

Alice Emily Linfield, and her wartime career in Queen Alexandra's Imperial Military Nursing Service



by Malcolm Linfield

Alice Emily Linfield, known in the family as 'Allie', was born in Worthing on 21 June 1887, second daughter of Arthur George Linfield and his wife Edith (née Young), who were married in 1883. Arthur was a pioneer of the Worthing Glasshouse Industry, and the family lived in a house at the front of Bridge Nurseries in Chesswood Road.

Allie had an older sister and five brothers, and as a child was something of a 'tomboy', preferring to play with her brothers in the rough and tumble games they used to devise for their amusement. One particularly dangerous activity involved hanging down from Ham Bridge and dropping green apples down the funnel of any passing steam engine – the possible consequences don't bear thinking about! On another occasion, her mother reprimanded her for digging a hole in the garden whilst wearing her best dress; when she came back later on, Allie was as naked as the day she was born, still digging, with her clothes neatly folded in a pile on the ground!



Fig. 1 Alice Emily Linfield as a child of eight (about 1895).
 (Family Collection)

Allie was a very determined young woman, and in 1912 she decided she would like to become a nurse. Her father was completely against it and they had a vociferous argument. Allie got her way, of course, and on 8 October 1912, she commenced training at King's College Hospital in London, one of the premier teaching hospitals. She started at the



Fig. 2 The newly built King's College Hospital, Denmark Hill, in 1913. Alice has marked the location of her bedroom with a cross. (Family Collection)

original hospital in Portugal Street, before moving to its new location at Denmark Hill, which was officially opened by King George V on 26 July 1913. She spent three years at King's, where she received a thorough education in medical care and nursing. After 1914, much of the hospital was requisitioned for military use and the increasing number of casualties necessitated the erection of huts and tents in nearby Ruskin Park. During training, Allie dealt

with a couple of typhoid cases, caused by food and water contamination in the poor sanitary conditions of the trenches. Flies could also transmit the disease when moving from infected faeces onto food. However, mass immunisation of British troops ensured that typhoid did not become a major killer.

Allie finished her training at King's on 16 October 1915. As a fully qualified staff nurse, she applied to join the Queen Alexandra Imperial Military Nursing Service (QAIMNS) as a reserve. The QAIMNS was the regular establishment of military

nurses serving as part of the British Army. Selection was strict, although standards were relaxed after 1914 as the demands of war dictated. Applicants had to be women between the ages of 25 and 35, well-educated and with three years training in an approved hospital. Allie was educated at Lyndale College and the Steyne School, in Worthing. They must also have good social connections, and the application form requests the 'name and address of one lady, not a member of your own family' for a reference. Miss Louise Holbrook of Manchester, daughter of family friend Edward Holbrook, Wholesale Fruit and Flower Salesman of Smithfield Market, was Allie's choice. Another reference was to be obtained from the Matron under whom they trained. Her Matron at King's College Hospital was a Miss Ray. Allie was informed on 17 December 1915 that she had been accepted, and was sent to the Lord Derby War Hospital at Warrington, where she joined the service on 4 January 1916.

What made her join? This is a difficult question to answer. The outbreak of war and the desire to become fully involved, by using her training to help the thousands of injured soldiers coming back from the western front, all must have been factors in Allie's decision. Perhaps another important reason was the death of her younger brother Harold at Aubers Ridge in May 1915.

The Lord Derby War Hospital was situated on the Winwick Rectory estate at Warrington, in Lancashire. The buildings of the Lancashire County Asylum were taken over to provide more than 2,000 beds, making it one of the largest military hospitals in the UK. From June 1916, it was also used for



Fig. 3 A group of nurses and patients at Lord Derby's War Hospital on the Winwick Rectory estate at Warrington, c.1916. Alice is seated in the middle row, on the right of the man with the walking stick. (Family Collection)

mental patients (with 1,000 beds). Over 56,000 wounded soldiers were treated there between 1915 and 1920, before it resumed its previous role as an asylum in 1921.¹ Allie was good at her job, and was soon promoted to 'Sister', the equivalent of officer status in the QAIMNS.

