

Grey Angels

by Anna Rogers

8 April 1915: A large crowd has gathered on Wellington's Glasgow Wharf. The nearby buildings are decorated with flags, and a brass band plays patriotic songs. Fifty New Zealand nurses, in bonnets and grey dresses, are boarding the SS *Rotorua*. They are on their way to the war that is raging in Europe.



Edna Pengelly on the deck of the SS *Rotorua*

The Vast and Boundless Ocean

One of the nurses setting off that day was Edna Pengelly. When war was declared, Edna wanted to help – and she was lucky. Nursing was the only official way New Zealand women could go overseas to help the fighting soldiers. Edna applied to go on **active service** in January 1915, and three months later, she sailed away on the “vast and boundless ocean”.¹

The long, cramped journey to Britain was difficult. But there was still lots of excitement about the exotic sights along the way. Edna wrote about Cape Horn with “whales spouting in the distance” and the flying fish near Rio de Janeiro. After the *Rotorua* reached Plymouth, England, on 19 May, the nurses travelled to London. From there, they thought they'd be going across the English Channel to nurse the men wounded on the **Western Front**.



Nurses enjoying the exotic sights in Egypt around 1915

To Egypt

But the New Zealand soldiers weren't on the Western Front – they were fighting at Gallipoli. The nurses were sent to the four British-run hospitals in Egypt where the sick and injured men from Gallipoli were being taken. The women arrived in Alexandria in mid-June, and Edna was sent to No. 19 General Hospital.

The work was punishing. It was very hot, and the nurses worked long hours. Some of the patients were sick with illnesses like **dysentery** and pneumonia. Others had serious bullet or **shrapnel** wounds or broken bones. There were no antibiotics. Sometimes a soldier's arm or leg had to be amputated, and the nurses would help with the operation.

For some patients, nothing could be done. The nurses would simply sit and hold their hands. Still, they were glad to be there. As one nurse, Cora Anderson, said in a letter to her brother, “We feel that we are doing what we came for.”²

Later in the year, the weather got very cold in Turkey. Soldiers coming from Gallipoli sometimes had terrible frostbite, and some of these men needed to have their feet amputated. Patients who recovered from their injuries or illnesses would be sent back to fight. Those who were very ill were sent home on a hospital ship.



Hospital Ships

Hospital ships (also known as “white ships”) were used to treat and transport sick and wounded soldiers. New Zealand had two: the *Maheno* and the *Marama*. Like nurses, the ships went wherever they were needed.

During the Gallipoli campaign, the *Maheno* spent time at Anzac Cove. Soldiers were brought from the beach to the ship on small barges. The ship’s two operating theatres were in constant use, and the eight wards overflowed. Often mattresses had to be put on the decks. From Gallipoli, the *Maheno* took sick and wounded soldiers (up to five hundred at a time) to the Greek island of Lemnos. The men were then transported to hospitals in Egypt. The very ill were usually sent home. By the end of the war, New Zealand’s “white ships” had transported 47 000 patients.



“Our ship is beautiful. A great, white monster with three large red crosses and one thick green stripe on each side. An angel on a mercy mission.”

(Nurse Lottie Le Gallais)

Brockenhurst

After a year in Egypt, Edna was sent to England. She went to work in the New Zealand hospital at Brockenhurst, near Southampton. This was one of five hospitals for New Zealand soldiers. The men were glad to be cared for by women from their own country. One visitor even thought the New Zealand atmosphere was the best “tonic” the patients could have. Edna also liked Brockenhurst, especially the smell of the woodlands and hayfields. It was a world away from the heat and dirt and flies of Egypt.

The hospital was busy, but it got even worse after the fighting on the Somme. In mid-September 1916, when New Zealand soldiers became heavily involved in the battle, Edna wrote in her diary, “They say there will be plenty of men coming across soon. It is a ghastly place.” Ten days later, patients were “pouring in” and there were “operations galore”. Sometimes, Edna scarcely knew what to do first.

The ambulances kept coming. “Poor fellows,” Edna wrote. “They have a rotten time, and some come here only to die.” On 16 October, Edna described the arrival of yet another convoy. “So busy that at 3 p.m. I felt quite hopeless ...”



Nurses and patients in one of the wards at Brockenhurst

Carrying On

Most of the soldiers Edna looked after came from the battlefields of France. They travelled on an ambulance train to Le Havre, where they crossed to England on a hospital ship. There were never enough stretchers or beds, and the “walking wounded” had to get around as best they could. One observer described these men boarding the *Maheno*: “The mud from the trenches is scarcely dry upon them. The blood from their wounds soaks their clothes. They come forward, still dazed by the crash and roar of rival **artillery**.”³

There was no shortage of sad sights, but Edna and the other nurses were careful to hide their feelings. Florence de Lisle, who also nursed in England, remembered: “My first shock was when I went to make a man’s bed and I found he had no legs. They hadn’t told me. That was a terrible shock, but I just had to carry on. We never let on we were upset.”⁴ The patients also tried their best, despite their suffering: “The men bear pain wonderfully well; they never complain, never grumble,” said Jean Muir, a nurse on the *Maheno*.⁵



Inside a British ambulance train, which was used to transport the seriously wounded

The Somme and Passchendaele

Edna described the Somme as a ghastly place. She was right. Although New Zealand soldiers didn't become heavily involved until near the battle's end, the cost was still high: two thousand New Zealand soldiers were killed.

