



Stories from the Plaques
No. 4: LTCOL Clara (Clare) Shumack AANS NFX70204



LTCOL Clara (Clare) Shumack

(source: Clara Shumack: AHS Manunda and other times and places John L. Forrest, front cover)

The campaign on the Kokoda Track was supported by many who never set foot on the Track, yet their service was no less noteworthy. One such group were Australian nurses whose service in World War II spanned across Australia, and in all theatres of war where Australian personnel served.

In particular, members of the Australian Army Nursing Service (AANS) have a unique link to many who fought in New Guinea. AANS members in Port Moresby and other locations tended to those ill, wounded and sick troops who had been evacuated by air, or who had made the arduous and often lonely trek across the Owen Stanleys on foot back to medical treatment and safety. Meantime, many ill or wounded Kokoda veterans, when evacuated back to Australia, were sent to Australian General Hospitals (AGHs), including the newly completed 113th AGH at Concord.

Our forth article in this series recounts the story of LTCOL Clara Shumack (she preferred to be called Clare), who served with distinction in World War II, being appointed the Matron on Australia's first Australian Hospital Ship (AHS) in 1940, being present during the first

bombing raids of Darwin in February 1942, to then becoming Matron (Lieutenant Colonel) at 113th AGH Concord in September 1945.

Clare Shumack's plaque in the Walkway's Memorial Rose Garden is located in the centre area, and briefly touches upon her service during the war. However, the story behind the plaque tells of a life devoted to medical care, often at great personal danger.



The plaque in the KTMW's Memorial Rose Garden honouring Clare Shumack.

Clara Jane Shumack was born on 17 June 1899 near Bathurst NSW, the eighth of eleven children. She chose a nursing career in Sydney, and became a registered nurse in November 1926. She worked in hospitals and private practice until late 1935, when she left for Europe on a working holiday.

Returning in 1937, she worked at St George Hospital, and began her military service in 1940, appointed as the first AANS Matron on the 2/1st AHS Manunda. Between her appointment and September 1941, the Manunda made four trips to the Middle East, caring for the sick and wounded from that theatre of war.



A.A. Form A 200.

AUSTRALIAN MILITARY FORCES

ATTESTATION FORM

FOR SPECIAL FORCES RAISED FOR SERVICE IN AUSTRALIA OR ABROAD.

Army No. NX70204

Surname SHUMACK Other Names Clara Jane

Unit A.A.S. attached Australian Hospital Ship Manunda

Enlisted for service at Victoria Barracks, Paddington (Place)

N.S.W. (State) 8.8.40 (Date)

A

Questions to be put to persons called out or presenting themselves for voluntary enlistment.*

1. What is your name? ... 1. Surname SHUMACK
2. Where were you born? ... 2. In or near the town of Bathurst
3. Are you a natural born or a naturalized British Subject? ... 3. Is the state or country of New South Wales
4. What is your age and date of birth? ... 4. Age 41 years
5. What is your trade or occupation? ... 5. Midwife from British subject
6. Are you married, single or widower? ... 6. Single
7. Give details of previous military service—
8. If now serving, give particulars—
9. Who is your actual next of kin? (Order of relation—
10. What is your permanent address? ...
11. What is your religious denomination? (This question

I, Clara Jane Shumack do solemnly declare that the above answers made by me to the above questions are true and that I am willing to serve in the Australian Military Forces within or beyond the limits of the Commonwealth.

Witnessed by E. Kearey (Signature of Attesting or Witnessing Officer) C. Shumack (Signature)

*The person will be warned that should he give false answers to any of these questions he will be liable to heavy penalties under the Defence Act.

National Archives of Australia NAA: B883, NX70204

Clare Shumack's photograph on enlistment and her enlistment papers. (source: NAA)



August 1940: Matron Shumack (left) onboard the Manunda with Matron E. Kearey, Principal Matron for the AANS in NSW. (AWM 002481)



A relaxed Clare on board the AHS Manunda prior to the horrors of Darwin. In picture on the left, Clare (far left) is in costume for a party in August 1941 (celebrating the first year of the Manunda's service as an AHS), and in the right, Clare sits with a crew member. (source: Territory Stories)



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

P04022.005

Some of the nursing staff aboard the AHS Manunda, prior to the bombing in Darwin Harbour. (AWM P04022.005)

In January 1942, the Manunda sailed for Darwin. However, following the surprise Japanese attack in Hawaii in December 1941 and the declaration of war against Allied nations, relentless Japanese victories in south-east Asia followed (Singapore fell just four days before the raids on Darwin). Japanese forces were moving towards the Australian mainland, and the threat of actual conflict against the seemingly invincible enemy was growing each week.

