I n the days before some 30,000 soldiers sailed from Australian shores to fight in World War I, many kept their eyes focused on a tiny, rugged island off the West Australian town of Albany. There lived Fay Catherine Howe, a lighthouse-keeper’s daughter, who became well known among the confined Anzacs. Adept in the art of signal communications, 15-year-old Fay relayed messages via semaphore flags or Morse code to the troops from their loved ones as the men waited to set sail. She would then send their replies in Morse code via telegraph and undersea cable, back to Albany, where they were transferred from office to office and printed as telegrams. In doing so, she inadvertently became a cherished lifeline. Fay was born at her parents’ home at the base of Cape Leeuwin lighthouse, in 1899. They moved to Breaksea Island in 1906. Her father was a lighthouse keeper, and when her mother died in 1914, she took on the role of looking after him.

Leaving by dawn’s gentle glow, it took four hours for the massive fleet – two-thirds Australian and one-third New Zealander – to clear out of the isolated natural harbour. Many of the newly enlisted men were clutching wildflowers, given to them by locals, as they headed into the Southern Ocean. And although their stories are familiar, that of the ‘little girl on Breaksea Island’ (as Fay became known) and her impact on the Anzacs is not.

“Life on the island was pretty rugged,” Don says. “If the weather was bad, they had to make do… because the supply boat wouldn’t come until the next month. Mum had a rifle; she used to shoot rabbits and muttonbirds for food. She was known as a crack shot.”

Other than two donkeys, pigs and a dog, there were few companions, as the mainland was quite close, perhaps a couple of hundred metres. Who knows, maybe she was up on a cliff with her flags waving or a mirror flashing.”

Dianne argues that Fay – whose birthday fell on 4 August, the day war was declared – would’ve been swept up in the sense of duty and adventure that was rallying the nation. “It was their last chance to tell their loved ones things.”

A year after the Anzacs departed, Fay became pregnant to James Watson, an assistant lighthouse keeper who had recently to the island. Nineteen years her senior, James married Fay and they moved to Perth, where they raised a family of three. Don, their only son, says she didn’t talk much to him about her connection to the troops, but having visited Breaksea for the first time four years ago, he feels a deep sense of pride in her wartime role. “It was such an emotional thing for me, because I was walking on the ground my mother did 100 years ago,” he says. “It was a feeling of absolute pleasure.”

One hundred years ago, 36 troopships departed Albany’s King George Sound bound for Egypt and Europe. Australia’s first and single-largest convoy carried two-thirds Australian and one-third New Zealander – to clear out of the massive fleet that was rallying the nation. “It was their last chance to tell their loved ones things.”

Dianne says the gathering troops weren’t allowed off the ships, and many put messages into bottles that washed up on Albany’s beaches. “They sent beautiful embossed cards. Mum used to keep them in her sideboard drawer. There was a bundle...”

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