

A Woman At War: The Life And Times Of Dr Phoebe Chapple MM (1879-1967), An Australian Doctor On The Western Front

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Introduction

- Dr Phoebe Chapple was one of 15 Australian women doctors who undertook overseas military service during World War I.
- She was the first Australian, and the only female doctor, to receive the Military Medal – awarded for gallantry in the field.
- Despite multiple foreign awards, the military service of these women has been largely overlooked by their own country.
- The only other Australian female doctor to have been so honoured is Carol Vaughan-Evans who was awarded the Medal for Gallantry following the Rwandan Kibeho massacre in 2005.

Background

At the outbreak of World War I (WWI) female doctors were not universally accepted within the profession. The Australian Army, and initially the British War Office, saw no role for female medical officers and refused to entertain the idea of medical women serving in military hospitals. The Australian Army did not appoint a female medical officer until 1943.

Quite undeterred however, and determined to prove their medical skills, at least 15 of the 129 female doctors in Australia at the time found their way to European theatres of war. These women served with the Royal Army Medical Corps (RAMC) and with a variety of “All Women Medical Units” including the War Office-funded Endell Street Military Hospital in London and the Scottish Women’s Hospitals for Foreign Service¹. They served in France, Belgium, Greece, the Balkans and Egypt. They worked under harsh conditions, receiving casualties directly from the frontline. The conditions of their service and their prospects of recognition were however, quite different from those of their male counterparts.

This paper will discuss the wartime contribution of Dr Pheobe Chapple MM, the only Australian and the only woman doctor to be awarded a medal for gallantry during WWI. Her experiences reflect the social and historical circumstances of Australian and British society at the time. Despite numerous foreign awards, the service of Dr Chapple and other Australian women

doctors who undertook military service on the Western Front and elsewhere in Europe, has been overlooked in the official histories of WWI.

Early Years

Phoebe Chapple was born in Adelaide on 31 March 1879, and entered the University of Adelaide aged 16, graduating with bachelors degrees in science, surgery and medicine¹. She came from a privileged background; her father was the headmaster at Prince Alfred College, Adelaide, and five of her seven brothers



Figure 1. Dr Phoebe Chappel, Graduation photograph (courtesy of the State Library of South Australia).

and sisters held university degrees. After qualifying as a doctor, Phoebe sometimes visited her patients in a phaeton, driven by a liveried coachman². Despite this privilege, her career showed a determination for hard work ; she frequently treated the poor and disadvantaged, charging only minimal amounts.

Dr Chapple was actively involved in women's health issues and was appointed to the committee of the South Australian [Women's] Refuge in November 1912. In January 1917, Dr Chapple was called to give evidence in a coronial enquiry into the death of Eva Brokensha, a 33- year-old woman who had died of septicaemia following an illegal abortion by (a notorious and unregistered) Mr Francis Sheridan³. The Brokensha case brought Dr Chapple into the public limelight and revealed a defining trait ; Phoebe was untiring in her work, and entirely professional in the face of public scrutiny.

Outbreak of WWI

When war broke out in 1914, there were calls for volunteers, including appeals in the Medical Journal of Australia for doctors at the front. Phoebe wanted to contribute, but the Australian Army refused to appoint women as doctors. As a result, if Phoebe wanted to be an army doctor and serve with the Allies, she had to go to Britain. "It was an anxiety, leaving my father and mother, but they, unselfishly, urged me to go – and I felt that the larger duty did call me overseas,"⁴ she said.

By February 1917, 40,000 Australians had already died on the Western Front; many thousands more would die in the Battles of Bullecourt, Messines and Passchendaele that year. Frustrated with the Australian Army's refusal to appoint women doctors, she travelled at her own expense to England that month to enlist in the Royal Army Medical Corps (RAMC) where she was appointed as house surgeon to Cambridge Military Hospital in Aldershot with the honorary rank of Captain.

