

A masseuse goes to war

Audrey Simpson finished her training in physiotherapy at the end of 1940, and immediately volunteered for the army. At this time, her brother-in-law and one of her elder brothers were already in the armed forces, one in the navy, one in the army, and her 20 year-old younger brother was trying desperately to get into the navy, so it was very much a family tradition in which she was acting, in making the attempt, which was not immediately successful. Her papers record her enlistment date as 22 August 1941, and she was described as height 5'5" ,weight 136 lbs, chest (max) 35 ½ ins, complexion fair, eyes blue, hair brown and she was now Masseuse Audrey Katherine Allen Simpson No. SX14162. Thereafter, events moved rapidly.

On 1 September 1941, she wrote the first of her surviving war-time letters to her mother, from the Lady Dugan Hostel in Melbourne. Doris Simpson was the widow of Allen Simpson, one time mayor of Adelaide, co-proprietor of the manufacturers A Simpson & Son, and benefactor of many good causes, amongst them the photographing and exploration of the Simpson Desert, which was named after him. His widow was in every way his equal, although far less visible, as was the custom of the time. Her family also had enlisted in Australia's wars – her father had been killed in the Boer War, and both her brothers had fought in World War One. Only one came home.

Mother and daughter were clearly very close, and the letters reflect this. Both wrote frequently, so that there is an element of conversation in the exchange, though this was often disrupted – the war was always in the background, and then suddenly very close indeed. This paper gives the masseuse's-eye view only, though one does get some idea of the mother's concerns from the daughter's comments.

Clearly, they shared a stiff upper lip: Audrey wrote, "I do love you so much, Mummy dear, but if I'd tried to tell you so, and what a lovely time you've always given me, we both would have sobbed bitterly." And meanwhile there were the mysteries of army life to absorb: "I have been wearing my hat back to front with the wrong rising sun in the cockade." Not that there was much time to learn. On 4 September, she was at sea; on the hospital ship *Wanganella*, writing that there were "only 3 in our saloon of 21 who enjoyed our breakfast the first morning. I have never seen so many yellow faces in a party of Caucasians." But if she enjoyed robust health, there were other aspects of her new life she had to get used to. One was censorship. As she wrote, "I don't know who reads this. Obviously I cannot give my impressions of various people when I don't know whether the less favoured ones might be reading this. 'Our officer speaks French' ones are permissible, no doubt." Apparently one of the doctors told his wife, "Darling, only you and the censor know how much I love you." (Later, the matron signed letters on the outside, indicating her trust in her troops, so any censorship was done outside the unit by people who did not know either the writers or their targets; of actual military information useful to the enemy there was virtually none.) Occasionally the strangeness of their lives struck her: "In the next top bunk Cynthia was

awake, but all around pyjamaed figures sprawled under the blue lights. We were reading the Good Book, Cynthia was silky-mitting her legs. And we were on our way to war.” But where?

It turned out to be Singapore – for which they were not equipped. Each had three uniforms, one outdoor, one working, and one mess, but nothing tropical. Nor were they certain of their status; their luggage said they were AANS, Australian Army Nursing Service, but their work came under the OC Surgical, in the 2/13th AGH (Army General Hospital). The two South Australians had suitable uniforms, copied from Victorian colleagues’ patterns, made by local dressmakers, and so, properly attired, went about their duties, at first at St. Patrick’s School on the island. At this time there was no war, so no patients, so they were lectured by the surgeons, and helped in the physiotherapy department of the Singapore General Hospital, where they worked with another Australian, Mary Uniacke. After six weeks at the school, they moved to a former mental hospital at Tampoli Hill, near Johore Bahru, and remained there until evacuated back to the island towards the end of January. Here the patients were military, Australian and Indian, mainly car and motorbike victims until the real war began. Thereafter, the only change, apart from the enforced retreat, was that the 2/13th became a CSS (Casualty Clearing Station), with 1200 beds instead of 600. This followed an earlier retreat, of the 2/10th AGH from Malacca, on 2/1/42. And now we return to Audrey Abbie and her experiences.

