

ANZAC DAY 25th April



Malta 1915

During World War I, the Little Company of Mary Hospital in Malta was requisitioned as a military hospital and served as a base for Australian soldiers injured in the region. This occurred during the intense battles of the Dardanelles.

On the eve of her final vows, Mother Xavier informed Sr Bernard Martin that she would be sent to Malta with another sister. Their mission was to assist in nursing Australian soldiers until the end of the war, after which Sr Bernard was to proceed to Rome. Preparations began immediately, including vaccinations, passports, and personal belongings. They were scheduled to travel via army transport as part of the additional nursing staff for the hospital in Malta.

At Lewisham Hospital, Sydney, the seamstress was instructed to make Sr Bernard's habit from lighter material due to the heat. However, when the army discovered that she would be traveling in her religious habit instead of a military uniform, Mother Xavier was informed that this violated army regulations, and Sr Bernard could not be accommodated. As a result, their travel was rearranged on a civilian ship, delaying their departure.

Mother Philip Coleridge, the Superior General in Rome, later advised Mother Xavier that Sr Bernard should not leave until better arrangements could be made. Since there was no way to transfer her at Suez directly to Malta, she would have had to travel to Naples first and then board another ship to Malta. This route involved crossing the Mediterranean twice, a perilous journey at the time due to heavy naval mines and frequent torpedo attacks on British ships.

Consequently, the decision was made to postpone her departure. If the war ended before she could travel to Malta, Sr Bernard would proceed directly to Rome instead.

This uncertainty persisted until June 1917. In the meantime, Sr Bernard remained at Lewisham Hospital, Sydney, working in the General Hospital theatre. Eventually, Mother Xavier called her and informed her of a new assignment—she would be transferred to Christchurch, New Zealand, until the war's conclusion, as she was still expected to go to Rome afterward.

Christchurch 1918

Shortly after Sr Bernard's arrival, Christchurch was struck by the Spanish flu pandemic. Sr Bernard became involved in the crisis when a man from the United Services Hotel arrived with an urgent request for a Sister to assist. Many guests from various parts of the country had fallen seriously ill, some delirious. As hospitals reached full capacity, tents were set up on the hospital's roof as makeshift dormitories. The Sisters themselves began contracting the virus, and soon, Sr Bernard also fell ill.

Suffering from delirium, nausea, and heart complications, she grew dangerously weak. At the height of her illness, she was given a glass of champagne, which miraculously revived her. The epidemic took a heavy toll, with only five out of the twenty Sisters in the Christchurch community escaping infection.

Despite Sr Bernard's hope of eventually nursing soldiers in Malta, the war ended before she could be deployed. She remained in New Zealand until 1929.

1972 Martin, Mother Bernard - Footprints from the sands of time : Memoirs of Mother Bernard Martin

