

Lyllis Rigby

Julia Lyllis Rigby became a nurse after she left school, and family members think that she may have completed her training at the Brisbane Hospital on Bowen Bridge Road in 1908. By 1913 she was working as a nurse at Rockhampton, and in 1914 she was appointed matron of Stanthorpe Hospital, after having been selected for the post from 34 applicants. After the war had started, she began to consider the possibility of joining the Australian Army Nursing Service (AANS).

We know that Lyl spent some time thinking about this, as Jack and George had both written comments on their postcards trying to dissuade her from joining the AANS. On one postcard that Jack had sent to Lyl from Mena Camp in Cairo, on 24 January 1915, he had written: *"I suppose you are now a lady at large, don't get the Army Nursing Craze, it is no place for a lady."* One week later, on yet another postcard that Jack sent to her, George had added a brief but blunt comment: *"Lyl, don't come over here."* Their concerns may have reflected a view that women were being treated poorly in Cairo, possibly by soldiers from the various camps as well as by local Egyptian men.



Above: Julia Lyllis Rigby, Australian Army Nursing Service.

Lyl was not to be put off. Despite learning that Jack had been killed and George had been severely wounded at Gallipoli, she joined the AANS on 15 July 1915 and then spent nearly two years working at the 6th Australian General Hospital at Kangaroo Point. She later transferred to the Australian Nursing Service, India, and on 21 May 1917 she signed the Attestation Papers that allowed her to serve overseas. Two days before this, on Saturday 19 May, between 80 and 90 people attended a farewell event held for her at the Yeronga Hall, where she was presented with a military suitcase and a travelling rug. On 26 May she embarked at Sydney on the RMS *Khiva*, which then berthed at Melbourne to take on board more nurses from Victoria.

Lyl sent postcards home from Colombo in Ceylon, where the ship had presumably docked to take on coal and water. The nurses were allowed ashore and rushed about sightseeing and shopping. They next arrived at Bombay in India, towards the end of June, where they were again allowed off the ship for at least one day, to purchase things that were needed for their posting, prior to disembarking.

On a postcard that Lyl sent on 23 June, featuring a picture of the Taj Mahal Hotel, she wrote the following:

Dear Old Father, Have just heard it's the very best part of India that we go to tomorrow, so will write & tell you all about it next mail – will be glad to settle down – Hope you are feeling quite well, Father, and that everything is alright. Heaps of love from Lyllis.

And on another postcard that she sent on the same day to her sister, Ethel, she wrote:

Dear Ethel, Just back from a shopping expedition, buying sheets etc for our mountain home – takes 10 people to sell a cake of soap here – Brisbane and quietness for me – Am longing for news, Ethel. Heaps of love from Lyllis.

EXCITEMENT IN COLOMBO:



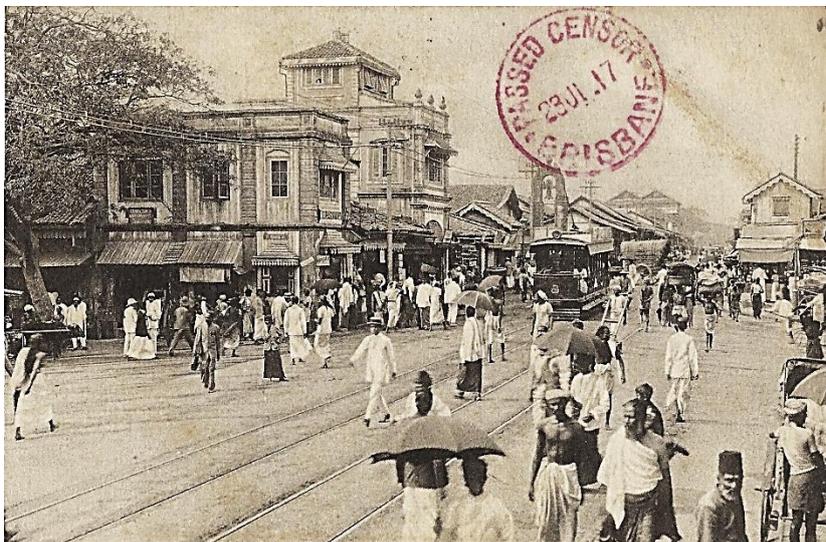
At left: On the reverse of this postcard showing Baillie Street in Colombo, sent by Lyl in 1917 to her brother George and posted to Wills Gilchrist Ltd. in Wharf Street in Brisbane, she wrote the following: *“Oh George, this is a Scream of a place, isn’t it? Major Adler took four of us everywhere yesterday – poor man is dead beat today – he had to initiate us into the Ceylon money, know it all now – Am writing – Heaps of love, Lyllis.”*

