The Boer War saw the first involvement of Australian women in war, as nurses, and towards the end of the war as teachers for women and children detainees.

What type of war would they face? What standard would these women set for others to follow? And in what other ways were Australian women involved in this war?

INVESTIGATIONS:
1. Who were the Australian Boer War nurses?
2. What was the nature of the war experience of Australian nurses in South Africa?
3. What other major roles did Australian women have in the Boer War?
## Essential learning achievements

At the end of this topic students will have developed:
- knowledge of women’s main roles in the Boer War;
- understanding of some of the attitudes and values commonly held at the time;
- empathy with the experiences of the nurses; and
- an informed judgement about the relative significance of the various roles.

## Suggested classroom approaches

1. Have students look at the **Forming Ideas** page, and develop a range of possible answers.
2. Students can now use evidence to develop some sense of who the Boer War nurses were (**Investigation 1**). They will probably see them as quite remote figures from their own lives, due to their dress, their backgrounds and the distance of time. It is suggested that students be given a copy of the **Key Data** as part of the evidence they look at.
3. **Investigation 2** will help students overcome any likely sense of remoteness. The students will be able to read a number of scenarios that will help them develop empathy with the nurses and their experiences. Asking students to try and imagine their own feelings in the circumstances mentioned will help them relate to how and what the nurses were feeling at the time.
4. **Investigation 3** suggests two other roles for women in the Boer War — teaching Boer children who had been confined in British concentration camps, and fundraising. Students may decide that, while few teachers actually went to South Africa, they were actually more involved in the war than those who raised funds in Australia. Of course, the most significant role was that of the nurses.
5. If this is the only unit being studied, students may like to undertake the museum exercise in **Unit 7**. The DVD section on the Boer War (see below) will help students with this exercise.

## DVD

**Chapter 1 of the DVD** provides a museum study approach to the way the Australian War Memorial represents Australian women’s involvement in the Boer War. It is suggested that this be used as part of **Investigation 2**.

## CD-ROM activities

- What were Australian women’s uniforms like over time?
- Create a National Australian Women’s Memorial
- Create an Australian Women in War poster and timeline

## Finding out more

- Melanie Oppenheimer, *Australian Women and War*, Department of Veterans’ Affairs, Canberra, 2008
- Richard Reid, *Just Wanted To Be There*, Department of Veterans’ Affairs, Canberra, 1999
**Key Data**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conflict</th>
<th>Second South African Anglo-Boer War, commonly known as the Boer War.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Period</td>
<td>1899 – 1902</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Background to the conflict</td>
<td>Australia was not a nation when the Boer War broke out. What are now the six states of Australia were colonies of Britain. Each colony sent troops (a total of over 16000) to fight as part of the British forces in South Africa. The war involved a British Army (with colonial troops included) fighting the South African farmers of Dutch origin, called Boers. The war started over the supposed poor treatment of British settlers in the Boer controlled republics of South Africa (Transvaal and Orange Free State). In fact, a greater cause was the British desire to gain control over South African resources, especially diamonds and gold.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nature of the conflict</td>
<td>The war went through three stages. In the <strong>first stage</strong> the British forces were mostly infantry forces, using their traditional battleground tactics. The Boers were in smaller groups, and highly mobile. The standard Boer weapon, the .276 German Mauser, had an effective range of over 2000 metres. Boer tactics were built around this weapon, so it became a clash of two systems: the traditional, parade ground discipline style of massed frontal attack and movement, appropriate when faced by opponents who had to take time to re-load single-shot muzzle-loading weapons, but suicide against hit-and-run ambushes, concealed snipers, using smokeless powder and multi-shot magazines, shooting from the hills at the troops on the South African veldt (plains), and then disappearing from the scene. Consequently, there were many British defeats in the opening months of the war, with Boer snipers even competing to see who could hit the approaching officers first. The British soon learned to discard their colourful uniforms for the khaki colour of the veldt. The <strong>second stage</strong> of the war, from December 1899 until September 1900, was the period of the British counter-offensive, as British tactics changed. They saw the need to make their infantry mobile, meaning that they had to be on horseback. The ordinary British soldier could not ride, so the Colonial forces were turned into mounted infantry. They comprised only 20% of the total British force, but 50% of the mounted force, and therefore were the troops mostly involved in fighting. The result was that organised Boer resistance was eliminated, but the Boer forces now broke into small mobile forces, living off the land and getting support and shelter from Boer farms. This <strong>third stage</strong> of the war therefore involved depriving the roaming Boer commandos (small bands) of their sources of supply — by burning farm houses and destroying animals and crops. Part of this involved setting up camps for the civilians whose farms were thus destroyed — the infamous 'concentration camps' which led to the death by disease of 27,927 Boer civilian men, women and children in the unsanitary camps. Over 22,000 of these were under the age of sixteen.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How Australian women were involved</td>
<td>Casualties need nursing. British authorities were reluctant to send female nurses to the Boer War. Despite the magnificent work of Florence Nightingale during the Crimean War of the 1850s, nursing still had a reputation as a low-status and unprofessional occupation, whose members were neither moral nor hygienic. In Australia nurses were fighting to overcome these prejudices and outdated images. The New South Wales Army Nursing Service Reserve was the first women’s military nursing body. It was formed in August 1899, and in January 1900 a group of fourteen nurses from this organisation were sent to the war, and served with the New South Wales Army Medical Corps. Nurses from each of the other colonies followed, some of whom went independently, paying their own way.</td>
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</table>
Each colony sent a number of contingents and from 1902 a number of contingents of the Commonwealth Horse became the first ever national Australian military force to serve outside Australia. Over 16,000 men served with the colonial or Commonwealth contingents.