"It was a tremendous experience," she said of her time in Aldershot. "I was in the surgical wards in charge of every variety of war ailment and wound. The convoys arrived continually from France, and more than 1,000 patients were accommodated at this busy centre."⁴ Phoebe's work soon gained recognition and she was the first woman surgeon in the hospital to receive equal status to the men. As a doctor, Phoebe was entitled to officer status, although the British Army did not gazette her rank formally. This situation was common to all of the women doctors during WWI and would have significant consequences for recognition of their service in years to come. As Phoebe noted, "The old country is very conservative, and was only beginning

to consider this step when the armistice was signed."⁴

Later, she was attached to Queen Mary's Army Auxiliary Corps (QMAAC). As members of the QMAAC, women doctors examined the recruits, ran invaliding boards and were in charge of the health of serving women. Their uniforms were those of the nurses and many found it galling, resenting the fact that they were not gazetted with the RAMC. It is for this reason that Phoebe's service, along with that of some other women doctors, has incorrectly been reported as nursing service.

By late 1917, Britain accepted the need to send women to the Front. "In her hour of need, England accepted the offer of her women, and it was found that five women were equal to four men as regarded work,"⁵. It was never intended that women should go into the actual fighting line, but the boundaries between bases and battle zones soon became blurred.

Britain was also struggling to provide medical manpower to the Front and opened a route for women to serve in the European theatres. Chapple was one of the first two women doctors sent to the front, which she "regarded as an honor [sic] for Australia".²

In November 1917, Phoebe arrived in France and found herself in the "centre of the battle zone". The war was at a "terrible pitch", she recalled, with the threat of air raids every night. "They were the worst proposition, we felt so helpless to protect the wounded patients from such attacks. The women all behaved splendidly throughout that awful three months in 1918, when nearly every night bombs would be dropped somewhere in the locality."⁴

Bombardment and gallantry

On 29 May 1918, Chapple was inspecting a QMAAC Camp near Abbeville in France when it came under a German aerial bombing attack. Her actions that night were recognised with the award of the Military Medal (MM). Chapple was the first woman doctor and the first Australian woman to receive such an honour: "For gallantry and devotion to duty during an enemy [action]".²

At the time of the bombardment, she was almost eighteen months into her wartime service. Earlier that day, German planes had been seen overhead. QMAAC Camp 1 accommodated women serving with the Queen Mary's Army Auxiliary Corps, who were working at the British hospital in Abbeville, closely located to the 3rd Australian General Hospital (SAGH).

According to one historian, a lorry was set on fire, close to the camp and "by the light of the flames the Germans were able to drop three bombs."⁶ It is unclear whether the lorry was set on fire deliberately, or was

hit in an earlier raid, but the impact of the three bombs was devastating: one hit a trench where the women were sheltering.

In her account of the night, more than two and a half years later, Phoebe emphasised the practical over the personal. "I think when there are suffering and death at hand, fear absents itself," she said. "Fortunately, the construction of the trench was zig-zag, so the missile was limited in its effect... Out of 40 women, nine were killed outright and a number injured. There was much work to be done then, with limited means, to relieve the sufferers. Even telephone communication with headquarters was temporarily cut off. There were lots more raids, too."⁴

Eight of the nine women died outright; one died later of her wounds. Hampered by darkness and difficulty, and subject to yet more raids, Phoebe worked her way through the trench, tending to the wounded. Finally, at 2 o'clock in the morning, the administrator in charge of the section, a Miss E. Cross, called out the roll. A QMAAC historian wrote: "No-one who was there will ever forget the silence that was only broken by a little gasping sob from someone when a name was called and not answered"⁶

Phoebe was one of the fortunate. She had survived.

Recognition for Gallantry

Her actions that night, during and after the air raid, were soon recognised. She was awarded a Military Medal (MM) and was the first woman doctor to receive it². The citation reads: "For gallantry and devotion to duty during an enemy air raid. While the raid was in progress Doctor Chapple attended to the needs of the wounded regardless of her own safety."

