



## HISTORICAL CRITIQUE

# Colonel Coralie Gerrard: A lifetime of distinction



## KEYWORDS

Nursing;  
Civilian;  
Military;  
History

## 1. Introduction

Coralie Hughes (née Gerrard) was born in Adelaide in 1946. She did not come from a nursing background, but her interest in nursing was kindled by a prolonged hospital stay, brought about by a life-threatening childhood illness. Prior to Coralie's seventeenth birthday she wrote to the Matron of Peterborough Soldiers Memorial Hospital, in response to an advertisement seeking student nurses. Within a few weeks young Coralie began her general nurse training in a country hospital where there was no requirement for her to have completed her high school education. Coralie recalled her parents expressed their doubts about her career choice, with her father stating "let her go, she'll be home again soon" (Gerrard, 2009).

## 2. Commencement of a distinguished career

According to Coralie no formal education was given to trainees at the Peterborough Soldiers Memorial Hospital to prepare them to nurse patients in the general or maternity wards. Still, the Matron did provide Coralie with an anatomy and physiology textbook, with the expectation that she would read it in her own time. After working for 2 years in this 44-bed hospital Coralie passed an examination, facilitating her transfer into the nursing program offered at Queen Elizabeth Hospital, located on the outskirts of Ade-

laide. This final phase of Coralie's training brought with it the introduction of regular study days, albeit on her rostered days off, which informed the nursing duties she performed during her clinical rotations at this larger centre. While the study days remained a novelty the close monitoring of trainees in their residential quarters, including the 'lock-down' at night, was standard procedure in both country and city environments Coralie recalled. After a total of 4 years training Coralie sat for her 'finals' in December 1966, with the following year signalling the start of a distinguished military career.

## 3. Civilian to military

It was Coralie's brother who suggested a shift from civilian to military nursing, an idea that appealed to Coralie. Midway through 1967 Coralie became a Nursing Officer in the Royal Australian Army Nursing Corps (RAANC) for an initial period of 2 years. She found the transition from civilian 'Sister' to military 'Lieutenant' uneventful, for the discipline and nursing duties were similar in both environments. Coralie stated that in both arenas there was an expectation that junior staff would "respect people's age and position" (Gerrard, 2009). Coralie was first posted to 1 Camp Hospital in Brisbane, an 80-bed rehabilitation facility, which had the capacity for some surgical interventions. Coralie and her colleagues cared for soldiers on their return from Vietnam, following emergency treatment and stabilisation at hospitals in Penang or Singapore. Coralie recalled:

*I enjoyed the general nursing work ... we didn't have a lot of time to talk to the patients or their families ... but if a patient asked me what was wrong with them, or their family did, I always went out of my way to ensure that they were aware I shouldn't be telling them anything that the doctor hadn't told them first, but I never believed in keeping information back ... I made every effort to make sure patients knew what was going on ...*

*I was adamant that patients needed to know* (Gerrard, 2009).

In January 1968 Coralie and two other nurses were transferred to Townsville to help establish a 20-bed Camp Hospital, another rehabilitation facility. The patients were nursed in a Nightingale ward, located in a large tin shed. Despite the tropical heat the nurses were required to wear long sleeved grey dresses with starched collars, starched linen veils, stockings and lace up shoes, but the Army made one concession, *"we could roll up our sleeves"* (Gerrard, 2009). Coralie expanded:

*... with the big fans it wasn't too bad, it was probably hotter out than in, which we were very glad about ... we had three nurses and possibly six to eight Medics, those who had done a six weeks course. The bottom line was we were training them as we went along, some of them went to Vietnam, so we were adamant they had to know basic nursing duties. They all wanted to suture and set broken limbs, but some of these Medics wanted to walk before they could crawl* (Gerrard, 2009).