In the letters, “we” usually refers to the masseuses, Marjorie Hill, a fellow South Australian, and Cynthia Sutton. They lived, worked, and socialised together. And at first, the social life was pretty prominent. They arrived on 15/9, and three days later, Audrey mentioned that they had no work yet, but they had joined the swimming club, and were going out a lot. This meant she had time for letter writing, and after 10 days, she apologised, “I hope my letters don’t seem too full of people to you. It isn’t that I don’t appreciate the place, but I can hardly go into a lyrical description of palms, bananas and natives ... the natives are mostly Chinese, from Hunan Island. But it is all so blissfully different.” One of her patients was Mrs Bell, wife the captain of HMS *Exeter* of River Plate fame, and she socialised with Mrs Collins, wife of the former captain of HMAS *Sydney*, her brother-in-law’s ship. And there were men: “the lad who flies over this place on my account is a cadet and if he gets through his exams next week he will be a flight sergeant and I won’t be able to go out with him anymore. Which will be nice and restful.” Not that she wanted too much rest: “There is the competition of Cynthia for whom all the nicest people fall. I shall undoubtedly cut her throat – really, Mummy, we do have fun.”

Not that it was all beer and skittles. They helped Mary Uniacke train four local medical orderlies: “they’ll probably set up as quacks after the war.” And two South Australian medicos, Capt. Juttner and Major Krantz earned good opinions for their work.

But there was still time – plenty of it – for recreation. Audrey won the thread the needle and the three-legged races at the AGH sports day, and visited a rubber plantation, before

meeting Angus Ward of the Dogras at the end of October: “he asked me to marry him but that is the effect of the jungle and sitting out here while his family is being bombed. He is a darling though.” This news caused alarm and despondency at home, leading Audrey to write, “Darling, don’t be devastated about Angus – whatever did I say? ... He is a dear and I did fall for him heavily, which is not my habit, but I am quite likely to do it several more times before the end of this war, so please don’t be worried.” She did, and Doris did worry, going so far as to warn of the perils of adultery on one occasion, but we don’t know whether this was general or particular.

It was clearly a full life, but also an unnatural one. Audrey had lunch with her bank manager, and wrote of it, “It was strangely comforting to have someone interested in one’s background, for a change. It is no doubt the bank manager’s ordinary routine, but, as a rule, one has here neither past nor future, so that everything has a slightly unreal quality that makes events and people entertaining but unimportant.” One suspects that she did not have many occasions when she had the time or the company to be aware of this sense of the impermanence and unpredictability of her situation, she was too busy at work or play. But all her very long life, she had the ability to observe, even as she participated in the activity all round her.

In November they moved to new quarters. It took an hour to get there – by ambulance, not then in great demand for casualties. “We sang most of the way and waved to everyone we saw – typically undignified. And then when we got here it was so much better than we had been led to expect. The hospital is all pink arches and covered ways too, no pillars, not arches and lots of tents.” The masseuses went looking for patients: “All the malaria men developed sore knees when they saw us, but in vain.” At the end of the month, she summed up her experiences thus far: “these last two months have been the most surprising in my life; there have been moments of vexation when we became sick of uniforms and restrictions or when our carefully laid plans went awry, but something keeps on happening and one may sit with an interested and grateful mind and observe it all. Raffles is an excellent post for such observation.”

But then in an early December postscript to the same letter, she wrote, “I had never thought of that happening somehow ... I can’t bear to think of what it’s like for Jan.” She had just heard of her brother-in-law’s death on *Sydney*. And then, a week later, she was at war. There was the first air raid, and she was busy making plaster bandages all day. And one night, there was a somewhat incongruous ball, which she compared to the Duchess of Richmond’s ball on the eve of Waterloo. In the absence of a band, one of the AIF men organised community singing: “it was pretty to see how that crowd of Australians, English, Indians, Chinese, Malays, yellows, browns, and brindles, with one voice begged Daisy to give her answer do. And all this was in a lunatic asylum, very memorable.”

After nearly a week of war, she told her mother, “Alerts are more formal than real, I have not been frightened so far ... [we] lie in a convenient ditch and read letters.” “The Chinese

boys looked down from the kitchen and said ‘boom-boom’ to us. Nothing to worry about and we don’t.” And to reassure her mother, “It will be just bad luck, like being run over, if anything happens to me, as we are a long way from anywhere and have Red ++s all over our roof.”

And there were patients: “We get on much better with the men. We learn from one of the orderlies ... that we were considered stuck up before, at St. Patrick’s, but public opinion is now with us. Working in a ward of men has its difficult moments, since the conversation is very general, and it was particularly so when we three happened to be side by side. Our three patients were loudly envied, and every single man seemed to have pains that could be cured only by massage.” And it was good that the medical officers appreciated them – they were brought in to help with the physical rehabilitation of malaria patients after prolonged bed care, in the absence of other than self-diagnosed sufferers.