Allie's duties at Warrington came to an end in 1917, when she was sent on active service overseas to Salonika. Included among the personnel of the 49th General Hospital, Allie sailed from Southampton on 19 April 1917, eventually arriving at Marseilles on 16 May. She was in charge of fifty nurses, so her responsibilities were considerable. They embarked from Marseilles on the Hospital Ship 'Goorka', and on 22 May arrived at Salonika, luckily without

incident. Temporary accommodation was provided aboard the Hospital Ship 'Valdivia', before Allie joined the 42nd General Hospital at the beginning of June.



Fig. 4 On one of the wards at Lord Derby's War Hospital, Warrington c.1916. Alice is standing at the back, fourth from the left. (Family Collection)

In many ways, the Salonika Campaign was something of a sideshow. The background to British involvement began in 1915, when the 10th (Irish) Division were given orders on 5 October to land at the Greek port of Salonika, in company with their French allies. The aim of the campaign was to provide military support to the Serbs, who had recently been attacked by the combined forces of Germany, Austro-Hungary and Bulgaria. But the intervention was too late, and after a

brief campaign in severe weather, the allies found themselves forced back to the area around Salonika. The British wanted to withdraw completely, but were persuaded by the French to remain. The allies started to build an extensive entrenchment camp around the

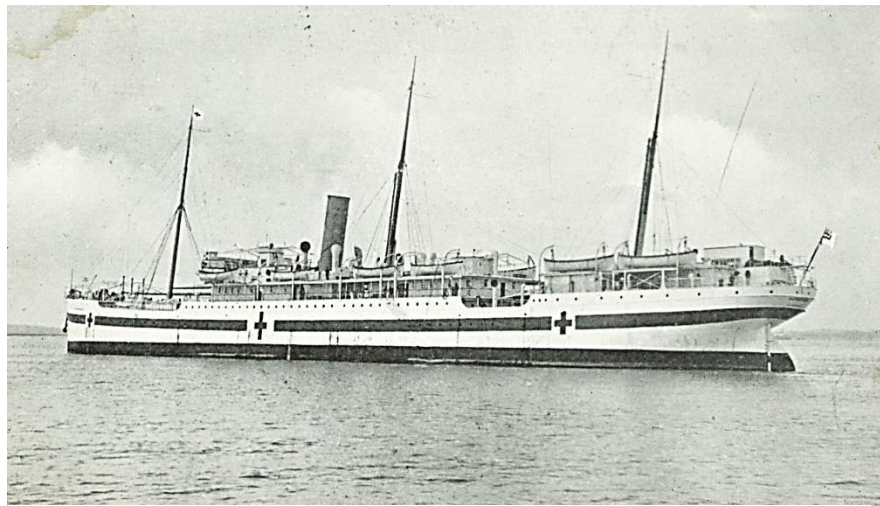


Fig. 5 HMHS Goorka, from a postcard sent by Alice to her mother on the journey across the Mediterranean to Salonika. (Family Collection)

town, and during the first four months of 1916 there was very little fighting as the Anglo-French forces worked on the fortifications. It became known as the 'Bird Cage' because of the vast amounts of barbed wire used in its construction. Some 160,000 British and French troops were encamped in an area of 320

square miles between December and mid-April.ⁱⁱ The allies waited for the Bulgarians to attack, but nothing happened as they consolidated their position in Macedonia. The lack of continuous military activity which characterised the duration of the Salonika Campaign led to criticism at home that the British Salonika Force (BSF) and their allies were shirking and they were nicknamed the 'Gardeners of Salonika', for spending most of their time building roads and tending their tomatoes. But this was very unfair.

