

SIGNIFICANT AVIATOR & AVIATION EVENTS PROFILES

GROUP OFFICER HELEN AGNES CLEARY RRC

RAAF Nurse, World War 2, Korea, Vietnam



Portrait image of Group Officer Helen Agnes Cleary, Matron-in-Chief of the RAAF Nursing Service from 1967-69.

Helen Agnes Cleary was born on 28 March 1914 at Peterborough, a small rural town in South Australia's mid north. Born into a large Catholic family, Helen was educated at St Joseph's in Peterborough, a Catholic school still operating in Peterborough. Her father was a labourer. After school, she pursued nursing and trained at the Broken Hill District Hospital, graduating as a general nurse in 1941 and an obstetric nurse in 1942. She then worked for a year at the Calvary Hospital at North Adelaide.

On 15 November 1943, she enlisted in the Royal Australian Air Force Nursing Service at No 5 Recruiting Centre, Adelaide, as a Sister (Flying Officer equivalent). She completed basic RAAF familiarization training and was posted to No 2 RAAF Hospital, based at the Melbourne Showgrounds at Ascot Vale.

Formed on 26 July 1940, the RAAF Nursing Service was a branch of the RAAF, as distinct to the Women's Auxiliary Australian Air Force which was a separate organisation. Nurses held commissioned rank and wore RAAF badges of rank along with the RAAF medical badge on their tunic lapels and capes but did not use Air Force

rank titles. A Sister was the equivalent of a Flying Officer, while a Matron in Charge of a hospital was a Group Officer; the equivalent of a Group Captain.

Established to provide a nursing capability in clearing stations, base hospitals, station sick quarters, and rehabilitation centres around Australia and overseas, the branch developed flight nurses from 1944 who were employed on aircraft with the Medical Air Evacuation Transport Unit. While initially growth of the branch was slow with only 45 members in December 1940, by the end of the war, the RAAFNS comprised more than 600 staff.



RAAF Nursing staff at No 2 RAAF Hospital, Ascot Vale; Sister Helen Cleary is 2nd from left, back row

Formed in October 1940, 2 RAAF Hospital, Ascot Vale, was a considerable unit. In early 1942, the staff comprised 20 officers, 26 nurses and 124 airmen and had over 500 patients. During her posting at the unit, Sister Cleary treated patients with various conditions including disease and post-surgery. She was then posted to No 7 School of Technical Training at Geelong – the first of several instructional positions she served in during her career.

In April 1945, she was one of ten nurses posted to the newly created No 2 Medical Air Evacuation Transport Unit at Morotai, Dutch East Indies. The unit's formation followed the establishment of No 1 Medical Air Evacuation Transport Unit (1MAETU) in 1944. 1MAETU was based in Lae and responsible for the medical air evacuations from New Guinea covering an area from Biak to Milne Bay. Based in Morotai, 2MAETU was responsible for all medical air evacuations from South East Asia to Australia. Essentially, the unit accepted responsibility for the patients from when they boarded the aircraft at the evacuation point to when the patient departed the aircraft at their final destination.



A RAAF Nurse treats wounded being evacuated by air in a 1 MAETU C-47 aircraft from New Guinea.

The RAAF nurses played a critical role being responsible for not only the care of the evacuated personnel on the flight but also their loading and unloading. The nurses with the air evacuation units became known as *Flying Angels*.

Cleary completed air evacuation training along with nine other nurses at 2 RAAF Hospital during April and arrived at Morotai. In late May 1945. The hastened course lasted only two weeks and covered topics such as ocean and jungle survival, tropical hygiene, aviation evacuation, and compression chamber testing to ensure they could cope with high altitude flying.

