



## *The story of Sister Elise Margaret Kemp*

- *Born 1881, Wellington, New Zealand*
- *Educated London & Brussels*
- *Trained King's College Hospital, London*
- *Surgical Nurse & Ward Sister*
- *Called up 1914 to Territorial Forces Nursing Service*
- *Served on the Western Front from January 1916*
- *Killed by a bomb dropped on casualty clearing station, October 20, 1917*
- *Buried at Godewaersvelde, France-Belgium border*
- *Memorial plaque in King's College Hospital Chapel*

*More than 500 nurses, about a quarter of the New Zealand nursing workforce of the period, served overseas during World War One with the New Zealand Army Nursing Service. Ten lost their lives in the Mediterranean when the troopship Marquette was torpedoed. Others served with British and French units, including Sister Elise Margaret Kemp, believed to be the only New Zealand born nurse killed in action on the Western Front.*

Elise Margaret Kemp was born in Wellington, New Zealand, on June 19, 1881, the third daughter and one of six children born to Dr William George Kemp and his wife Charlotte.

Dr Kemp was originally from Alnwick, Northumberland, and qualified as a physician at Durham University. By November 7, 1868, he was in New Zealand and was appointed Resident Surgeon at Nelson Hospital in the South Island. It was in Nelson that he met his wife, Charlotte Greenwood.

Charlotte had been born in Motueka, Nelson Province, one of the 11 children of Dr John Danforth Greenwood, an American, and his wife Sarah Field, an artist of note who has an entry in the Dictionary of New Zealand Biography. The couple married at Nelson Cathedral on February 17, 1870, in a double wedding with Charlotte's sister.

By the time of his marriage Dr Kemp had already taken up a position of surgeon-physician at Wellington Hospital and the couple moved there to begin married life. In fact, two of Charlotte's sisters began an independent school in the city.

Dr Kemp continued to qualify in various specialties and was ultimately appointed New Zealand's Chief Medical Officer, according to some documents which have not yet been verified.

### **Move to London**

Several years after Elise's birth the family was in London where her younger brother Charles Gordon Kemp was born. Whether they returned to New Zealand for a time or stayed permanently in London is not known.

Elise was educated at the Church High School at The Shrubbery in Streatham High Road. This was one of 33 of schools established by the Church of England for girls and provided a curriculum that included languages, religious studies, maths and science, elocution, music, art and needlework. From there Elise travelled to Brussels to attend finishing school.

The UK census for 1901 shows the family living at 38 Alleyn Road, West Dulwich, close to King's College Hospital. In addition to parents, there were four Kemp children at home on that date: Violet Annie (born Wellington 1877); Elise; Kathleen Mary (born Wellington 1883) and Charles Gordon (born London 1885). The eldest daughter Dorothy Charlotte and another brother were not listed.

### **Nursing School**

On October 8, 1904, Elise Kemp entered nursing school at King's College Hospital at the age of 23, by which time the family's home address was "Tarama", Avenue Road, St Albans, Hertfordshire.

She graduated on February 12, 1908, and was described as: "A very capable nurse, bright, intelligent, and very nice manners, better surgical than medical nurse as she did not seem quite able to grasp all the things necessary in a thoroughly good Medical Nurse. Managing Powers Fair, Rather of a nervous temperament and a little want of sympathy and self confidence but all ought to improve with more experience. Health fairly good. A nurse who ought to get on in the nursing world."

Shortly after her graduation, however, she became ill and spent nine weeks in the hospital's Fergusson Ward. Three days after being discharged she was appointed Ward Sister of the Albert and Victoria male surgical wards.

In August that year she was on a salary of £35 and her parents had moved to "Oakhurst" at St Helen's Park, Hastings.



In November 1909 her sister Violet Annie died and Elise Kemp resigned from her job as a result.

Notes written with her resignation state that she was "a very good Ward Sister & an exceedingly nice girl, one much liked by all".

In May the following year she returned as temporary Sister of the Wigram Ward and in April 1914 was appointed Sister of the Lister male surgical ward.

Four months later she was called up for military service and became a member of the Territorial Forces Nursing Service (TFNS), working in London. Two of her brothers who had qualified as physicians also joined up with the Royal Army Medical Corps and served overseas.

### **Western Front**

In January 1916 Sister Kemp was posted to the Western Front where she served until October 1917, shortly after the disastrous First Battle of Passchendaele in Flanders.

On October 20, 1917, although attached to 58 Casualty Clearing Station, she was on temporary duty at 37 Casualty Clearing Station at Godwaersvelde, Flanders, which that day was engaged in treating the wounded from a local action. In the evening the clearing station was bombed by an enemy aircraft - Sister Kemp, three orderlies and three patients were killed outright when a bomb landed close to the marquee they were working in.

The Matron-in-Chief made the following entry in the unit's war diary:

**October 21st** "Went on to Godwaersvelde to 37 C.C.S. where I saw the O.C. and learnt the particulars of the very trying incident of the night before. Fortunately they had just evacuated and they had only 30 patients in hospital, or the casualties would have been very great. There had been no warning at all beforehand and the bombs landed close to a marquee where the sister, 3 orderlies and 3 patients were killed and other were wounded, two of whom lost their arms. In another marquee the Sister in charge, Miss Devenish Meares, received multiple wounds, fortunately of not a very serious nature. She had an anaesthetic during the night and pieces of shell were removed from her thigh, ankle and fore-arm, and arrangements were being made to send her to the Sick Sisters' Hospital, St. Omer. I visited her and found her wonderfully plucky. Arranged for Miss Luard, Q.A.I.M.N.S.R., to join 37 C.C.S. as Sister in charge as soon as possible. Arranged for 4 of the nurses who were very upset to be sent down to the Base."

### **Grave at Godeswaerfelde**

Sister Kemp - "a splendid nurse loved, respected and admired by all who were privileged in knowing her" - was buried at Godeswaerfelde in French Flanders just across the border from Belgium. Her grave today is in the Commonwealth War Graves Commission cemetery just outside the small town and far from the normal routes followed by visitors to the World War One battlefields.

Following her death, King's College Hospital appealed for funds for a memorial window in the hospital chapel to Sister Kemp. The fund-raising resulted in the ordering of a memorial tablet which can be seen in the chapel today.

Both brothers who had joined the RAMC returned to New Zealand to practice after the war and although one retired to the United Kingdom, the other, Dr Charles Gordon Kemp MB BS (Hons) Durham 1907, MRCS LRCP London 1907, remained in New Zealand for the rest of his life.



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