Right: Lyl posted this card depicting the Galle Face Hotel in Colombo to her father, writing the following on the reverse side: *“This is the Galle Face Hotel where we did most of our shopping yesterday, had all day in Colombo & today too – It’s a marvelous place – I wish you could all be here – the heat was dreadful though – all went & bought the largest helmets in the market – writing later. Heaps of love from Lyllis.”*



On the back of another postcard from Lyl, sent to her sister Ethel at home in Yeronga, she wrote:

“Sunday 7 am, Just going to swallow a bite of breakfast & McLean & I are off to the town again to get some snapshots – we were too busy staring & gaping yesterday to get any – Hope you got my cable yesterday. Do wish you were here, Ethel. Heaps of love from Lyllis.”



Left: On the reverse of this postcard that Lyl sent to her mother, showing Kayman’s Gate, Pettah, she wrote the following: *“Oh of all the days, yesterday was the funniest – went scooting everywhere, first in rickshaws, then to Victoria’s – This is just like Colombo on this card, only you can’t imagine the wonderful colouring & costumes – No cable yet but still hope, Heaps of love, Lyllis.”*

Lyl disembarked at Bombay from the *Khiva* on 24 June, and on the same day she was posted to duty at the 34th Welsh General Hospital at Deolali. She may have been serving on the staff of Miss Alma Bennett, whose team replaced British nursing staff at No. 34 WGH at Deolali at about this time. Deolali was situated in high country, about four hours inland from Bombay by train. This hospital was housed in stone bungalows that had originally been built as barracks. Casualties were brought in from Mesopotamia, and these also included a number of Turkish Prisoners of War. There were more than 2000 patients at Deolali in September 1917, but only around 59 Australian nurses and 15 Indian temporary nurses were working on the staff.

More than 500 Australian nurses served in India between 1916 and 1919. Most of these nurses had expected to serve in India for only a limited time, to gain experience before moving closer to active fronts. They worked in hospitals across India, Burma, and Southern Persia but, in India at least, they were not considered to be on active service. A common desire among the Australian nurses was to work closer to the front lines of the war, to be under Australian administration, and to tend primarily to Australian casualties, but for most of them it was not to be. There was also confusion about where the legal responsibility for the Australian nurses lay, and they suffered ongoing problems related to pay issues and, for a while at least, had income tax imposed on them by the Indian Government. The nurses were also forced to pay for their own railway fares while on leave, although these were free to the nurses who were working in Mesopotamia or on the hospital ships. These nurses were treated as if they were permanently employed by the Indian Government, but they actually received lower salaries and fewer benefits than those granted to members of the Indian Nursing Service. The Australian nurses also found that their uniforms were too heavy for the heat of India, and so many of the nurses bought additional light dresses locally from their own money.²⁰

On 8 September 1917 Lyl was posted to the British hospital ship, *HS Herefordshire*, which at last gave her the opportunity to be classed as being on active service. This ship mostly operated between the Persian Gulf and India and it served in this role between 25 July 1916 and January 1918. The staff on board consisted of 7 British officers and a Warrant Officer, 10 nurses and sisters, and 43 other medical staff and orderlies. It provided accommodation for up to 50 sick or wounded British officers, and 230 cots and 100 berths for other ranks. The heat and the monsoonal weather created unpleasant conditions for everyone on board, and because of the threat of enemy attack the protective scuttles often remained closed, further reducing the flow of ventilation. The staff regularly carried patients up to the deck at night, to try to alleviate heat stress.²¹



