

# Honouring the *Marquette* nurses

By co-editor Anne Manchester

Work on restoring the Nurses' Memorial Chapel in Christchurch is due to begin this year, with the work expected to be completed by October 2016.

New Zealand's first hospital chapel was built in memory of the 10 army nurses – three from Christchurch in particular – who perished in the sinking of the transport ship *Marquette* in 1915. The chapel has been closed since 2011, following damage in the September 2010 earthquake. Most of the contents of the chapel are in storage at the Air Force Museum at Wigram.

Last year, a land transfer agreement was enacted, transferring responsibility for the chapel from the Canterbury District Health Board to the Christchurch City Council. The council is now preparing a plan to restore the chapel, working in collaboration with the Nurses' Memorial Chapel Trust.

The chapel was designed free-of-charge by well-known Christchurch architect John Goddard Collins and opened on the grounds of Christchurch Hospital in 1927. The inter-denominational chapel was funded through a public appeal and is New Zealand's only memorial built specifically to commemorate New Zealand women killed at war.

The *Marquette*, built in Glasgow in 1898, was converted to a transport ship at the beginning of World War 1. On October 19, 1915, it sailed from Alexandria in Egypt bound for Salonika. On board was the No.1 New Zealand Stationary Hospital, including 36 nurses of the New Zealand Army Nursing Service who had arrived in Egypt a few months earlier, and staff from the New Zealand Medical Corps. Among the 741 people on board were some 500 officers and troops of the British 29th Divisional Ammunition Column with their equipment and mules.

## Ship torpedoed

The ship was struck by a German submarine torpedo on October 23 and rapidly listed to port. Those not killed in the explosion donned lifebelts and moved quickly to lifeboat stations to abandon ship. One lifeboat on the



The Nurses' Memorial Window commemorates the contribution of nurses in both world wars. The window is depicted in one of the Spirit of Anzac commemorative stamps issued last month.

port side fell onto another, killing and injuring many. Many being lowered in boats on the starboard side were tipped out into the sea. Only one boat left the *Marquette* with nurses aboard and that was half filled with water. The ship sank within 10 minutes with several men and four nurses still on deck. Two of these nurses survived, despite being sucked under the water by the sinking ship. Of those that made it off the ship, many died from exposure and exhaustion in the cold water. Sister Popplewell wrote: *"I found myself and my friend and a Tommy clinging to a bit of wreckage and perished with cold . . . Another sister joined us, and we four managed to hang on by our hands to our life-saving board. It was all too awful and too harrowing to write about."*<sup>1</sup>

The survivors floated for hours in intense cold, clinging to rafts and debris before being picked up by rescue ships. Ten of the 36 nurses perished (among the 31 New Zealanders who died): Marion Brown from Riverton, Isabel Clark from Oamaru, Catherine Fox and Mary Rae from Dunedin, Mary Gorman from Waimate, Nona Hildyard, Lorna Rattray and Margaret Rogers from Christchurch, Helena Isdell from Kumara and Mabel Jamieson from Palmerston North. Altogether, 167 people died in the disaster.

Six days later, all surviving nurses and some medical officers sailed back to Alexandria on the hospital ship *Grantully Castle*. Some of the nurses eventually returned to New Zealand, including Matron Marie Cameron, who never fully recovered from her injuries, while others served again during the war. The deaths of the 10 nurses mark the worst tragedy to ever strike New Zealand military nursing.

Many questions about the sinking of the *Marquette* remain unanswered, including why the nurses were on a transport ship, not on the *Grantully Castle*, which sailed from Egypt the same day, empty, for Salonika. By all accounts, the tragedy was avoidable.

In May 2009, a Greek dive team located and identified the *Marquette*. Resting in 87 metres of water in the North Aegean Sea, the wreck is now protected.

A plaque in the memorial chapel records the names of the 10 nurses. Another six nurses died on active service during World War 1 – Ella Cooke, Ada Hawken, Dorothy Kemp, Lily Lind, Margaret Thompson,

Esther Tubman and Mabel Whishaw. The chapel also remembers two Christchurch nurses, Hilda Hooker and Grace Beswick, who died in the flu epidemic that swept through the country at the end of the war.

Over the years, the chapel has been used for weddings and funerals, hospital chapel services, *Marquette* memorial services and annual Anzac services.

One of the largest of the 12 stained glass windows commemorates the contribution and sacrifice of nurses who served in both world wars. Another remembers Plunket promoter Annie Patrick. Matron-in-chief to the New Zealand Expeditionary Force, Mabel Thurston, is also remembered, along with Mary Christmas who survived the *Marquette* sinking and became the first tutor sister at the Christchurch Preliminary School of Nursing, and district nursing pioneer Sybilla Maude.

The centennial service marking the *Marquette* sinking, organised by the Friends of the Chapel, will be at Christchurch's St Michaels and All Angels Church on October 23. This is the church where the first memorial service for the nurses was held in November 1915. •

## Reference

1) Maclean, H. (Ed) (1916) The loss of the "Marquette". *Kai Tiaki. The Journal of the Nurses of New Zealand*; 9: 1, p11.