On 19 February 1942, the Manunda was in Darwin Harbour when the first Japanese air raid

occurred just before 10.00am that morning. Shumack and her fellow nursing staff were suddenly in the midst of a dangerous and unexpected situation. Despite being clearly marked as a hospital ship, the ship was hit several times with shrapnel from near misses. Then, a direct hit followed, destroying two decks and seeing crew being flung overboard followed by a fire. In total 12 crew and staff were killed, and 18 seriously wounded. One of the fatalities was Sister Margaret de Mestre, a 26 year old AANS member (the first AANS killed in World War II), while another nurse was seriously wounded.

Despite the chaos, fear and danger during the attack, Matron Shumack remained calm and efficiently supervised the nursing of the many injured and dying. In her report on the incident, Clare stated that ‘events were now forgotten temporarily in our efforts to relieve more wounded ... survivors from other ships ... the majority badly burnt and shocked and all were very brave’. As she and the nursing staff worked with the injured on board and those being brought aboard, Clare wrote that there was ‘ ... no thought of food ... to bed for 3 hours [but] no sleep’. Approximately 250 civilians and Allied personnel died on that day, while nine vessels in the harbour were sunk or grounded, and many others were damaged.

During and following the two raids (the second occurred just before midday), the Manunda took on board many injured sailors and crew from other ships that had also been hit. The following day, despite being heavily damaged with limited capacity for steering and navigation, the Manunda sailed for Fremantle (arriving safely eight days later) with dozens of wounded personnel from other ships and those on shore at the time.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL 126804

A graphic image of the moment the AHS Manunda is hit by a Japanese dive-bomber during the Darwin raid.
(AWM 126804)



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

P04022.004

The lounge on the AHS Manunda following the Japanese air raid on 19 February 1942. (AWM P004022.004)

Matron Shumack rejoined the Manunda (after undergoing repairs) in August 1942, when the ship sailed to Papua and New Guinea. She participated in a further 27 voyages to and from these destinations, again not without great risk.

On the Manunda's second voyage at this time, on 6 September 1942, the ship was berthed at Milne Bay when two Japanese warships entered the harbour under cover of darkness and proceeded to attack Allied ships. As usual, the ship was clearly lit and recognisable as a hospital vessel with its Red Cross insignia, but this time it was not hit. Bizarrely, the Japanese warships illuminated the Manunda with searchlights as patients were being transported from the shore in her lifeboats, and then fired over her to sink a British freighter. Recalling this incident later, Shumack was furious 'at the Japs for interrupting our work'. It was the second encounter with the enemy, but this time the Manunda escaped unharmed.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

026450

August 1942: A sight that would have been familiar to Matron Shumack and her fellow staff: the 2/1st AHS Manunda alongside the wharf at Port Moresby, being loaded with ill and wounded troops for evacuation back to mainland Australia. (AWM 026450)



September 1942: The corvette HMAS Bendigo transporting wounded and sick from the Kokoda Track from the wharf at Port Moresby to the AHS Manunda (in the right, background). Matron Shumack would have been on board for such transfers, and then supervising her nursing staff while traveling back to Australia. (AWM 026663)

In March 1943 Shumack was appointed Major (when ranks were first conferred upon AANS staff), and in April 1944 she was transferred to the 128th AGH in Port Moresby. Major Shumack continued her service in the AANS, but was herself a patient on the Manunda and then at 113th AGH Concord in August 1944, as a result of a skin infection, most likely from her time in the tropics.



Matron Shumack, together with others prepares to lay a wreath at the Cenotaph in Sydney in May 1943, following the sinking of the AHS Centaur by a Japanese submarine off the Brisbane coast. No doubt Clare's thoughts focused on the losses of her fellow service personnel, but also the near misses she and others encountered twice on the AHS Manunda.