While Phoebe expressed her surprise at the award, and sought to play down her involvement ("I had never looked at my work in that light"⁴), others became concerned, and even angry at the discrimination they felt she had received in not being awarded a Military Cross, which would have been more usual for an Officer.

The issue of Military Medals for female gallantry was contentious in WWI. Some felt that the Military Cross (MC) was appropriate but it was not agreed to as women did not hold commissions and were never formally gazetted as Officers. The award of Member of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire (MBE) was also considered for women but the criteria were broad and did not specifically recognise acts of gallantry. As a result, the relatively new Military Medal (MM) - instituted in 1916 - was agreed upon as an appropriate award for women who displayed "bravery and devotion under fire".⁷



Figure 2. Dr Phoebe Chapple's Medals including the Military Medal (courtesy of the Australian War Memorial).

This award was initially intended only for men but a supplementary warrant for the MM was quickly issued to recognise women three months later, "under exceptional circumstances, on the special recommendation of a Commander-in-Chief in the Field".²

In the supplementary warrant no restriction was made by nationality or service and the award was made open to foreign women.

A colleague of Chapple's from Adelaide, Dr Helen Mayo, was so incensed at what she saw as discrimination that she noted, many years later, that: "Had [Chapple] been an officer (and a man) she would have received the Military Cross."² Dr Mayo was herself a doctor and educator, specialising in infant health. Like Phoebe, she also pursued her career in Adelaide and sought to advance the status of women in terms of education, equality and opportunity.

For the entire period of WWI approximately 150,000 MMs have been awarded – women represent just 0.1% of that total, making them one of the most exclusive groups within the whole Honours system. The Military Cross was not awarded to a woman until 2006 when British Army medic Private Michelle Norris was recognised for acts of gallantry in the Middle East.

Post bombardment

After the events at the QMAAC camp, Phoebe went on to serve as a doctor with the Women's Auxiliary Army Corps in Rouen and Le Havre (now with rank of Major) until the end of the war. She returned to Adelaide in 1919 and resumed practice.

Dr Chapple also became involved in women's politics. Supported by the Women's Non-Party Association, she stood in Adelaide's municipal elections held in December 1919. In an editorial, the Advertiser newspaper commented on her suitability as a candidate: "She has a wonderfully good record in connection with the war, having displayed administrative talents which should enable her to render excellent service as a councillor if elected. Previous attempts to capture seats in the City Council for ladies have proved unsuccessful, but in principle there is nothing against them; on the contrary, a strong case can be made out in favour of utilising the special gifts of women."⁹ Voters disagreed, however. Phoebe was defeated.

It was the first and the last time that Phoebe stood for election. She remained committed to women's issues, and was an advocate for equality, but she preferred professional practice to politics. However, she continued to work towards removing professional barriers to women and became a founding member,

Dr. Phoebe Chapple Returns

IN addition to taking part in Coronation festivities and visiting clinics in different parts of Europe, Dr. Phoebe Chapple, who returned to Adelaide on Saturday, was also fortunate that her visit coincided with two important medical gatherings.

The first was the conference of women doctors under the auspices of the Medical Women's International Association. This was held at Edinburgh, and Dr. Chapple was the Australian delegate.



DR. PHOEBE CHAPPLE, who returned on Saturday from a seven-months' trip abroad.

"About 300 women from all parts of the world attended," said Dr. Chapple. "All papers were given in both English and French, and I have never known a more efficient secretary than the Englishwoman who translated so quickly from one language to the other. The American women were marvellous, as they not only did they prepare excellent papers (the subjects of the conference were cancer and maternal mortality), but they also illustrated each one with cinematograph films."

The second gathering was the annual meeting of the British Medical Association

at Belfast. Nothing which could have added to the comfort of the delegates had been omitted from the preparations. The congress badge was a free pass in the trams, and a special floor had been hired from London at a cost of £300 for the reception and dance in the King's Hall. This incidentally was left for the visit of the King and Queen a week later.