About 600 Australians were killed or died of illness, and 800 were wounded.

About sixty nurses were sent with the colonial medical contingents. More than twenty other women volunteered or paid their own way to nurse or teach in South Africa. One woman, Sister Fanny Hines, died of illness on 7 August 1900.

Map showing the main regions of the world where Australian servicemen and women served in this conflict

After the Boer War each state built a memorial. Here is the South Australian memorial, located in Adelaide.

1. What does this memorial show?
2. What messages does it give to viewers?
3. There is no reference on it to women. Suggest reasons why not.
4. If there were to be a reference, what do you think it should be?

There is a proposal to build a Boer War national memorial in Canberra. At the end of this unit you will be asked to think about what might be an appropriate way of commemorating the service of Australian women in an official national Boer War memorial.

You are about to investigate the roles and experiences of Australian women in the Boer War. This will enable you to test your ideas from questions 3 and 4.

IN YOUR INVESTIGATIONS you should draw on these components of the Australian Women in War resource:

- DVD: CHAPTER 1 Second South African Anglo-Boer War
- CD-ROM activities:
  - What were Australian women's uniforms like over time?
  - Create a National Australian Women's Memorial
  - Create an Australian Women in War poster and timeline
We have limited information about the experiences of Australian nurses in the Boer War.

One of your tasks when you explore history is to draw reasonable conclusions from limited evidence – realising that you may need to change your view if new evidence appears.

From the limited evidence below, describe the Australian Boer War nurses.

1. Imagine that you were a journalist seeing a group of nurses off to the Boer War. Write a brief description of these women for your readers.

2. Does any aspect of these nurses surprise you? Explain why or why not.

Source 1

Julia Bligh Johnston

Julia Bligh Johnston was one of the 14 nurses of the New South Wales Army Nursing Service Reserve who went to the Boer War.

She was a professional nurse, and a member of the 1st New South Wales Army Medical Corps.

Nursing originally carried a poor reputation for the quality of the women involved, but by 1900 that had changed. Johnston and the others were considered ‘desirable persons to enter a service composed of ladies’, though there was still some uncertainty and even hostility among some Army leaders about sending women to nurse soldiers in combat areas.

Most of the women who served in the Boer War were from the middle and upper classes – Johnson’s father was prominent in the local church, a returning officer for the local electoral area, a magistrate, district coroner, and president of the local Hawkesbury Benevolent Society.

She had a good education, and had previously acted as a companion and teacher. But her desire to serve others meant that these callings did not satisfy her. ‘No one who has ever experienced the satisfaction that arises from work of this nature … ever cares to go back to the dull routine of earning her living in any of the other spheres at present open to women.’

Source 2

The original fourteen nurses

The original fourteen New South Wales nurses were typical of the nurses who went to South Africa:

- most were aged 25-41
- all were single
- all were professional trained nurses
- ten called themselves ‘British’, two Scottish, one (Julia Bligh Johnson) English and Scotch, another Irish – though in fact eight had been born in the Australian colonies
- ten were Church of England, four were Protestants.

They went out of a sense of duty, adventure, patriotism, or a combination of these.
What was the nature of the war experience of Australian nurses in South Africa?

1. Look at Chapter 1 of the DVD. It will provide you with some information and ideas about how the displays in the Australian War Memorial show Australian women in the Boer War. They are a starting point for your investigations in this unit.