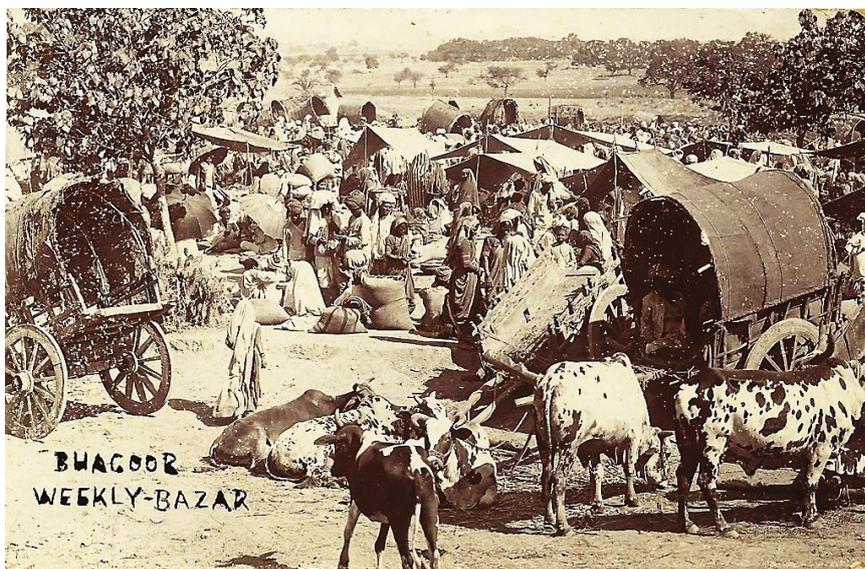
Above: A photographic postcard sent home to Yeronga by Lyllis Rigby. She wrote on the back the following: “*The Good Ship “Herefordshire”*”. From L. to R. – C. of E. Padre, Barry [nurse], Chief Officer, Warren [nurse], Capt. Milne.”

POSTCARDS FROM DEOLALI:



Above: A postcard showing an Officer's Mess at Deolali in India, sent by Lyl to her brother, George. On the reverse she writes: "Dear George, this is the typical Indian home – our mess is just the same, only a vivid green. Business is very slack at present and very dull – would love to be right up at the Front. Hope you are all well at home, Love to you and Marjorie, Lyllis."

Right: A postcard that Lyl sent home to Yeronga, showing the Deolali Railway Station.



Left: In September 1917 Lyl sent this postcard of the Bhagoor Weekly Bazaar to her youngest brother, Hubert. On the reverse she writes: "Dear Hub, Our Bazaar! How do you like the quadrupeds? Those spots are dabs of coloured paint [on the cows] – Have been offered a bike to ride while I'm here – fancy me! Heaps of Love, Lyllis."

Lyl was transferred to duty at the Colaba War Hospital in Bombay on 9 January 1918. It was probably here that she met Sydney Henry Woolf, who was serving as a Captain in the Indian Army, and they married on 10 July of that year. Married women were not accepted into the services at that time, and as such Lyl had to resign her appointment in the Australian Imperial Force on the day before her marriage. They nonetheless remained in India until April 1919, where Captain Woolf's services were still required.



Above right: The Royal Bombay Yacht Club. Lyl posted this card to her father on 9 February 1918, and wrote: "This is where we are often asked to dinner, quite the best place in Bombay – all military people belong to the Club. Love, Lyllis."

The withdrawal of Australian nurses from India at the end of the war became problematic, in that fighting had broken out at the North-West Frontier against Afghanistan and the Indian Government had wanted to keep Australian nurses in service. Most nurses managed to return to Australia by the end of 1919, but many missed out on the tributes and parades that were offered to returning soldiers.