(At least half of these men still have no known grave.)

But a more terrible experience for the New Zealanders came a year later in 1917. This was when they took part in a series of battles near the Belgian village of Passchendaele. The campaign, which began in June and lasted many months, was poorly executed. During the fighting, men sometimes struggled through barbed wire under machine-gun fire. They were also shelled and gassed. The soldiers could hardly move because of the freezing cold and deep mud – and the surrounding countryside was said to look like a moonscape.



A ghastly place: New Zealand soldiers on the Somme battlefield, 1916



On the Move

During the war, nurses were sent wherever they were needed, although never to the front line. Still, some New Zealand nurses got very close, especially those who worked in the **casualty clearing stations** or in the hospitals in France, where there were terrifying air raids. Edna stayed in England, moving first to the New Zealand hospital at Codford and then to the one at Oatlands Park.

Many of the patients at Oatlands Park were "**limbies**". But the hospital also cared for other seriously wounded soldiers. In October 1917, the long convoys of ambulances came again. This time, they carried survivors from Passchendaele. The men were, as Edna put it, "dreadfully knocked about".



An ambulance convoy leaving a field hospital near the Western Front

The End

In March 1918, the Germans launched their last huge attacks. Again, Edna described wards full of wounded men. The hospital had to put up tents to provide extra room. Many soldiers had been affected by **mustard gas**, which was used later in the war by both sides. These men had burnt, swollen eyes and blistered throats – and some would develop fatal pneumonia. “Their breathing was dreadful,” said Florence de Lisle – and many suffered the effects “all their lives, like asthma”.⁶

That year, there was also a new problem to deal with: influenza. This worldwide **pandemic** killed between 20 and 40 million people. Many of the flu patients ended up in hospital.

In October, Edna described Oatlands as being “like a beehive – at least a thousand here”.

Finally, the war came to an end. “We heard rumours at 8.30 that the **armistice** had been signed but, of course, could not believe it. At noon we heard it was a fact.” Some people went to church, and others celebrated. Edna wrote in her diary that many people went to London, where it was “quite mad”, with dancing in the streets.

Edna came home on the *Marama* in 1919. Soon afterwards, she went to work at Queen Mary Hospital in Hanmer, nursing soldiers recovering from the war. Some men had long-term injuries. Others had shell shock.

Shell Shock

Soldiers were shot at, shelled, and gassed. They watched their friends die. They lived in mud with huge rats, and there were always lice in their uniforms. All this could become overwhelming. Some men stopped talking or became very confused. Some had nightmares – or couldn’t sleep at all. Others lost control of their limbs and trembled a lot. These men were suffering from what we now call post-traumatic stress disorder. At the time, it was known as shell shock. For some people, especially **civilians**, shell shock was difficult to understand. Some even thought that shell-shocked soldiers were cowards. But nurses like Edna understood and tried to help. It’s thought that around 40 percent of the **casualties** from the Battle of the Somme had shell shock.



The New Zealand nurses who served overseas were highly respected for their work. By the end of the war, 550 of them had served with the New Zealand Army Nursing Service. The soldiers never forgot these brave and selfless women and the care they gave.

¹ From Edna’s autobiography *Nursing in Peace and War* (all of Edna’s words are from this book)

² From *While You’re Away: New Zealand Nurses at War 1899–1948* by Anna Rogers

³ From Anna Rogers’s book

⁴ From *An Awfully Big Adventure: New Zealand World War One Veterans Tell Their Stories* by Jane Tolerton

⁵ From Anna Rogers’s book

⁶ From Jane Tolerton’s book

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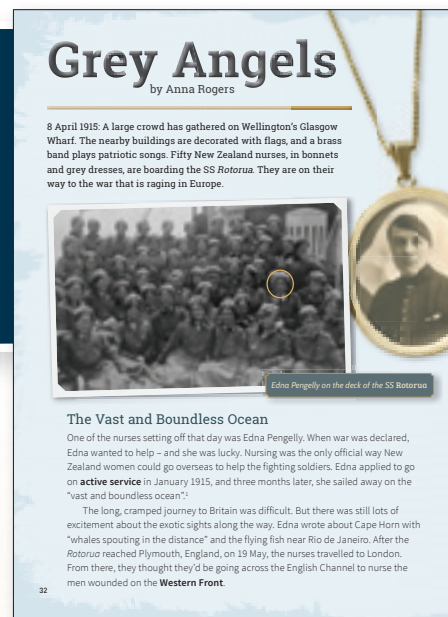
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