Over the next four months, Cleary completed many long and arduous flights on largely C-47 aircraft flying from airfields such as Tarakan, Labuan and Balikpapan to Morotai to Biak and then Townsville via New Guinea. At Townsville or Brisbane, the evacuated personnel were handed over to an Air Evacuation Section allowing the 2MAETU flight to then return to Morotai via the same route. Overall, the trip required several days travelling inevitably leaving very early in the morning to avoid the heavy cloud cover that would envelop the mountainous terrain in the tropics in New Guinea and Dutch East Indies. Between May and September, 2MAETU evacuated almost 2,500 patients via this route with flight nurses recording up to 100 flying hours per month.



Sister Helen Cleary (Left) taking a break from her nursing duties to repair items in the domestic area at Morotai



On 17 August 1945, she was involved in an aircraft accident at Tarakan when the C-47 (A65-7/VH-CTG) she was a flight nurse on, caring for freed prisoners of war, overran the runway. While the aircraft was damaged beyond repair, there were no major injuries to patients or crew, but Cleary suffered a broken arm in the crash.

With the Japanese surrender on 15 August, 2 MAETU roles suddenly expanded with the need to repatriate allied prisoners of war, many of whom were in poor health. In early September, Cleary became one of several RAAF nurses to be in an advance party deployed to Singapore to begin the repatriation of POWs. She would later recall that the *"conditions were very primitive, we slept on the floor on a blanket, also having no lights or water for toilet facilities and rations as you can imagine were very scarce."* After visiting Changi Prison and seeing Australian prisoners of war she remarked *"I had thought when evacuating battle casualties from the front lines that we were doing an important job but here was something much bigger, and it was our aim to get the boys back to civilization and decent conditions where they could be nursed to health as quickly as possible."*

Repatriation flights commenced on 13 September 1945, with the 2MAETU detachment providing RAAF nurses for flights from Malaya and Thailand to Singapore and then on to Morotai for further repatriation to Australia. During the remainder of September, more than 5,000 POWs, including more than 2,900 Australians, were repatriated by the Singapore based 2MAETU detachment. The tasks were understandably difficult and stressful, putting the nurses in very challenging situations, including managing various conditions such as malnutrition, dysentery, and traumatic stress on long crowded flights. The RAAF nurses were very proud of the fact that no POW died on their flights – a remarkable statistic considering the numbers transported and condition they were in.

By March 1946, 2MAETU was disbanded, the POW repatriation flights completed and the RAAF nurses including Helen Cleary returned to Australia. Like the rest of the RAAF, the RAAF Nursing Service underwent significant demobilization but Helen Cleary remained on strength based largely on her significant experience with aeromedical evacuation during the war. From 1947-1948, she was posted to RAAF Mallala, a solo RAAF nurse position supporting the medical section including casualty evacuation from Woomera to Adelaide.

In 1949, she was posted to No 6 RAAF Hospital at Laverton, Victoria. She tutored on the first and second post war Air Evacuation and Air Sea Rescue Course in 1949 and 1950, designed to train RAAF nurses in aeromedical



RAAF nurses undergoing decompression training on the air evacuation course that Cleary instructed on in 1949 and 1950.

evacuation, at the Aviation Medicine Section, RAAF Point Cook. She was then posted to RAAF Pearce from April 1951 where she was promoted to Senior Sister in September. In January 1952, she accompanied a casualty evacuation flight to Cocos Island to retrieve seriously injured airmen on an Avro Lincoln aircraft. The long-range flight over water proved risky when the Lincoln lost one engine with another engine also experiencing problems on the return leg.

In 1952, she was posted to Iwakuni as the Sister-in-Charge of the 50 bed RAAF Hospital. The hospital treated British and Australian soldiers and airmen as well as supporting the repatriation of allied prisoners of war. The RAAF was responsible for the evacuation of all Commonwealth wounded from Korea to Iwakuni. To assist in this process, Cleary established a RAAF Ward in Kimpo, Korea for the purpose of assessing and caring for the Commonwealth wounded until they were fit to fly to Iwakuni in Japan.



Senior Sister Helen Cleary tending an allied POW who is being repatriated from Korea at the Iwakuni medical facility, Japan.

