

Sister Alice Ross-King, ARRC, MM

'Front-line angel'

The grief-stricken woman hugged her infant daughter as she struggled to come to terms with the tragic events of the day. What was to have been a day's fishing on Perth's Swan River had claimed the lives of her husband and two sons.¹ All she had left now was young Alys and she vowed that she would never let anything happen to her.

Alys Ross was born in the Victorian town of Ballarat, in August 1891.² She was of hardy Scottish stock and while she was still a toddler, her father had moved the family to Perth in search of a better life. Following the shocking accident which claimed her husband and sons, Mrs Ross returned to Melbourne with her daughter.

Alys attended some of the finer Melbourne schools for young ladies and from an early age decided on a career in nursing. She started her training at the Alfred Hospital and remained there until she completed her Certificate in Nursing. As Sister Alys Ross she continued at the hospital, where she added to her qualification, that of a theatre sister, and at times was called upon to fill the position of acting matron.²

With the onset of war, Sister Ross enlisted in the Australian Imperial Force in November 1914.³ During her AIF service she used the surname Ross-King and changed the spelling of her Christian name to Alice.



AWM J05886. Australian officers and nurses enjoying a picnic at the 'Spinney', Ismailia, Egypt.



*Sister Alice Ross-King
ARRC, MM. (Photograph
courtesy Mark Appleford)*

Her mother was extremely upset with her daughter's decision to go to war. Alice was all the family she had left and the thought that her only child might be killed or injured weighed heavily on Mrs Ross's mind.

Alice was allocated to the 1st Australian General Hospital (AGH) and sailed for Egypt on 21 November 1914 aboard the troopship *Kyarra*.⁴ The 1st Australian General Hospital was based in the Cairo suburb of Heliopolis and the nursing staff was kept busy with a constant stream of patients emanating from the AIF desert training camps at Mena.

It wasn't all work in those early days in Egypt, and the nurses enjoyed an active social life. They hosted afternoon teas on the lawns of their quarters and they were always the first to be invited to the dances at the various officers' messes dotted around Cairo.

With the imminent departure of the 1st Division to Gallipoli, it was decided to prepare other hospital facilities in anticipation for the expected tide of wounded soldiers. Alice, along with a number of other nurses, was detached to the nearby city of Suez, where they were tasked to prepare suitable buildings to be used as clearing stations for Gallipoli casualties.⁵

Their worst fears were realised when, in late April 1915, the first of the wounded from the Gallipoli beachhead reached the wards. Alice and the other dedicated nursing staff worked around the clock, tending to their patients and fighting overwhelming odds to improve the survival prospects of many of the most seriously wounded. Sometimes they were successful. Other times they had to face the



AWM H12939 Alexandria, Egypt, 1915. Wounded from Gallipoli being transferred from hospital ship Gascon to trains for transfer to hospital in Cairo.

heartbreaking reality that their best efforts had failed. To those in their care they were truly front-line angels.

It was decided that some of the more gravely wounded would be returned to Australia—to make room for others of the increasing number of casualties. As the wounded would need nursing care during their voyage home, it was necessary for some of the nurses to accompany them to provide ongoing treatment during the trip. Sister Ross-King was amongst those chosen to return to Australia.²

Alice was aware that a shortage of nursing staff at home might jeopardise her chances of returning to the front. Immediately after she landed in Australia, she sought to secure orders to be sent back to Egypt. She enjoyed a short leave with her mother before again bidding her a tearful good-bye.



In April 1916, Sister Ross-King helped establish 1 AGH in France.⁵ The hospital was based in Rouen and the medical staff quickly prepared themselves for the onslaught of casualties from the ‘real’ war. They didn’t have to wait long—actions at Fromelles in the north and Pozieres on the Somme kept the hard-pressed nurses working around the clock.

Ross-King remained at 1 AGH Rouen for the duration of the Somme offensive then joined the 10th Stationary Hospital at St Omer in the north of France. In July



AWM H01993. St. Omer, France, No 2 Casualty Clearing Station tent lines, twelve kilometres from the town.

1917, Alice was moved forward to the 2nd Australian Casualty Clearing Station which was situated close to the battlefield near Trois Arbres.⁵

One night—only five days after her arrival—Alice was making her way back to her tent at the end of her shift. As she followed a young orderly along the duckboards, she heard the high-pitched sound of approaching aircraft. Staring skyward, she could see the grey outline of the planes and as they came closer she could distinguish the bold crosses on the wings.

She knew that the hospital was clearly marked with large red crosses but, despite this, the German pilots seemed hell-bent on attacking. She heard the whistle of falling bombs just before one of the missiles exploded directly in front of her, knocking her to the ground. Regaining her senses, Alice looked around for the orderly but could not see him. Realising the enormity of the situation, she rushed back to her patients.

The deadly projectiles were now bursting amid the buildings and tents. As she ran to the wards, she found what was left of the pneumonia ward tent. The extract in her diary reads:

*Though I shouted, nobody answered me or I could hear nothing for the roar of the planes and artillery. I seemed to be the only living thing about. I kept calling for the orderly to help me and thought he was funkling, but the poor boy had been blown to bits.*⁵

Struggling under the collapsed canvas of the tent and in partial darkness, she tried to lift a delirious patient from the floor.