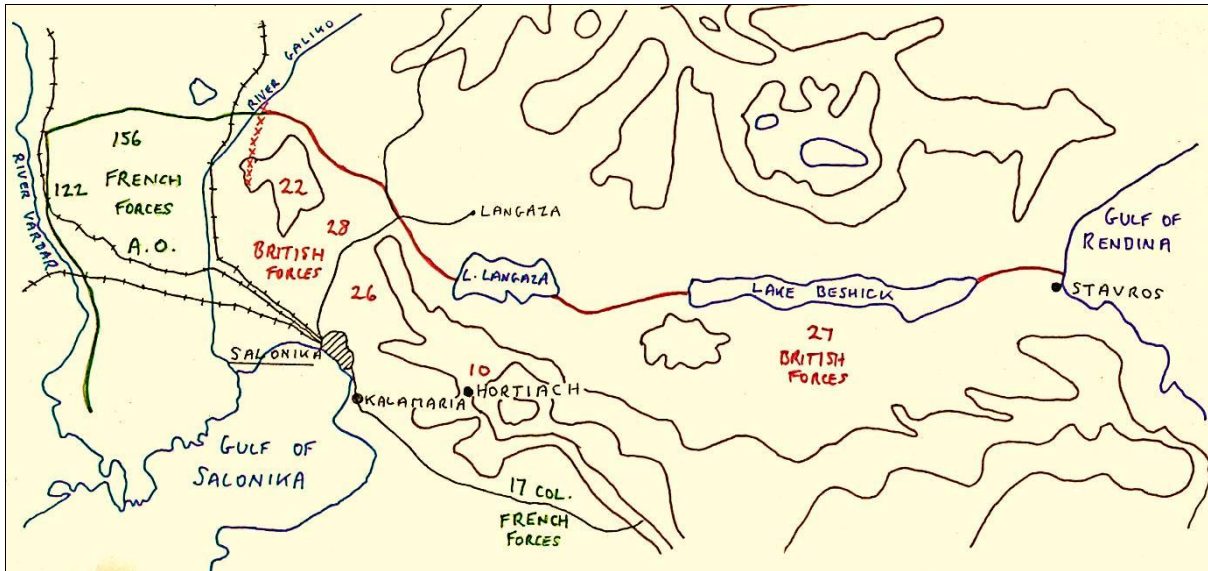


Fig. 6 The Entrenched Camp of Salonika, showing dispositions early in March 1916. British forces are shown in red (the numbers are divisions) and the French in green. Natural features in the landscape, such as hills, lakes and marshes, were incorporated into the 80 mile run of fortifications since they provided good obstacles. (Drawn by author)

The fighting may have been more spasmodic than on the western front, but in order to get about, they first had to build good roads and some light railways across the harsh terrain and impenetrable mountains to replace the ancient dirt-tracks. Battles were fewer, but when they did occur, they were very fierce and bloody, with a large number of casualties. It was easy for the enemy to pick off allied soldiers from their sniping positions high in the mountains. And then, of course, there was the malaria and disease. The British continued to strengthen their forces and consolidate, and by early 1916 they had been joined by an extra four infantry divisions. Many allied reinforcements also arrived from Serbia, Italy and Russia. From 24 April, the British government decided to allow the BSF to advance up to the Serbo-Greek border for limited offensive actions.

The main thrust of allied attacks during 1916 was across the Serbian border towards Monastir, which was finally liberated in November. By the time Allie arrived in May 1917, some 600,000 French, British and Serbian troops were still fighting in areas infested with malaria carrying mosquitoes.ⁱⁱⁱ It is doubtful whether the nurses sent to Salonika had much idea of the living conditions they would encounter. But they found themselves in a land of harsh extremes, and for those nurses from a comfortable Edwardian middle-class background, it must have been particularly shocking. They lived in small tents, and in an area where water was in short supply, they used canvas bowls or baths to wash. Perhaps expecting a hot climate, rather like Egypt, they must have been dismayed at what they found. The winters were harsh and very cold, with freezing winds blowing down the river Vardar and spreading across the vast empty plains. The

terrain was hostile and unrelenting. At night, the nurses in their freezing tents soon discovered that if they failed to wrap a garment or towel around their heads, their hair would freeze to the pillow.

But that was just the winter – the horrors and discomforts of the summer were much worse. Flies and ants were everywhere, touching everything, whilst there were also centipedes, sand-flies, scorpions, wind and rain. ‘Creepy-crawlies’ would get into the tents at night – mice, lizards, the occasional snake – whilst the sweltering July heat would generate copious perspiration and a permanent thirst. But more dangerous and lethal than any of these were the dreaded female *Anopheles* mosquitos, which have a vicious liking for human blood. Illness was rife and the majority of the troops who served in Macedonia became infected at one time or another. The nurses spent more of their time tending to those with malaria and dysentery than the wounded. The nature of the marshy terrain, peppered with stagnant pools, combined with the baking heat in the summer to create one of the worst areas in Europe for malaria. Malaria seriously impinged on the effectiveness of the BSF because it sapped the energy and strength of all the men who contracted it, while dysentery was another serious killer which claimed many soldiers’ lives, as well as some of the nurses caring for them.