#### 4. Posting to Malaysia

In 1969 Coralie received her first overseas posting which was to Malaysia, formally known as Malaya. The country was approaching a decade of peace, following the Japanese invasion during WWII and attacks from Chinese Communist insurgents during the Malayan Emergency (1948–1960) (McLeod, 2005). The tradition of Australian Army nurses working with the British was well established by the time Coralie arrived in Malaysia, for the presence of Australian Army nurses had been uninterrupted since 1955, when the first group of six nurses was posted to the British Military Hospital (BMH) at Kamunting (McLeod, 2005). Coralie was posted to an alternate location, the large BMH at Terenda in Malacca, a former Portuguese settlement. Coralie indicated the hospital had a substantial nursing complement, comprising of up to forty British nurses, eight Australian nurses and a small number of local Indian and Chinese nurses. Coralie noted the British rostering practices were outmoded, particularly the split shifts. *"They were never fun"*, as time for rest and recuperation in the tropical heat was limited (Gerrard, 2009). Generally the nurses slept between their morning and evening work allocations, but sometimes they found time to visit the neighbouring seaside town, or embark on the one hour journey to Singapore, *"but this was rare"* (Gerrard, 2009).

While at Terenda Coralie nursed women and babies from a range of cultures in the families' ward. She cared for patients with Liptospirosis, Malaria and a variety of tropical skin diseases. While most of the nursing duties echoed her experiences in tropical Townsville or Brisbane, one area of care was new to Coralie: *"I'd never seen tape worms in Australia, they [patients at Terenda] had dreadful ... big worms ... dreadful big worms that they'd vomit up. That wasn't very pleasant!"* (Gerrard, 2009).

During Coralie's year long deployment to Malaysia she spent 4 months at the BMH in the Cameron Highlands. This impressive change-of-air station was built in the 1930s to board and educate expatriate children, but it was seized

by the Japanese during WWII and following their surrender it was reclaimed by the British (McLeod, 2005). It was still being used as a BMH during Coralie's deployment over 20 years later. In this setting Coralie had the opportunity to move outside the hospital confines, taking her convalescing soldiers and sailors for picnics and other outings. Other adventures included mixing with the locals in the local township of Tanah Rata, visiting the Malays in their traditional kampongs, observing the cultural differences of the Aboriginal people living in stilt houses on the jungle fringes, and encountering numerous small green tree snakes on her outings, which *"made me run a mile!"* (Gerrard, 2009).

Shortly after Coralie's return to Terenda the BMH closed, paving the way for it to be returned to the Malaysian military. Thereafter, Coralie was posted to the BMH in Singapore. She reflected *"this was the old WWII hospital, where the nurses had been shot on the steps [during the fall of Singapore] ... but of course I only found this out much later on in my military career. No one ever talked about history or what had gone before"* (Gerrard, 2009). During this deployment Coralie worked in the Families' Medical Clinic, *"a GP type clinic, with Australian and New Zealand doctors"* (Gerrard, 2009).

Prior to Coralie's departure from Malaysia she was promoted to Captain. She commented that *"I came back to Australia [in June 1971] as a Captain ... I think someone had gone home from Singapore and there was a Captain's position vacant and so I was promoted ... it used to be four years before you could get promoted, but I managed to pick it up about the three and a half year mark"* (Gerrard, 2009). While Coralie claimed *"I was in the right place at the right time"* her superiors recognised that she was ready to fulfil the role and responsibilities of a senior nursing officer (Gerrard, 2009). On Coralie's return she was posted to 7 Camp Hospital, located in Wagga Wagga. She recalled the 30-bed hospital was mainly for rehabilitation, but it could expand to 60 beds when required, *"it was a really old facility"* (Gerrard, 2009). Coralie recalled that there were *"nasty military training accidents ... a couple of deaths ... and a couple of gun shot wounds, young recruits cleaning their weapons ... mishandling their weapons ... they were nasty incidents"* (Gerrard, 2009). The year was proving to be a significant one. Following her promotion Coralie became the second nursing officer to continue in the Army following marriage, made possible by a recent change in regulations (Bassett, 1992) (Photo 1).

Coralie's administrative experiences continued, first in Adelaide as Adjutant of a Citizen Military Forces (CMF) nursing unit, where civilian nurse reservists were trained, followed by a posting to Puckapunyal, Seymour. During this deployment 29-year-old Coralie was promoted to Major. She explained that throughout the 1960s many Army nurses resigned from the service to marry, which created a shortage of senior nursing officers. Therefore, many of the young nurses who remained in the Army were promoted quickly, willingly accepting rank and responsibility. This promotion and others that followed were supported by internal military courses and later by external diplomas and degrees. Coralie was Matron of 2 Military Hospital at Ingelburn immediately prior to her promotion to Lieutenant Colonel. In this role she worked in Melbourne as Assistant Director of Army Nursing, one of five positions in Australia.

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