On 15 April 1919 Lyl and Sydney left India on board the *Erinpura*, which served as a hospital ship from 1st May 1916 until June in 1919. It accommodated up to 475 sick and wounded men in cots, and it is likely that this voyage served to repatriate both medical staff and casualties from India back to England. On 14 April Lyl sent a last postcard from Bombay to her mother and the family in Yeronga, on which she wrote the following:

Darling Old Lady and all, Well, we're off early tomorrow morning by the "Erinpura" – Had a fiendish day dashing about after passports, etc – We're dining with Mr. Gorrie tonight – will be very Sea-Sick tomorrow I expect – Writing again from Suez – Goodbye to India – Heaps of love to all from both [of us], Lyllis.

The *Erinpura* docked at Marseilles in France, and on 4 May 1919 the couple took a train from there to Le Havre in the north of France, and then made their way to England. On the train journey Lyl had written another postcard, addressed to her father, which read:

Very many happy returns of today – It's hard to write on board the troop train, left Marseilles for Havre this morning – Heaps of love from Lyllis.

On 19 July 1919 Lyl's first and only child, John Herbert Cosmo Woolf, later known to the family as Jimmy, was born at the Dumfries Hotel in Cardiff, Wales. The couple soon moved again, home to Yeronga in Brisbane, but their relationship failed and Sydney Woolf eventually left Australia. Their son, Jimmy, suffered badly from epilepsy. He spent most of his short life living as a patient at the Goodna Mental Hospital, where Lyl would visit him regularly. Jimmy died from an epilepsy attack on 20 August 1942, aged 23. During the Second World War, shortly after Jimmy had died, the US Army's 42nd General Hospital took over part of that Goodna Mental Hospital to care for up to 35 of their own patients.

Lyl spent much of the rest of her life living at the family home at Shottery Street in Yeronga, and she never married again. Judith Smith remembered her as being a quiet but industrious woman who enjoyed reading. She added that Lyl had spent long hours, several times a week, helping out at the Red Cross Café in the city during the Second World War. As Mrs L. Woolf she was also an active fundraiser in her capacity as secretary of the Ex-Brisbane General Hospital Nurses' Group. She was similarly active as a vice-president of the Social Club for Nurses, which formed in 1946.

Gordon Rigby

Gordon Alexander Rigby attended Brisbane Grammar School from 1912 to 1914, after which he started working as a clerk with Queensland Trustees Ltd. He was keen at sports and particularly enjoyed tennis and cricket, and played both sports for many years. He also served in the Senior Cadets for four years. Gordon enlisted in the Army on 30 August 1916, at the age of eighteen years and eight months. He was described as being five feet six and a half inches tall, had fair complexion, blue eyes, and light brown hair.

Gordon was initially posted to the 11th Depot Battalion at Enoggera on 4 October 1916. He was then briefly posted to the 42nd Battalion (5th Reinforcements), and later attended Corporals School until 22 November. From there he was posted to the Machine Gun Reinforcements, after which he was ranked as a Gunner. His next posting was to the field artillery depot section, and on 2nd February 1917 he was posted to the Field Artillery.



Above: Gordon Alexander Rigby.

On 21 July 1917 Gordon boarded the HMAT A29 *Suevic*, bound for England. What should have been an exciting voyage for him became decidedly less so when he came down with the mumps, and he consequently spent time in the ship's hospital. After disembarking at Liverpool on 26 August, he was sent to the Reserve Brigade Australian Artillery at Larkhill in Wiltshire for further training. He transferred to the Australian General Base Depot at Rouelles in France on 7 November and soon joined the 1st Division Artillery. His active service finally began on 12 November 1917 when he became a Gunner with the 101st Australian (Howitzer) Battery, serving in Belgium and France.