Once infected, the familiar symptoms of malaria gradually took hold – the weakness, fever, vomiting, headache, diarrhoea, aching limbs and trembling – and even death in some cases. What is worse, it would re-occur - people infected in summer would continue to have regular bouts of sickness all winter. Everyone was encouraged to use netting at night and take quinine regularly, about five grains a day, when exposed. The nurses started to wear mosquito veils, gloves which reached their elbows and boots – hardly comfortable in the summer heat – to prevent being bitten. The effects on manpower were devastating – in total, the British suffered 162,517 cases of the disease, and in total 505,024 non-battle casualties.^{iv} Without the supreme efforts of the medical organisations in Salonika – the Royal Army Medical Corps, the QAIMNS, the Red Cross and the Scottish Womens’ Hospitals - hardly a single man would have been fit to continue fighting. In total, non-battle casualties were up to 20 times the level of casualties in battle.

Allie and her nurses arrived in Salonika soon after the finish of the British offensive attacks at Lake Doiran on 9 May 1917. They joined the 42nd General Hospital (GH) for duty on 2 June, but were sent the very next day to the 1st Canadian Stationary Hospital (SH), where they remained for the next two months. This unit was stationed in Salonika between 3 March 1916 and 4 September 1917. The Canadian hospitals cared for thousands of sick and wounded, but their staff were gradually thinning through the effects of malaria and dysentery. Allie and her team would have been heavily involved with looking after the wounded of the recent military action. British casualties were heavy, some 12,000 men killed, wounded or captured by the Bulgarian defenders, who buried more than 2,250 men.^v The British were forced to abandon their attack, having made little impression on the Bulgarian defences. Not surprisingly, there were also vast numbers suffering from malaria and other endemic diseases.

As a Ward Sister in the QAIMNS, Allie’s job was to supervise orderlies and other staff; not just showing them what to do, but fully involving herself in all the

many different tasks they would perform. They would prepare wards, apply dressings, feed meals to the sick and wounded who couldn't feed themselves, chat to the patients, comfort the dying and write letters home to next-of-kin. But nurses also had to deal with psychological suffering and 'shell shock'. Allie had to ensure that her staff maintained a level of professional excellence and empathy in the most difficult of conditions.