At the end of 1941, Doris wrote, “Darling your letter is so palpably telling me nothing, and yet you have made it pleasant and interesting and you sound calm and fairly happy ...” Coincidentally, on the same day, Audrey wrote her mother a letter to be opened in the event of her death, “so that if anything unpleasant happens you won’t have the added grief of believing that my peace of mind was upset. Nor that it is just a waste ... Do not think of me as being frightened, for so far I have not been. And in any case it is not the body that matters. Remembering how you and Jan do not fall down at a crisis I shall not either, with God’s help. I hope you do not have to read this, but if you do it is because I wanted you to know that twenty-five such happy years as I have spent are worth paying for.”

But this was not the mood in which she wanted her mother to watch events, so, on 21 January 1942, Audrey wrote, (reassuringly, she doubtless hoped,) “The news must be very trying for you just now [the Japanese were carrying all before them as they advanced down the Malay peninsula] – you’ve no idea how much difference it makes being the person rather than thinking about them. And, of course, there are so many other lasses in it with me. But Rick having gone must make it all seem horribly possible to you – truly, Mummy, it is how you must be feeling that worries me most, and, as you know, I’m not very courageous.” And then after describing washing her hair in difficult circumstances, she went on, “You probably picture us grimly working flat out all and every day – we don’t. We work quite hard some days, in the theatre, or elsewhere, making plasters very hard, but always in a pleasantly amateurish way, so that we go back to tea patting ourselves on the back and saying smugly, ‘Well, I do feel tired!’ Only mostly I don’t, except my feet.” And a few days later she compared her position to a cousin’s in the London blitz – “she knew she was not the goal.” Presumably it was reassuring for Doris to know that her daughter was alive and in good heart on the day she wrote the letter.

Then Audrey changed the subject, and enthused over Major Nairn, “who has invented a beautiful way of fixing compound fractures so that they can be transported easily.” They had done three that morning, but the ward was a mess. “Plaster is clean dirt, but what with

basins, tarpaulins, tables, kerosene tins and various and numerous odds and ends, it looks as though the painters had been in." Audrey mentions plaster a lot: what the masseuses had to do was put fractured limbs, sometimes compound fractures with long bones protruding through the skin, in plaster casts, after the surgeons had cleaned the wounds. Massaging hardly got a look in. One of the patients was Grant Harrison, of Alma Shoes back home, who had crashed in the jungle, and spent six days without food, two of them in a hut on stilts guarded by crocodiles, and 1 ½ swimming in a river.

Suddenly all was action. "Scalded cats lead a dignified and sedentary life compared to us. We took 2 days for what usually takes 6 weeks ... We have been taking part in what is generally known, as our senior surgeon pointed out to an appreciative ward, as a strategic withdrawal. ... We carted beds and linen and goodness knows what, and more beds until Captain Frew said 'Let's have a rest, let's carry mattresses for a while.' Gosh, I hope I'm allowed to say all this." They moved into new quarters, a Chinese house, whose previous, English, occupants explained "that there were no – pantomiming, as Barbara Williams did, the pulling of a chain. Amazing! Such a thing from the English." Their hopes for a chain that pulled continued being disappointed.

"I wish that I could do justice to yesterday... Australians are amazing in that upon occasion, they can surpass even their own high standards. I think our predecessors were somewhat astonished [at what the Australians accomplished in a very short time] – and I saw some Indians nearly collapse when they saw Major Clarke, crown and all, carrying a table on his head upstairs. Major Hunt removed his shirt and toiled dramatically and joyfully. 73 patients were received, bedded and asleep in ¾ hr in his ward. He does love being a strong man. ... The patients, the surgical ones, any way, are incredible, so cheerful and so ... awfully nice." And she mentioned Major Krantz, who was earning great praise for his surgery: "his cases come on to us and all our people are much impressed by the clean wounds. I can vouch for his excellent plaster work, in fact we can usually recognise it at once, partly because he uses only Cellonia, which is specially prepared stuff. But certainly he is doing fine work."

At this time – late January, early February, just before the end, it was all work. "We three have volunteered for convoy work, which means being on call at night, if convoys come in. Apart from plaster work, we will take notes for the operations and make tea, and generally wait on everyone. Our functions in fact range from those of assistant surgeon to V.A.D., it is all very strange. And it is increasingly obvious that we'll all become the most distressing bores after the war. 'When I was with the army in Malaya ...'"

