

'It makes one feel and realise what a dreadful thing war is' – a nurse's story

Written by The Conversation USA

Five thousand Australian nurses served during the second world war. The most famous of these, [Lieutenant Colonel Vivian Bullwinkel](#), survived a massacre on Bangka Island, and Japanese “hell camps” in Sumatra.

For many other nurses, life in WWII was by turns tedious, perilous and adventurous. Dorothy Janet Campbell was one of the vast majority who survived without capture, imprisonment or fatal illness. Her experiences are caught in her extensive diaries and photographs shared here by her niece Janet Scarfe.

South Australian Dorothy Campbell (known throughout her life to all as “Puss”) served in the Australian Army Nursing Service from 1940 to 1946, in England during the Blitz, in the Western Desert during the siege of Tobruk, in Papua New Guinea, and in Queensland and South Australia.

She spent many nights in air raid shelters and nursing in a tin hat but she was never directly bombed on land or sea.

Campbell's diaries and photos record the nurses' day to day lives, mostly away from the wards. She and her friends took full advantage of their split shifts and days off. There were sherry parties, tennis and golf, and sightseeing.

For all that, Campbell's “real work” was “looking after our boys”. Long periods of inactivity, such as waiting for hospitals to be set up or weeks at sea became tedious, despite the games and socialising.

Campbell nursed in several hospitals that were state of the art, including the Australian Hospital in Surrey and in the Greek hospital in Alexandria. She also worked in freezing tents in Queensland and grass huts in Buna in Papua New Guinea.

She was devoted to her patients – provided they were genuine. She deplored the “B Class” men

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she nursed in England in 1940. Deemed unfit for service and awaiting repatriation to Australia, they made difficult patients, malingering, drunk and dismissive of the nurses' orders. By contrast, the sick and wounded evacuated straight from Tobruk received her complete attention:

How I love to be able to help them, and to listen to their great stories they tell ... it makes one feel and realise what a dreadful thing war is ...

Occasionally she described cases as "very interesting" or "difficult" but mostly her comments relating to work were "busy", "very busy" or "dog-tired". Comparisons between her diary entries and the hospital daily war diary show what an expert in understatement she was.

Campbell was never too tired to sight see. She loved England and Scotland. In Alexandria, she sponged her patients very early one Saturday morning, rushed off duty and caught the train to Cairo with several nurses and officers. They shopped, dined and danced till late, saw the sphinx and pyramids, rode camels and donkeys, had their fortunes told ("damn lot of rot") then caught a small plane back to Alexandria on Sunday afternoon.

She and the other nurses had a rich social life. In Alexandria, there were sea bathing and sailing, occasional dinners with colonels yearning for some female company, mosques to visit, and customs to marvel at.

The American base near Buna guaranteed a rich social life. She learned to drive a jeep, spent time off socialising with American officers and fell for one who was charming but duplicitous.

Campbell's diary entries change over the years. Exhaustion and monotony set in as the war ground on. England, Egypt and Papua New Guinea were highlights.

Queensland in 1942-43 and 1945 was dull and she never liked dull. Entries from Townsville in 1945 were brief and largely confined to golf games (nine holes most days between shifts) and the narrow-minded matron. There were few photos. Her exaltation at the news of peace was personal, professional and patriotic. Here are her diary entries for 15th and 16th August 1945:

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Wednesday. 15th

Very exciting day PEACE. Every body very excited – Party arranged in Red + Hut for all Hosp. (pts and staff.) – had few drinks in our Mess first, then... went to Sgts Mess – and then to dance, and then on to Officers Mess and spent very bright evening happiest night ever spent in army – felt rather ill and went out for walk...

Thursday Aug 16th [Townsville].

Terrific [sic] headache., after a few hrs felt better and got busy and arranged party in our Mess – Off [duty] 1–6 – had a little rest and helped to prepare supper... Went off duty 8pm to party, it was one of the best we have had and it kept on until 1 am. every body thoroughly enjoying themselves.

The diaries end abruptly the night before she boarded the train home to Adelaide on 28 November 1945. Her great adventure was over.

She had nursed men with battle wounds and serious illnesses. She knew the anxiety of air raids and long sea voyages. But she also relished all the opportunities that came her way, particularly the friendships, the sightseeing and new experiences.

Campbell remained in the Citizens Military Forces until 1958 and was decorated for her work with the Royal Australian Army Nursing Corps.

After her demobilisation, Campbell worked as a radiotherapy technician, one of the first women in South Australia to do so. She remained single, explaining to a small boy in an Anzac Day school talk that she “had loved them all and married none”.

She spoke of her time in the war to her family only in the broadest terms (“When we were away ...”). She kept her diaries to herself to the end of her life. But kept them on her bookshelves for

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easy discovery.

Janet Scarfe does not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organization that would benefit from this article, and has disclosed no relevant affiliations beyond the academic appointment above.

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