STORIES FROM THE ARCHIVES:

GRACE FIASCHI (née THOMPSON): WORLD WAR I NURSE

Grace Thompson was one of more than 3,000 Australian civilian nurses who volunteered for active service during World War I. Grace's story has links with our College and our city.

The Thompsons were from Aberdeenshire, in Scotland, but Grace was born in Benalla, Victoria, where her father was the Principal of Dookie Agricultural College. She was born on 13 October 1888, the same year that PLC Sydney was founded. The family moved to Sydney in 1891. Grace was one of eight children and she and her four sisters all attended the College. Indeed, descendants of the Thompson family have been PLC pupils as recently as 2011. Grace had a twin brother, Frank Low Thompson, who served as Chairman of our College Council from 1931 to 1974. Three of her sisters taught at Branxton. So, a family well-imbued with the Black Watch tartan!

Grace attended Mrs Morgan's School near her home in Burwood until she was enrolled at PLC Sydney in October 1904, shortly before her 16th birthday. Her school career here was short and we only know, thanks to the *Aurora Australis*, that she was a member of the Student Christian Union.[1] She left PLC in 1905.

Four years later, in 1909, Grace began nursing training at Royal Prince Alfred Hospital, then known only as Prince Alfred Hospital. At that time the nursing course was a four-year program and nurses lived on the hospital premises. First year students had to pay for their uniforms and, although they did some work on the wards, they received no pay. From a monthly wage of 13s.4d. in second year, their pay gradually increased to £2 in their final year. They had only one day off each month. By 1911 Grace was a Ward Nurse and her certificate was granted in April 1913.[2]

Nurses in training at Prince Alfred Hospital, 1911.
Grace Thompson is inthe middle row, 4th from the left.
Photo: Royal Prince Alfred Hospital Museum.

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[1] *Aurora Australis* March 1905.
[2] Royal Prince Alfred Hospital Museum.

Soon after the hostilities of World War I started in early August 1914, young Australian men signed up for the army. Most of these soldiers were sent first to Egypt where they trained to fight against the Turks to protect British interests in the Middle East and the Suez Canal.

Grace Thompson, 26 and single, joined the Australian Army Nursing Service (AANS) as a Staff Nurse and embarked on the HMAS *Kyarra* on 28 November 1914 bound for Egypt. According to the Nominal Roll, her religion was Presbyterian and her salary was £60 p.a.[3] On the long voyage she and the other nurses were kept busy assisting with vaccinations and operations and training male orderlies. Grace served with the 2nd Australian General Hospital, which had been established in Mena House, a former royal hunting lodge in Cairo (now a resort with easy access for visiting the Pyramids at Giza). Once the ill-fated Gallipoli campaign started on 25 April 1915, this hospital was soon overcrowded with wounded soldiers and the medical staff worked around the clock.

Thompson family history tells us that Nurse Thompson contracted mumps while in Egypt and subsequently undertook nursing duties on the *Runic* back to Australia. Back home, however, she did not resign from the AANS but rather embarked on the HMAT *Orsova* on 29 July 1916, this time with the higher rank of "Sister", to serve with the 14th Australian General Hospital in Abbassia, a neighbourhood in Cairo.[4]

Nurse Grace Thompson during World War I. Photo: Betty Davis (née Thompson)

Working in this hospital Grace would have been exposed to the horrors of war – soldiers suffering from savage wounds, missing limbs, shell-shock, mustard gas and more. It is also likely that in her time off she and other nurses enjoyed excursions, on camel, to the nearby Pyramids. These experiences were life-changing and fostered a more worldly view in women of Grace's generation.

At some point in 1916 Nurse Thompson was transferred to England, where she met Piero Francisco Fiaschi, a Lieutenant-Colonel in the Australian Army Medical Corps who had served in Egypt, Gallipoli and France before his posting in England. Dr Fiaschi was born in Windsor, NSW, but his family was from Florence, Italy. His father, Thomas, was also a medical practitioner. Grace and Piero were married on 31 January 1917 at All Souls Parish Church, Marylebone, London.[5]

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[3] Australian War Memorial.

[4] Ibid.

[5] "Fiaschi, Thomas Henry (1853-1927)", *Australian Dictionary of Biography*.

Marriage meant the end of Grace's career as a nurse, both within and outside the military. After the war the Fiaschis lived in a three-storey home in Darling Point. Dr Fiaschi established a successful medical practice in Phillip Street and was Clinical Assistant at nearby Sydney Hospital from 1936 to 1946. He also held a number of medical appointments in the militia.[6]

According to Grace's niece Betty Davis (née Thompson), a PLC student from 1932 to 1938, there were always great birthday parties at Darling Point for cousin Katherine, the Fiaschi's daughter. "Auntie Grace was a large woman, always well dressed, and she had a sense of humour," Betty recalls[7]. She was also a great reader and when she visited her brother and other family members at Branxton, Strathfield, she always took books to share with them. Grace's main concerns were running the home and attending to family needs.

Grace's husband died in 1948, having been badly burned when a spirit stove he was lighting exploded[8]. Subsequently Grace lived with her daughter and son-in-law in Wahroonga. She died of renal cell carcinoma in October 1959, aged 71.[9]

There is a postscript to the story of Nurse Grace. Those familiar with the bronze sculpture *Il Porcellino* (the piglet) located in front of Sydney Hospital in Macquarie Street will be interested to learn of its link with our former student Grace Horwood Fiaschi (née Thompson). The sculpture was a gift to the City of Sydney by Dr Piero Fiaschi's sister, Marchesa Fiaschi Torrigiani, who donated it in 1968 as a memorial to her father, Thomas, and her brother, Piero, who both had associations with the hospital. It is a replica of one in Florence, Italy, made by sculptor Pietro Battiste Tacca around 1633. Visitors are encouraged to donate coins in the little pond at the boar's feet to assist the operations of Sydney's oldest hospital – and to rub its nose for good luck!

Il Porcellino, Macquarie Street, Sydney.
Photo: Jamie Williams for City of Sydney

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[6] Ibid.
[7] Interview with Betty Davis (née Thompson), 24 May 2016.
[8] Obituaries Australia.
[9] Death Certificate, Office of Births, Deaths and Marriages.
All other information from PLC Sydney Archives Series 18 Ex-Students Box 182.