"It's funny about not being frightened – cautious I am, but really I am very happy – it's having lots to do, I suppose. I must say things are not what I would have supposed." The next day, 30 January, was her birthday. "I was on convoy duty last night, and they were working flat out, so I didn't get off till 4:30, but it was a high and lofty moment, or do I mean lonely? I had three plasters to do, all of which would normally need three masseuses and a surgeon, or at least three masseuses but all I got was one hand of the anaesthetist. One was

one of Major Nairn's pets, a special plastered-in Thomas splint, which Captain Hogg decided to do on the assumption that I knew more about it than he. Which was rash. At 12.10 I raised my eyes to the clock, all four tables had patients on them, and I had just come out of the resuscitation ward into the glare of the theatre, and nearly laughed out loud for there I was, just turned 25 in most unusual surroundings..." And then later, Angus turned up – "and a more disreputable object you never saw ..., I came over most peculiar – excitement only, I think, but deary me I was amazed." And then there were two bottles of beer on every table at lunch – "supposed to be the anonymous gift of Bruce Hunt, because we have all worked so hard, but to arrive on my birthday –". Her PS was "I am most careful of myself, you be too."

She was to dwell on her calm and well-being in the few letters before they were evacuated, and it must have been something for her mother to know that she was relatively safe and happy – even if she didn't believe her. But Audrey does seem to have had the right temperament for where she was. As she wrote, "It is strange how unperturbed we all are – it is because we are comfortably certain that the army always looks after its women, none has been even wounded so far ... it is strange how one can hear a plane droning overhead and just not notice, especially if one is at work." And at this time she had another distraction. As she put it, "Angus has given me more 'miserable thoughts' than Tojo." It helped, of course, that this was a war about which few had any doubts about the justice of their cause, and in Audrey's case this was backed up her faith – all her life she was a devoted, if critical, member of the Unitarian church, of which both sides of her family had been members before they migrated to South Australia. She never feared death.

This was a time when one seized what opportunities one could for one's own activities, because the pressure of work was unrelenting. "I am writing in the theatre, on an operating table – un peu macabre, n'est ce pas? But it is light. I came here to do a job, to put a patient of Maj. Hunt's under a heater, so he'd sleep, preserve us! In this climate! And it is now 9.15 and Maj. Nairn, who likes to have us round" [Here the writing stopped, and resumed the next day - 7 February] "He [Maj. Nairn] sucked me in. I was there till 2.15 last night, mostly making tea but also helping with a bad motor-bike accident case. As I so frequently say, we do odd jobs here." And what they did was noted.

Audrey continued this letter: "But oh, Mummy, are we appreciated? We are so. Last night, before I went to the theatre, there was a mess meeting. Audrey had been mess secretary, and her dear friend and colleague Marjorie Hill treasurer, and as such both had played a big role in organising such events as the sports day and Christmas party, for which they were thanked at the meeting. Both their terms were up. Because of the black out, the meeting was held in darkness. After the thanks had been registered, proceedings took an un-agenda-ed turn, when "the Matron held forth into the darkness. She said she wanted to thank the masseuses not only for their social work but for all the things they'd done. She really did not know how the hospital would have got on without us. She had always thought of masseuses

as ladies of leisure, but not us we'd been wonderful. ... everyone clapped and Marje and I blushed." Then the meeting went on: "Cynthia wasn't there, so was elected without opposition as treasurer in Marje's place, I am continuing as secretary, which will be a sinecure as lately my only work has been to straighten out Marje's curious accounts. But wasn't it fun? And a complete surprise because we had not supposed that Matron had particularly noticed us, although she was impressed by us volunteering for night duty." And she signed off with her usual reassurance, "While I am undoubtedly in danger ... things aren't as bad as you, I feel sure imagine. Anyway, we are all very cheerful, and the situation shows signs of improvement." This last statement was a lie, if as white as snow, for four days later, they were evacuated, on board the *Empire Star* – the last ship to get away from Singapore.

But that is another story, and I shall finish this one with an extract from a letter from Doris, written on 12 February. "Darling, Today we see that nurses have been evacuated and I do believe it is true because it is reasonable & oh it must be so. It has been a ghastly 2 weeks ... If only you are safe & unharmed, what an experience ... How useful you will be beloved as a money-making asset for all my dos when you get back..." Both mother and daughter were good at making the best of circumstance.

John Mayo