, and they would become “living men” in a very

short space of time. From one to two pints of blood was usually injected into the patient's arm, having previously been taken from a "volunteer" – one of whom was always on hand for the purpose. There were occasions on which a nurse would have to work as much as eighteen hours a day. At first , they were stationed at Brandhock, near Ypres. They were constantly subjected to the horrors of air raids. On one occasion an officer and three men of their staff were killed.