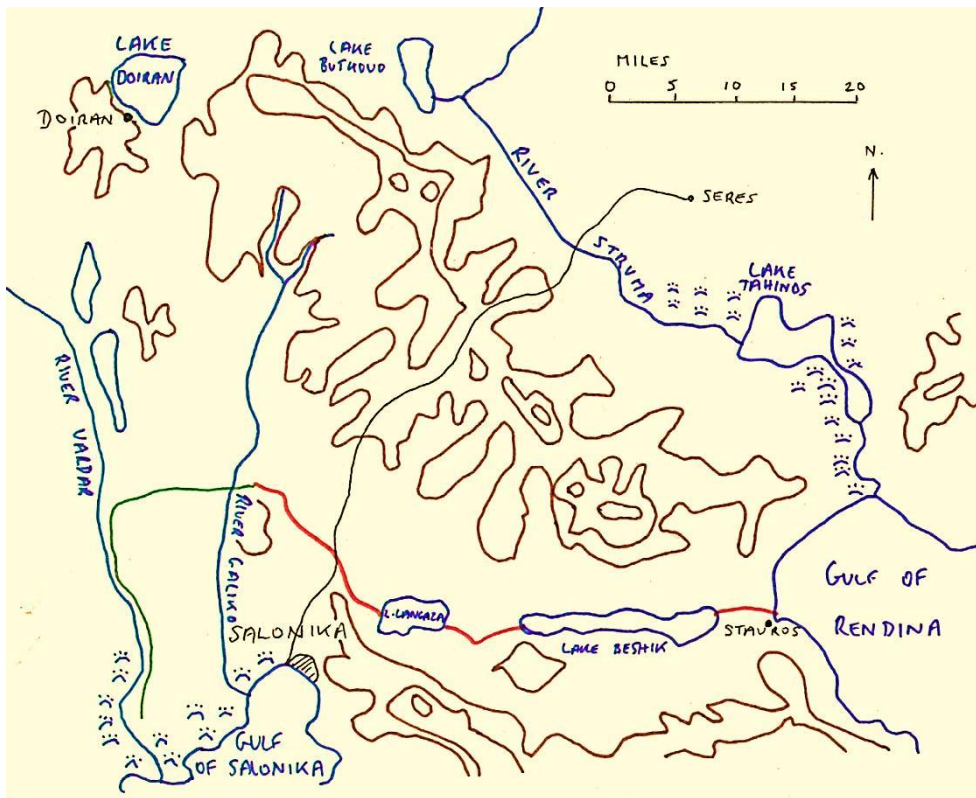


Fig. 7 Map showing the 'Birdcage' line, December 1915 to July 1916. Lake Doiran, where offensive attacks by the British took place in April/May 1917 and September 1918, is shown at top left. The map gives an indication of the difficult terrain faced by the allied forces – impenetrable mountains and marshy areas around the Vardar and Struma rivers. (Drawn by author)

This was to be the last major offensive until September 1918, and the BSF remained more or less static in their front line trenches, apart from the occasional clash of patrols along the Struma. The troops deeply resented the continuing derision they received at home because of the lack of military activity. The sweltering heat at Doiran and the malaria infested swamps of the Struma provided some of the most unbearable conditions ever endured by British soldiers. As one witness cannily observed, 'The only forces that hold the Struma valley in strength are the mosquitoes, and their effectiveness may be computed by thousands of millions'.^{vi} The campaign also received much criticism for tying up large numbers of troops that could have been deployed on the western front.

On 1 August 1917, the war diary of the 1st Canadian SH records there were only 178 patients and work was light.^{vii} Preparations were in hand to embark to a new destination, and on 4 August Allie was transferred with other personnel to the 49th GH on the Hortiach Plateau about 8 miles east of the city. This was a tented hospital where all types of wounded and sick – including those with typhoid,

malaria, black water fever, and dysentery - were treated. Interestingly, the war diary of the 1st Canadian SH mentions the serious fire in Salonika on 18 August when, it claims, 100,000 were made homeless. Fresh food became very scarce due to the destruction of the town's markets.



Fig. 8 Alice Linfield, seated on right of officer in centre of photograph, at one of the hospitals she attended. This may have been taken at the 49th GH on the Hortiach Plateau or the 48th GH at Eurednjik, both situated in the hilly areas outside Salonika. (Family collection)

On 9 September, Allie was again transferred, on this occasion to the 48th General Hospital on a hillside at Eurednjik, a few miles north east of Salonika. This hospital mainly catered for those suffering from malaria and dysentery, so it is perhaps hardly surprising that only eight days after arriving, Allie herself became seriously ill with both diseases. On 17 September, she was admitted to the 43rd General Hospital in the Kalamaria area, which had a special 'Sick Sisters' department, with 100 beds, to look after the nursing casualties from the many surrounding hospitals. Army nurses were haunted by the nightmare of being taken seriously ill, but they were treated extremely well in a comfortable setting to aid their recovery. Dysentery was particularly nasty, especially when combined with malaria, and was extremely serious. Caused by a bacterium usually found in infected faeces, it was easily spread by the vast numbers of flies or poor sanitation, and resulted in severe diarrhoea accompanied by abdominal pain and stomach cramps.

On 16 October, after a month of treatment, Allie was sent to recuperate at the Red Cross Convalescent Home, which was situated in the former home of the Turkish governor in Salonika. She finally returned to duty at the 49th GH on 10 November 1917, where she remained until 16 March 1918 when she was transferred to the 2/1st Northumbrian Field Ambulance (FA) at Stavros. This was more like a stationary hospital or Casualty Clearing Station since it lacked the transport usually attached to a mobile FA. During her service at Stavros, she was admitted to the Red Cross Convalescent Home on 1 June, presumably for a rest or perhaps to recuperate from a recurrence of malaria. She re-joined the 2/1st Northumbrian FA on 8 June, after a stay of seven days.