Gordon served for nearly a year before he received leave to holiday in England on 5 November 1918, and the war ended while he was in the UK. He returned to his unit in France, but soon found that returning to Australia would take some time. On 26 April 1919 he left the 1st Australian Field Artillery Brigade and moved to the 2nd Australian Division Base Depot at Le Havre. He left France on 5 May, just one day after his sister Lyllis had boarded the troop train at Marseilles for Le Havre, and from there went to Southampton. On 26 June he boarded the *Konig Friedrich August*, disembarking at Sydney on 10 August. He was discharged from the AIF in Brisbane on 10 September 1919.

Gordon returned to his job at Queensland Trustees and was appointed as their area manager at the Townsville office from 1939 to 1949. During World War II he became the Honorary Secretary of the RAAF Recruiting Committee in Townsville. He married his secretary, May Mellick, on 15 October 1949 at the Sacred Heart Cathedral in Townsville, and the couple soon transferred south to live once again at Yeronga in Brisbane. They lived in Lake Street, not far from the Yeronga Railway Station and near to where Gordon grew up. Gordon retired early from Queensland Trustees due to ill health, and the family thinks that he and May then owned a fish shop, for a short time, at Chardon's Corner in Annerley.

Gordon died from heart failure on 23 January 1969, aged 71, and was survived by his wife May. The couple had no children.

After the war

The period following the end of the First World War was an emotional time. Soldiers were returning home, many wounded and scarred, and the agony of not knowing what had happened to many of those that didn't return caused lingering sadness and anxiety. Local people nonetheless celebrated the return of the troops, and at Yeronga Memorial Park an avenue of trees was planted to commemorate local soldiers who had died. Julia Rigby was part of a local group of women who had advocated for the creation of Honour Avenue, and on 15 September 1917 she planted the first tree in memory of her son, Jack. She and her husband, William Alfred Rigby, also supported the creation of the local RSL in the years following the war.

William Alfred Rigby died of throat cancer in May 1922 and is buried at the Dutton Park Cemetery. Julia Rigby afterwards had a smaller home built on what had formerly been the family tennis court, at the corner of Shottery and Kadumba Streets, and in 1924 the original family home, *Rawene*, was sold. In 1969 it was bought by the Mackenzie family who converted it into a Reception House. It was called the *Golden Pyramid* and it operated successfully for around four years. Dalgetys Ltd. bought the house in 1973 as a city retreat for their graziers. Later that year a mini tornado swept through Yeronga and damaged the property beyond repair. A block of units, named *Shottery Gardens*, was later built on the site. In a sad twist, George Rigby's family had arranged for their collective family to have dinner at the *Golden Pyramid* on its last night, but George was rushed to hospital two days before and the dinner was cancelled.

Lyl lived with her mother at this new family home, and as a trained nurse she was a great help to her in later years. Julia Rigby died in 1952, aged ninety-four, and was buried in the same grave as her husband. Their son, Lieutenant Jack Rigby, is also remembered on their headstone.

Lyl inherited the family home but later sold it, moving briefly to Tarragindi before purchasing a permanent home at 2 Tees Street, Yeerongpilly. She shared this house with her brother, Hub, and after George's wife Edith died, he also moved in to live with his siblings. Lyl died in 1966, leaving Hub and George to share the house together.

Ethel had married an Englishman, William Reginald Cave, at Yeronga in 1924. The Cave family were well known to the Rigby family; Jack and George had visited them in Melbourne on their way to Egypt, and William Cave had previously been married to Ethel's cousin, Frances Pearson, in New Zealand. William and Frances had two children, but Frances had died in 1918 at the Blue Mountains in NSW. Ethel never had children of her own but after marrying William she became stepmother to his children. They lived for a time in Sydney, but spent most of their lives living in Melbourne. William Cave, known as Reg to the family, was outgoing, friendly, and popular. He had worked in insurance his whole life and had retired at the top of his profession, managing both the Australian and New Zealand operations of the North British and Mercantile Insurance Company Ltd. and the Insurance Office of Australia Ltd. For all of that, he was fun and was liked for his "cheerful boyishness".²² Ethel eventually died of heart failure in 1957 at their home in Kooyong in Melbourne, aged 69, and Reg died 11 years later.