While the work for the flight nurses was almost as demanding as it was during World War 2 (they mostly flew around 80 hours per month including long 30 hour over several days evacuations to Australia from Japan), Cleary spent most of her time managing the air evacuation system from Iwakuni. She returned from Japan in September 1953 completing almost one year deployed on the operation.

Promoted to Squadron Officer, she was Matron of No 3 RAAF Hospital at RAAF Base Richmond from 1957 to 1961. In the 1961 New Year's Honours List, she was appointed an Associate of the Royal Red Cross. In 1962, she completed a Diploma in Nursing Administration at the New South Wales College of Nursing. She was then posted to RAAF Base Butterworth as the Matron, Base Sick Quarters from 1963 to 1964 and then Matron of No 4 RAAF Hospital, RAAF Base Butterworth, from 1966 to 1967, on promotion to Wing Officer.



RAAF nurse tending a casualty in a C-130 Hercules during the Vietnam War

4 RAAF Hospital had reformed at Butterworth in March 1965, largely due to the growing need to support casualties from the Vietnam War, including the conduct of air evacuation through Butterworth to Australia. More than 3,100 battle and non-battle casualties were evacuated by 4 RAAF Hospital from Vietnam. While Cleary was the Matron, she is recorded as being the flight nurse on air evacuation flights. While the task was similar to that she had done in World War 2 and Korea, the aircraft were notably different with the RAAF using the significantly more capable C-130 Hercules for the air evacuation flights.

On 18 August 1967, Cleary was promoted to Group Officer and appointed Matron-in-chief of the RAAF Nursing Service. She was also appointed honorary nursing sister to Queen Elizabeth II.

On 8 June 1968, Cleary was appointed a Member of the Royal Red Cross. The Citation read:

Group Officer H.A. Cleary, the Matron in Chief of the RAAF Nursing Service has been a member of the RAAF Nursing Service since 1943. During the Second World War, she served in aeromedical duties in the Pacific area evacuating battle casualties and later prisoners of war. In post war years she was tutor sister for the training of nursing staff and medical orderlies in all phases of aeromedical evacuation. In 1952, during the occupation of Japan, she was Sister in Charge of sick quarters at Iwakuni and was again actively engaged in aeromedical duties during the Korean War. In 1961, Group Officer Cleary was awarded the Associate of the Royal Red Cross for devotion to duty. Group Officer Cleary has completed two tours of duty in Malaysia, the second time in 1966 as Matron of No 4 RAAF Hospital. During the whole period of her service, she has contributed greatly to the training of nursing staff and has always maintained the high ideals of the nursing profession.

After 25 years of distinguished service, serving in air evacuation roles in three conflicts across three decades, Group Officer Helen Cleary retired from the RAAF on 28 March 1969. Retiring to Adelaide, she passed away on 26 August 1987 at Toorak Gardens, Adelaide. She was buried with Catholic rites at Centennial Park Cemetery, Adelaide.

Meanwhile, Cleary along with the many other RAAF nurses who served during World War 2 and the Korean War developed a RAAF aeromedical capability that today remains as a critical capability in the current RAAF using modern

aircraft such as the C-17 that can fly around the world in a day. Today, No 3 Aeromedical Evacuation Squadron based at RAAF Base Richmond and Amberley carries on the proud legacy of flight nurses such as Helen Cleary.

Group Officer Helen Cleary's Honours and Awards were:

- Member of the Royal Red Cross
- 1939/1945 Star
- Pacific Star
- War Medal 1939/45
- Australian Service Medal 1939/45
- Korea Medal
- United Nations Service Medal
- General Service Medal(Southeast Asia Clasp)

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A RAAF C-17 Globemaster of 36 SQN configured for an aeromedical evacuation of a training sortie with medical staff from No 3 Aeromedical Evacuation Squadron treating patients on board. A vast difference from the C-47 Dakota aircraft being flown in World War 2 and the Korea War.