I had my right arm under a leg which I thought was his but when I lifted I found to my horror that it was a loose leg with a boot and a puttee on it. One of the orderly's legs ... had been blown off and had landed on the patient's bed. Next day they found the trunk up a tree about twenty yards away.⁵

During the ensuing hours, Alice's actions were inspirational. Little did she know that her work on that terrible night would result in her being awarded the Military Medal, 'for great coolness and devotion to duty'.⁶

By now, the AIF was locked in the Third Battle of Ypres and the casualty clearing station was filled to capacity with wounded Diggers. The doctors and nurses worked tirelessly as the sheer volume of casualties and the severity of their wounds taxed the medical staff to their limits. Alice wrote:

The Last Post is being played nearly all day at the cemetery next door to the hospital. So many deaths ...⁵



In November 1917, Alice returned to Rouen where she was promoted to Head Sister, 1 AGH. Accompanied by a number of other sisters and nurses, Alice moved to an advanced dressing station just behind the front lines. The stream of incoming wounded seemed endless and the days were long and tiring. After one such shift, when they had finally gained the upper hand, the doctor said, 'That's the lot for now, Sister. Why don't you get some sleep while you can?'

As she made her way back to her tent, she heard the feeble, anguished moans of wounded men. She searched until she found the source—53 badly wounded German prisoners who had been all but forgotten for the past three days. 'Doctor! Doctor! Come quickly!' she called frantically.

Alice's diary entry summed up the situation that confronted her:

I shall never forget the cries that greeted me. They had gone without food or water ... everyone on our staff was dead beat but I got the doctor to come and fix them up. We did forty patients in 45 minutes (the other 13 had died). No waiting for chloroform ... amputations and all, and onto the train an hour and a half after I had found them.⁶

Alice was twice Mentioned in Despatches and she was awarded the Royal Red Cross, 2nd Class, in the King's Birthday Honours of 1918.⁶

With the cessation of hostilities following the Armistice, Alice returned to England. In January 1919 she boarded a troopship bound for home. It was during the voyage that she met her future husband, Dr Sydney Appleford. The pair married later that year and settled in rural Victoria.



AWM 136909. Melbourne, 28 September 1942. A leader of the Australian Red Cross Voluntary Aid Detachment (VAD) Major A. R. Appleford (nee Ross-King) ARRC, MM; Assistant Controller Australian Army Medical Womens Service (AAMWS) passes the saluting base during the servicewomen's march through the city streets.



AWM P01788.001. Heidelberg, Vic, 1944. Group portrait of nursing trainees for the Australian Army Nursing Service (AANS) with their teachers at the Heidelberg Military Hospital. This was the first group of AAMWS trainees (AAMWS) who had been selected for training in general nursing.



With the onset of the Second World War, Alice Appleford took on the task of training members of the Voluntary Aid Detachments (VADs)—medically trained but not fully qualified nurses who worked in convalescent hospitals, on hospital ships and in the blood bank, as well as on the home front. On 3 October 1941, Appleford was appointed to the Headquarters, Southern Command. She became the backbone of the Victorian VADs and worked tirelessly to improve their capabilities.⁷

The VADs were the forerunners of the Australian Army Medical Women's Service (AAMWS). In 1942, Alice was commissioned as a major in the AAWMS and appointed Senior Assistant Controller for Victoria⁵—her task to supervise and co-ordinate all AAWMS personnel in Victoria. This included 106 AGH at Bonegilla, which also provided medical care to a prisoner of war and internment camp at nearby Tatura.⁷

Her military service did not end with the Japanese surrender, which heralded the end of the war in 1945, and she remained a member until the AAMWS disbanded in 1951.

In 1949, Alice was awarded the Florence Nightingale Medal for her considerable efforts in support of the Red Cross and Service charities.⁵ An extract of the citation sums up this amazing woman:

*No-one who came in contact with Major Appleford could fail to recognise her as a leader of women. Her sense of duty, her sterling solidity of character, her humility, sincerity and kindness of heart set for others a very high example.*⁷

Alice Appleford died on 17 August 1968, but her memory lives on in the Alice Appleford Memorial Award, which is presented annually to an outstanding member of the Royal Australian Army Nursing Corps.

Notes

- 1 Family interview with the author, May 2003
- 2 Coulthard-Clark C, (Ed.) *The diggers: makers of the Australian military tradition*, Melbourne University Press, 1993
- 3 National Archives of Australia: B2455, WW1 Service Records, Sister A Ross-King MM
- 4 AWM 8 Unit Embarkation Nominal Rolls, 1 AGH AIF, 1914–1918 War
- 5 Reid R, *Just wanted to be there - Australian Service Nurses 1899–1999*, Department of Veterans Affairs, Canberra, 1999
- 6 Barker M, *Nightingales in the Mud – The Digger Nurses of the Great War, 1914–1918*, Sydney, 1989
- 7 Goodman R, *VADs in peace and war: the history of Voluntary Aid Detachments in Australia during the 20th century*, Boolarong, Brisbane, 1991