(source: Clara Shumack: AHS Manunda and other times and places. John L. Forrest, p.91)

Clare was appointed acting Lieutenant Colonel in April 1945, substantively appointed to

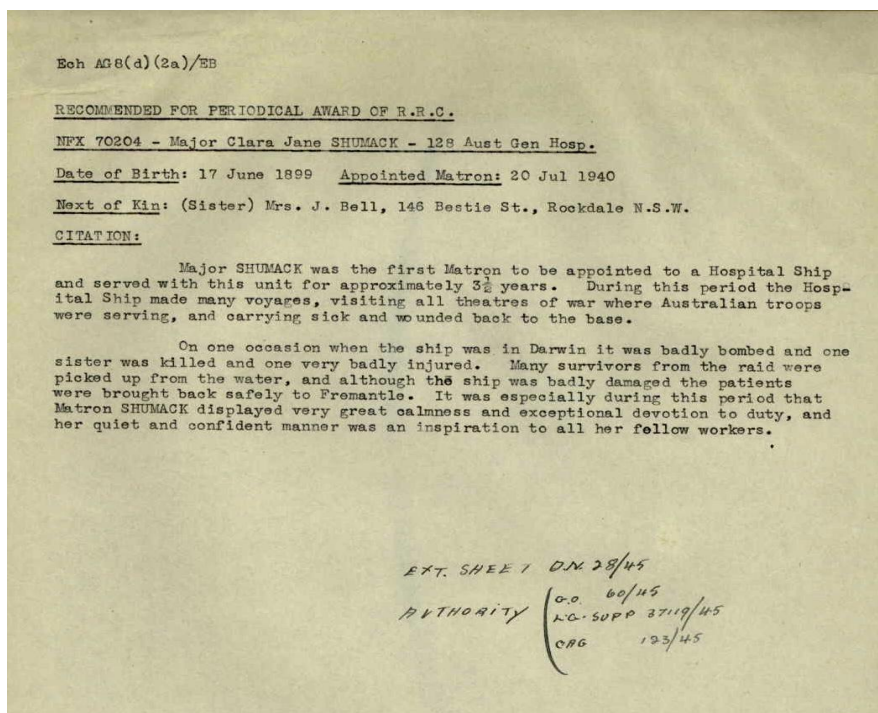
that rank in September of that year when she was appointed Matron of 113th AGH at Concord.

At Concord (always known as 'The Repat' among returned service personnel), LTCOL Shumack was responsible for 185 nursing sisters, and her arrival coincided with the arrival of repatriated Australian POWs from various locations across south-east Asia.

Meantime, in June 1945, Shumack was awarded the Royal Red Cross (RRC) 1st Class, a military decoration awarded for exceptional services for those in military nursing. In part, the commendation read that during the Darwin raid 'Major Shumack displayed very great calmness and exceptional devotion to duty, and her quiet and confident manner was an inspiration to all her fellow workers.' The decoration was widely publicised at the time, since it was rarely awarded, and only in exceptional circumstances.



Left, an image of the Royal Red Cross 1st Class. Left, a news article (14 June 1945) announcing Clare's Royal Red Cross in the 1945 King's Birthday Honours. (sources: Canadian War Museum; Trove)



An excerpt from Clare's recommendation for the Royal Red Cross (source: NAA)



The entrance to 113 AGH Concord shortly after its completion in 1942. (AWM 026546)

LTCOL Shumack remained as Matron at Concord until December 1946, and was discharged from the AANS in January 1947. Following her discharge, she continued her career in nursing, and served in hospitals at Lithgow (until mid-1954) and Bexley (until late 1958). In 1950 she became a foundation fellow of the College of Nursing Australia.

In retirement, Clare enjoyed classical music, and regularly marched in Anzac Day parades with fellow ex-staff and crew from the Manunda. She was a staunch royalist (like many of her generation), and was a fellow of the Royal Empire Society. Twice she met with royalty at garden parties, once with the newly crowned Queen Elizabeth in 1954, and again in 1958 when the Queen Mother toured Australia.

Locally, in recognition of her service, Clare had a street named after her in North Ryde (although it is mis-spelt as 'Schumack' Street).



A passport photo of Clare in the late 1950s (source: Clara Shumack: AHS Manunda and other times and places. John L. Forrest, p.115).

Like many other nurses, Shumack's wartime service was selfless, professional but not without personal risk during this period. And like so many others, after the war she chose to continue nursing, and to further contribute to that profession.

For over 30 years, Clare Shumack devoted her life to nursing, but it was her service during World War II that saw her steely but calm nature come to the fore. She was a natural leader, and her bravery on board the Manunda during the Darwin raids (and the awarding of the RRC) reflected an inclination to do her best no matter the situation, to care for others under extreme conditions without shirking her duty, but also to guide those under her to emulate those actions. Fellow Manunda nursing staff remembered her during the war as 'very regimental', 'strict' but 'often unbent afterwards', which summarises her life.

Clare Shumack died on 23 December 1974, aged 75 years.

Lest We Forget.

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