



Janie Mason

Re-Interpreting the civilian nurse role in Darwin's first bombing raids 1942 - Sister Eileen Mary Neenan MBE

Eileen Mary Elcock née Neenan MBE was that 'jack of all trades' so often found in a good nurse. She showed the full breadth of the nursing role as envisaged by Florence Nightingale, when she managed, and managed well, in a variety of support systems for the care of the hospital in-patient. With the military take-over of Darwin Hospital by early 1942, the "sisters", civilian nurses employed by the Northern Territory Medical Service, were no longer rostered in a clinical role at the bedside. Without evacuation offer, they had felt abandoned by their employer. What was Eileen's extra-ordinary service which resulted in the award of an Imperial honour? The only nurse, civilian or military, so honoured for her service on that first terrible day of Japanese bombing raids, on the 19th of February 1942! In the official 1943 announcement of her award of the Member of the British Empire, Eileen Neenan was said to have "quietly/quickly and efficiently organised the house-keeping side" at Darwin Hospital. What was this house-keeping role? And how did Eileen remember that time? It has usually been easy assumed that civilian nurses remaining during the early militarisation period, helped to staff the Hospital. This journey of re-interpretation has resulted from research for a forthcoming book telling the significant part Eileen and her husband Harold Elcock played in the Northern Territory from pre-World War 11 to later years in the South East of South Australia. Memories from Eileen's family and acquaintance and an interview as Eileen's mental capacity was failing, three years before she died in 1989, provide clues to explain her "house-keeping" role. Construction of a truer picture emerges which does explain why she was so singularly honoured.