On 28 September 1918, Allie was transferred to the 28th GH at Salonika, where she remained until demobilisation. Described as 'a large base hospital which

always had more than its share of serious medical and surgical cases^{viii}, Alice was once again in a challenging medical environment where malaria, amoebic and bacillary dysentery were rife. The timing of her transfer suggests her services were needed to help with a large influx of casualties after the British attack on Doiran on 18-19 September. The allies were finally achieving some success, and the surrender of the Bulgarians on 30 September 1918, after a breakthrough by the Serbs west of the River Vardar, finally saw the conclusion of the military campaign.

The first case of the Spanish flu pandemic reached Salonika at the end of August, complicating further the problems of diagnosis since two or three diseases might have to be treated at the same time. Allie had another bout of disease herself, and was admitted once again to the 43rd GH on 27 January 1919; and from there to the Red Cross Convalescent Home on 19 February. She was discharged to duty on 22 February, having been informed on 9 February that she was to be returned to England for demobilisation. She embarked for England on 12 March, undoubtedly with an enormous sense of relief after all the personal hardship and illness she had endured. Nevertheless, Allie was a conscientious and hard-working nurse who did her very best in the most trying of circumstances. This is undoubtedly reflected on her demobilisation form where she is described as a 'most capable & efficient Ward Sister'. Many years later, in 1938, when her father was dying from bowel cancer, Allie was able to utilise her nursing skills to care for him. He remarked to one of his sons how thankful he was that she had trained as a nurse, although he had been against it at the time.

Regrettably, Allie kept silent about her experiences during the war, like the vast majority of nurses and soldiers when they resumed their civilian lives. They had borne witness to so many horrific sights, so many mangled and damaged bodies, and so much unspeakable pain. Was it really so strange that all they really wanted was to put the war completely behind them and forget about the past? For the single woman returning to England, it was hardly appropriate for them to return home as they had experienced considerable independence, even if it were under military control.

Former nurses often set up home together, and Allie was no exception. She and her old friend Sarah Wheeler lived together at Coneyhurst, near Billingshurst, for many years, until Sarah died in 1933. Sarah was also a Sister in the QAIMNS, and they first met when Sarah started at the Lord Derby War Hospital on 14 March 1916. They were sent to Salonika together, and appear to have spent much of their time at the same medical facilities during their war service. Emotional connections between nurses were quite common since it helped to sustain morale and keep work bearable in extreme situations. They may even have asked to stay together if possible. Allie and Sarah were usually only apart during bouts of sickness, such as when Sarah was 'seriously ill' with malaria and admitted to the 43rd GH on 11 October 1917, but met again at the Red Cross Convalescent Home when Sarah was admitted on 25 October. Allie was already there recuperating from malaria and dysentery, and they both returned to work at the 49th GH on 10 November 1917. Both Sisters were sent to the 2/1st Northumbrian Field Ambulance at Stavros on 16 March 1918, and to the 28th GH on 28 September 1918. They were also officially demobilised on the same day, 23 March 1919, having embarked at Salonika on 12 March for Southampton.

After what they had been through in Salonika, living together after the war must have helped both of them to come to terms with their experiences. Allie must have been devastated when Sarah died in 1933, at the early age of 52.

Allie never married, and after her father's death, she moved in with her widowed mother at Worthing where she lived throughout the years of a second world war. Many years ago, I had a letter from an evacuee who had briefly lived with them in Belsize Road in 1940,^{ix} and he recalled Allie's kindness. On his twelfth birthday, Allie took him to the cinema to watch the 'Wizard of Oz' as a special treat. He remembered how in the evening they would all sit down for a late supper of mushrooms on toast after playing Bezique or Rummy. He was only there for 6 months as his school was relocated to Hertford because of the invasion threat along the south coast, but he remembered his time there with affection.

Allie was a lively and interesting person, and she would remorselessly tease her brother Arthur for taking himself too seriously. After her mother died in 1953, Allie moved to a house at Harborough Hill in West Chilton where she lived with a companion, Miss Milligan. She died on 3 March 1962 in her 75th year.

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