Wounds of War

The clearing stations and hospitals had to deal with injuries and illness on a scale never before seen. Soldiers suffered horrific wounds from machine gun fire, bomb shrapnel and the effects of poison gas.

“Shell shock” was a term not heard of before World War I, but confronting the sheer intensity of bombardment and the horror of combat triggered mental breakdown among many soldiers. The effects of poison gas were devastating and difficult to treat. Within hours of being exposed to mustard gas soldiers’ skin blistered and internal organs scarred. It was extremely painful and often lethal. Those who survived were often blinded or chronically ill. Conditions in the trenches, in which soldiers’ feet were constantly wet and cold, also led to trenchfoot, a painful condition that in severe cases led to gangrene and amputation.

On top of all that, hospitals dealt with infectious disease. Soldiers suffered from dysentery, diarrhoea and typhoid among other diseases. But by far the most devastating disease occurred at the end of the war with the outbreak of the Spanish Flu in 1918. The flu killed more than 50 million people worldwide.

No words can describe the awfulness of the wounds. Bullets are nothing. It is the shrapnel that tears through the flesh and cuts off limbs.

— Sister Claire Trestrail

MEDICAL PROCEDURE

Organising evacuation of the wounded from the frontline took strategy, courage and planning. At Gallipoli, nurses cared as best they could for wounded soldiers aboard hospital and transport ships anchored off shore. They lacked vital equipment, medical supplies and fresh water and nurses worked tirelessly to dress wounds and comforted their patients until they could be transported to makeshift military hospitals in Greece or Egypt or transported back to Britain. The larger medical challenge came when troops moved to the Western Front, where more than 80 per cent of Australia’s total casualties during the war occurred. To deal with the influx a system of evacuation was developed. stretcher bearers would take the wounded to a dressing station, usually sheltered from shelling or sniper fire, then they would be transferred by foot, horse-drawn cart, ambulance or truck, through the mud, to a casualty clearing station.

The stations were several kilometres from the front and had surgeons and nurses who could do more advanced triage before serious cases were transported, often by train, to a bigger general hospital. Depending on their injuries and length of recovery, the soldiers could be sent to specialist hospitals in Britain, home to Australia, or back to the front.

WOMEN SERVE ABROAD

While men queued to enlist to fight, the only way women could do their “duty” was to nurse overseas.

While it was a chance to help soldiers often needed medical help well before they made it to hospital and the wounds of war blighted many lives in peacetime.

Tending to wounded soldiers injured in battle was the only way in which women could serve overseas during World War I. But wounded soldiers often needed medical help when they were exposed to shells. Twenty-five nurses lost their lives while serving and many received military medals for bravery.

More than 3000 Australian nurses volunteered for service, of which more than 2139 served overseas. Private John Simpson Kirkpatrick became famous for his rescue missions of injured soldiers during the Gallipoli landing. Carrying soldiers on the back of his donkey from “Shrapnel Valley” to the safety of Anzac Cove. He died trying to rescue two wounded soldiers.

Seven Australian nurses were awarded the Military Medal for “acts of gallantry and devotion to duty under fire” while working in casualty stations in France.

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Women mainly served with the Australian Army Nursing Service or other organisations such as the Queen Alexandra’s Imperial Military Nursing Service, the Red Cross and privately sponsored organisations. There were 2139 Australian nurses who saw active service in the Great War. They were sent to France, India, Greece and Egypt, filling roles on hospital ships and trains, in hospitals and closer to the frontline at casualty clearing stations.

Conditions closer to the frontline were difficult and nurses were exposed to shells and bombs. Twenty-five nurses lost their lives while serving and many received military medals for bravery.

Sources and Useful Links

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With thanks to the Shrine of Remembrance, shrine.org.au
Check out News Corp’s 100 Years of Untold Stories for a great online student project and diggers’ diaries: themercury.com.au/anzac-centenary