

CATHERINE McNAUGHTON

PIONEERING NURSE OF WORLD WAR I

By Ken McNaughton

Catherine McNaughton, born and raised in a small Australian farm community, nursed soldiers of Gallipoli offshore on the island of Lemnos, and the wounded from battles of the Somme and Passchendaele. Mentioned in dispatches by Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig, her diaries provide a unique view of World War I.

In 1915 Australian and New Zealand soldiers formed part of an Allied expedition that set out to capture the Gallipoli Peninsula to open the way to the Black Sea for the Allied navies. The objective was to capture Constantinople, the capital of the Ottoman Empire, which was a member of the Central Powers during the war. The ANZAC force landed on 25 April and met fierce resistance from the Ottoman Army commanded by Mustafa Kemal (later known as Atatürk). The war quickly became a stalemate and the campaign dragged on for eight months. At the end of 1915 the Allied forces were evacuated after both sides had suffered heavy casualties and endured great hardships. The Allied deaths totaled over 56,000, including 8,709 from Australia and 2,721 from New Zealand. News of the landing at Gallipoli made a profound impact on Australians and New Zealanders at home and 25 April quickly became the day on which they remembered the sacrifice of those who had died in the war. The creation of what became known as the Anzac legend became an important part of the national identity in both countries [1].



Sister Catherine McNaughton 1915
(Courtesy Alex Barnes)

I grew up with this legend about the brave men of Gallipoli and so was intrigued to see on the library shelves in 2024 a six-part miniseries called “Anzac Girls” [2]. I was even more surprised to hear one of them addressed in Episode 3 as “Sister McNaughton.” This happened again in Episode 5 but I wasn’t sure if the title was addressed to one of the five central nurses. It was frustrating not to know if I was watching my namesake becoming famous onscreen so I reread the preamble—“This drama is based on the lives of real people. Certain characters and timelines have been changed for dramatic effect.”

In 2008 Peter Rees published “The Other Anzacs: Nurses at War 1914-1918” [3]. I obtained a copy from Australia but could find no mention of Catherine in the index or photo captions. Four of the five nurses featured in Anzac Girls have several mentions in the index but I could find no reference to the fifth one, Sister Hilda Steele. In 2013 Janet Butler published “Kitty’s War: The remarkable wartime experiences of Kit McNaughton” [4] based on the previously unpublished

war diaries of Great War army nurse Sister Catherine “Kit” McNaughton. In 2014 Electric Pictures released a four-part documentary miniseries “The War That Changed Us” [5] based on an original concept by historian Clare Wright that was first shown by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation on four consecutive Sunday evenings commencing August 19. The series follows the experiences of soldier Archie Barwick, army officer Pompey Elliott, army nurse Kit McNaughton, anti-war activist and trade unionist Tom Barker, anti-war activist and publisher Vida Goldstein, and pro-war crusader Eva Hughes—chosen because there was a substantial amount of material they had written. I could not obtain this in the US but a trailer is available [6] and I was able to view a screener. The miniseries follows Australians in the First World War via contemporary film clips, commentary by experts in their fields, including Professor Clare Wright and Dr. Janet Butler, and recreations of the six central characters at key points. Catherine McNaughton is played by the winning Jane Watt.

Catherine (known as Kitty) was born on 15 March 1884 into one of the earlier white settler families of the Little River district, the daughter of John and Anne (née Baxter) McNaughton, and granddaughter of a Scottish immigrant. Little River is 27 miles southwest of Melbourne on the road to Geelong with a population at that time of about 300. My people came to Melbourne in 1838 but I could not find a direct link with this John and Anne McNaughton. However, I wrote an article about a family of McNaughtons that migrated from Scotland to this area in 1852 [7] and recently there were still McNaughtons in the neighborhood.

From 1909-1912 Kitty trained as a nurse at Geelong Infirmary and Benevolent Asylum and later worked as a private nurse and then at Bairnsdale Hospital [8]. Nurses were the only Australian women officially permitted to serve overseas during the First World War and Kitty enlisted in the Australian Army Nursing Service in June 1915. She embarked for Active Service on the ‘Orsova’ on July 17 arriving in Egypt in time to nurse the flood of wounded from the August offensive on Gallipoli. It was the aim of the nurses to serve their “boys” as close as possible to the front. After a month at No. 2 Australian General Hospital in the converted Ghezireh Palace Hotel in Cairo Sister McNaughton volunteered for service on the Greek island of Lemnos sixty miles from Anzac Cove and served four months in a camp called No. 2 Australian Stationary Hospital. She and her fellow nurses proved their worth in the normally male-only camps despite inadequate food, clothing and shelter and a heavy work load and disease.

After the evacuation of Gallipoli Kit returned to her original hospital placement at the Ghezireh Palace Hotel before embarking for the Western Front in March 1916. In Marseilles she nursed quarantined soldiers as the troops streamed through the port on the way to the front. In June 1916 she was sent to Wimereux near Boulogne to reinforce No. 8 (British) Stationary Hospital in time for the operation on the Somme. For her work nursing severely wounded German prisoners from these battles Sister McNaughton was mentioned in dispatches by Field Marshall Sir Douglas Haig “for distinguished and gallant services and devotion to duty” [9].