The idea of living on a vessel in port when accommodation is at a premium is evidently becoming popular, as between two and three hundred doctors stayed on the *Almansora* at Belfast, and then later went for a cruise to Norway, described by Dr. Chapple as the most beautiful country in the world.

While on the Continent, Dr. Chapple attended clinics at Berlin, Vienna, and Budapest. Budapest was looking particularly prosperous owing to the great popularity of its artificial baths for rheumatic cases, to which people were flocking from all parts of Europe, she said.

She was particularly impressed in Munich with a remarkable monument erected by Hitler to the 16 pioneers of the Nazi movement who were killed in the city square. It was in the form of a huge colonnade with the 16 coffins arranged in two rows at both sides of the centre archway. The guard of soldiers with reversed guns is changed every two hours, and every citizen gives the Nazi salute as he passes.

Dr. Chapple was one of the few South Australians to have a seat in the Abbey for the Coronation, a privilege for which she was nominated because of her war service. Every part of the ceremony, even that of the precedence of England's nobility and of the overseas representatives, was easy to follow with the aid of the imposing book, bound in cream calf and embossed in gold with the royal coat of arms, which was given to each person in the Abbey. "Barley sugar and cheese" was Dr. Chapple's answer when asked how she survived without food for the many hours of waiting both before and after the actual ceremony.

Most of Dr. Chapple's time in England was spent with her three brothers: Mr. Alfred Chapple and Mr. Ernest Chapple, in Cambridge, and Dr. Harold Chapple, a Harley street specialist. Among the many other South Australians she met was Mr. Stanley Newman, at one time a master at Prince Alfred College, when Dr. Chapple's father was headmaster, and later a well known operative singer. Two of Mr. Newman's sons entered the Air Force, but one was killed in Arabia almost two years ago.

and later President, of the South Australian Medical Women's Society. She also held the role of honorary doctor at the Salvation Army maternity hospital for unmarried mothers from 1910 to around 1940.

Her work also demonstrated an ongoing interest in the 'underbelly' of Adelaide society: as a doctor trusted by the courts, she was called to give evidence in cases involving backstreet abortion and police violence. From 1921 to 1922 she also worked as an Honorary Medical Officer in the night clinic at the Adelaide Hospital, where she treated women with venereal disease, which had become a significant post-war health issue¹⁰.

Phoebe cherished her independence, making six overseas trips during her career in an era when international travel was difficult and arduous. In 1953, she was invited to the Queen's Coronation Ceremony held at Westminster Abbey. She also attended the Medical Women's International Association Conference in Edinburgh and visited clinics in Berlin, Vienna and Budapest¹¹.

Phoebe continued to work from her private practice in Norwood, in Adelaide's eastern suburbs, until she was 85. Her later life was marked by involvement in organisations committed to women's welfare, but she received little acknowledgement in the press. Although her life and work were largely defined by her wartime service, she preferred to play down her experiences. She marched each year on Anzac Day, ironically at the head of the nursing units.

Phoebe Chapple died on March 24, 1967 and was cremated with full military honours. Unmarried and with no children, her estate helped to fund a bursary at St Ann's College at the University of Adelaide¹⁰.

Dr Chapple was not the only Australian woman doctor to serve in uniform during WWI, but her service is unique. Until Captain Carol Vaughan Evans was awarded the Gallantry Medal in 2005 following her actions in Rwanda at the Kibeho massacre, Phoebe remained the only Australian woman doctor recognised for gallantry in the field, under fire. As the centenary of ANZAC nears, it is appropriate that Australia recognises the military service of Dr Chapple and her female colleagues who undertook service in military medicine during WWI.

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Figure 3. Dr Phoebe Chapple returns. Adelaide Advertiser, Monday 18th October 1937, p6.

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