Hubert Stanley Rigby was at the time too young to serve in the Army and therefore missed service during the First World War. He spent only one year at Brisbane Grammar School, in 1915, but then finished his education at the Central Technical College. He spent a number of years in the Militia prior to the outbreak of the Second World War, and then enlisted for service on 3 November 1939.

Hub became a Bombardier with the Anti-Tank Regiment. He was sent to Officers Training School at Holdsworthy in New South Wales, trained at an Artillery Course, and was promoted to Lieutenant on 1st July 1940. He embarked on the *Orontes* at Sydney with the 1st Anti-Tank Regiment and then underwent further training at Larkhill in England. Hub was subsequently wounded in Greece on 12 April 1941, and he seems to have also suffered the effects of shell shock. He spent time in hospital before being returned to Australia on the S.S. *Dorset* in April 1942. Hub was then appointed to Adjutant Camp Staff at Enoggera Barracks, but he was eventually declared medically unfit. He was transferred to the Retired List in July 1944.

Hub was very good with leatherwork and woodwork, and was also talented with pencil drawings, which he may have initially taken up as part of his rehabilitation from injury. He was noted in the family for making quality inlaid wooden boxes, small chests of drawers, and other items. Hub eventually gave up work and retired on a T.P.I. Pension. He died in August 1969, just six months after the death of Gordon.



Above: Hubert Stanley Rigby as a young man.

The last direct family link to the First World War ended when George Rigby died on 9 September 1973. He was also the last in this family branch to carry the Rigby surname.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to acknowledge the invaluable assistance and support given by the late Judith Smith, who was a daughter of George Henry Rigby. I met Judith a couple of times during the 1990s to discuss our common Mitchell family history. She was a dedicated family historian who collected, collated and preserved much of the Rigby history and memorabilia, and she was most generous with the help that she gave to me. Much of Judith's material was later bequeathed to her daughter, Noelene Blatch, who has been similarly generous in allowing fresh access to Judith's records. I sincerely thank Noelene for allowing her photographs, postcards and other material to be presented in this article, and for her assistance in preparing this material.

I would like to acknowledge the work of Keith McPhee, who has provided background information about many of the returned veterans on the *Discovering Anzacs* website. This material has been of great benefit to me, especially his entry for Gordon Rigby, who left us with little personal information in the way of postcards and letters.

I would also like to acknowledge members of the Yeronga-Dutton Park RSL Sub Branch who have been supportive both in telling the story of Jack Rigby and in helping to secure the naming of Rigby Place at Heritage Close in Yeronga. In particular I offer my thanks to Ruby Luder, who as a former secretary of the RSL gave early support to promoting Jack's story; to Brenda Christiansen; and to Ross Wiseman, who as President also attended the unveiling of Rigby Place.

I offer my thanks to Vivien Harris, the Archivist at Brisbane Grammar School, for supplying a copy of the *Brisbane Grammar School Magazine* from August 1915 and for allowing access to school records.

I'd also like to thank the team at *LifeStoryPresents* for their generous effort in making restored copies of Rigby family postcards and photographs. This article has been a beneficiary of their work.

Lastly, I owe a debt of gratitude to Stephen Sheaffe of the Annerley Stephens History Group for his early support of this project, and for his many suggestions in helping to edit the final draft.

Endnotes

20. Jan Bassett, *Guns and Brooches – Australian Army Nursing from the Boer War to the Gulf War*, Oxford University Press Australia, 1992. Refer to Chapter 4: Outposts of the empire; India and Salonika, pp 74 to 90.
21. Kirsty Adams, *Red Reflections on the Sea: Australian Army Nurses serving at Sea in World War 1*, as published in the *Journal of Australian Naval History Vol.6 No.2*, 2009; refer to the section titled Persian Gulf Service, page 65.
22. Much of this material about the family comes directly from Judith Smith's own memoirs. The specific comment about Reg Cave's enthusiasm was taken from the *Australian Insurance and Banking Record* of 21 June 1947, on the occasion of Reg Cave's retirement.