In August 1917 Kit was sent to No. 2 Australian Casualty Clearing Station at Trois Arbres near Steenwercke on the Belgian border. Here, just over 6 km from the front line, with shells passing over the hospital, she took charge of the operating theatres during Passchendaele. Retained in England after leave in January 1918 Kitty served in No. 3 Australian Auxiliary Hospital in Kent until August and was then transferred as Theatre Sister to the Queen’s Hospital, Sidcup. Plastic

surgery was being pioneered at this hospital and Kitty became the first nurse in the Australian Surgical Section.



Sister Catherine McNaughton (left) and fellow nurse with troops (courtesy Therese Ryan).

Kitty McNaughton returned to Australia as Sister-in-Charge of the hospital section of the troopship ‘Wiltshire.’ In the Peace Dispatch of 2 January 1917 in London, announced as she travelled, she was awarded nursing’s highest honor, the Royal Red Cross First Class. She arrived in Melbourne in August 1919, her health affected, like so many of the nurses, after four years of almost uninterrupted service. On 11 December 1919 there was a presentation to returned soldiers at the Werribee Mechanics Hall [10]. The Chair expressed disappointment at the absence of Sister C. McNaughton, who was prevented from being present owing to illness. She was the first of many on the list—“Royal Red Cross, 1st AGH; served Egypt, Lemnos, France and Egypt.”

Kit married Little River farmer Joseph Ryan in 1921 and they raised three children. She retired to Werribee in 1946 and died in 1953 at the age of 69. Catherine McNaughton—the young woman who enlisted at the age of thirty-one, landed at the Ghezireh Palace in Cairo, got as close as she could to Gallipoli, the Somme and Passchendaele, worked with Australians, New Zealanders and the British and was honored for nursing the enemy—worked almost continuously for four years under some appalling conditions.

For families who would like an introduction to a real McNaughton heroine I can recommend the six-part Acorn miniseries “Anzac Girls.” Even though Sister McNaughton, played by Honey DeBelle, is only mentioned by name twice, this historical fiction is an excellent parallel to what Janet Butler mines from Kitty’s diaries. Sister Alice Ross King is prominent among the five nurses portrayed. If you want to imagine what Catherine would have gone through you could pretend the fictionalized Alice was actually Catherine instead of waiting for the fictionalized Sister McNaughton to be mentioned. Jane Watt plays Catherine McNaughton in the four-part “The War That Changed Us,” which is not available in the US. For those who are interested in Catherine’s diaries and a unique view of World War One battles, you can read Janet Butler’s deep analysis in “Kitty’s War.”

As well as performing routine nursing duties and under extreme stress Catherine also delivered anesthetics and undertook minor surgeries. She was placed in charge of the whole Bosches Line of German prisoners at No. 8 Stationary Hospital. On the sixth day of the Somme she wrote [11]:

I have eleven with their legs off and a couple ditto arms & hips & heads galore & the awful smell from the wounds is the limit as Gas Gangrene is the most awful thing imaginable, a leg goes in a day. I extracted a bullet from a German’s back today, and I enjoyed cutting into him ... the bullet is my small treasure, as I hoped it saved a life as it was a revolver one ...

On the lighter side Catherine was able to see the world like a tourist far from her rural home, to mix with men and women from different countries, to bond very closely with fellow nurses, party with military men, and even to defy authorities while protecting her professional concerns. In July 1916 she wrote [12]:

I forgot to mention that I had a visit from the Queen of Portugal – Imagine this, going round the W[ar]d interpreting to her with about three generals, secondary staffmen, the Matron, one Col[onel] & Maj[or] & Lady Gifford, and this poor Aust[r]alian doing the honours ... She almost embraced me, squeezed my hand in hers & it was the most embarrassing moment of my life, with all the crowd looking on; to stop all, she called me a ‘Noble Woman’. Some kid I am.

Australia and Australians celebrated the centenary of Anzac Day in 2015. With an extraordinary four years active service, Catherine McNaughton, the young farm girl from Little River, has secured a permanent and prominent place in this celebration. Her wartime diaries inspired the 300-page 2013 book that carries her nickname—“Kitty’s War.” A four-part 2014 miniseries about the war is based on the experiences of six real people; Catherine is the only nurse among those six. She is mentioned twice in a six-part 2014 miniseries that closely mirrors many of the events Catherine recorded in her candid and revealing diaries. We will remember her.

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9. “Somme Battles: Work of Anzacs; 592 mentioned in dispatches,” *The Argus*, Melbourne, 3 January 1917, p. 5.
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11. Sister Catherine McNaughton diary entry quoted in Butler, Janet, “Kitty’s War: The remarkable wartime experiences of Kit McNaughton,” p. 131.
12. Sister Catherine McNaughton diary entry quoted in Butler, Janet, “Kitty’s War: The remarkable wartime experiences of Kit McNaughton,” p. 130.

NOTES

My thanks to Clare Wright OAM, Professor of History/Professor of Public Engagement and Dr Janet Butler, Honorary Associate in the History Program, both at La Trobe University, Melbourne, Australia, and Judith Cockburn-Campbell, Head of Distribution & Publicity at Electric Pictures. It’s hard to resist the temptation to point out that Kit McNaughton’s small community also lent its name to the most successful Australian-born group ever on American music charts—The Little River Band. This work is copyrighted and may not be reproduced in whole or in part in any medium without written permission from Ken McNaughton Living Trust, 3778 College Avenue, Ellicott City, MD 21043; phone/fax: 410-418-9340; kjmcn@comcast.net (28 September 2024).