2. Look at the following accounts of nurses’ experiences in Sources 1–7 and use that evidence to answer these questions:

   2. Describe the conditions and nature of the war for the nurses.

   3. List some of the feelings the nurses may have experienced. Justify your ideas with evidence.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conditions/Feelings</th>
<th>Evidence to support this</th>
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**Source 1**

The nature of a hospital

Bloemfontein, ‘the fountain of flowers’, was a pestilential city, ‘a pest hole of enteric fever and other illness’. Dead horses and human sewage had infected the water and the army … and [in a few weeks] upwards of 1000 men died. The carts carrying their blanket-wrapped bodies rumbled down the streets by day and night. The sick tents were crowded, the unwashed and despairing sick men lay on the floor in their stained uniforms with their one service blanket to cover them. An ‘all pervading faecal odour’ filled the makeshift hospital.


**Source 2**

Nursing typhoid patients

Lately I have taken to cleaning the mouths of the worst typhoids. By the time I have finished doing twenty or thirty tremulous pairs of lips, the same number of quivering tongues, with the teeth, gums, and palates accompanying them, I am nearly as tremulous as any of them. It is the most trying piece of work I have ever undertaken. When one begins, their mouths are stiff and caked with sores so that they cannot articulate or taste at all (many times) till they are cleaned.


**Source 3**

A typical day

Sister Janey Lempriere wrote this about a typical day:

The sister has to go around with the surgeon, take his orders, pass the dressings – the orderlies fetch & carry & clean up after dressings. It is puzzling to define the work the sister does. She has all anxiety and worry. Before 1 o’clock she leaves for lunch, writing down any instructions for the orderly or relieving sister, & then after lunch we rest till 4.45 till we have aft. tea & then go back to superintend again from 5 till 7.45 when we are bound to return for dinner at 8. The night sisters go on duty at nine, leaving at 8 in the morning. The hours are not long, but you get tired all the same from running about.

**Source 4**

Nursing conditions

Imagine being left alone on the veldt in a Boer farm with your patient[s], far from assistance, hearing no news, and knowing nothing of what was happening. My hut was built of clay, round with a mushroom-shaped roof of reeds … There were no drugs other than [those] I had with me, and no medical aid available. All treatment was left entirely in my hands … Altogether I had thirty patients [here] … and thirteen at one time. Seven in one small tent on the ground with a macintosh sheet underneath. The cases were pneumonia, double pneumonia, broncho-pneumonia after measles, concussions, malaria and dysentery. Fortunately no deaths.

Julia Johnson in Jan Bassett, Guns and Brooches, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1992, pp20-21

**Source 5**

Death of a nurse

But the experience could also take its toll on the sisters’ health. One nurse, Fanny Hines, died of disease there of ‘an attack of pneumonia contracted in devotion to duty. She was quite alone with as many as twenty-six patients at one time, no possibility of assistance or relief, and without sufficient nourishment.’

Quoted in Jan Bassett, Guns and Brooches, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1992, p24

**Source 6**

The commitment of the nurses

Captain W. W. Dobbin, a Victorian Bushman, wrote:

‘You have no doubt heard of all the misfortunes, disease and discomfort encountered by the troops unfortunate enough to be sent to Beira, Marndellas, etc. Our nursing sisters were the only sisters who ventured into these districts, and they have indeed done more than their share of work. At times one, sometimes two, would be trekked off on a week’s coaching journey to some fever bed where the troops are falling ill, with possibly no accommodation but a deserted public house. I have seen two sisters on their knees scrubbing and cleaning such a place to receive their patients, and in the middle of their work 10 or 12 sick and dying men dumped down from an ox wagon, and no orderlies detailed and no native servants.

‘The nurses would be obliged to take off some of their own clothing to make pillows for sick men, and then go outside to cook food under a blazing sun. They were never with us after Beira, but some of our troops, and men from other contingents write and speak in most grateful terms of their willing services.’

Imagine that you could interview a Boer War nurse about her experiences. What further information would you like to have?

Imagine that you are a journalist reporting back from South Africa on what the nurses are doing. Write a brief paragraph for your readers.

From this evidence in Sources 1–7, how significant would you say was the contribution of Australian nurses in this war?

How would their contribution have helped change the opinion of those who may have been critical of their involvement initially?

How might it have changed people’s ideas back in Australia?
INVESTIGATION

What other major roles did Australian women have in the Boer War?

Look at this evidence. What does it tell us about two other roles undertaken by Australian women in the Boer War – one in South Africa, and the other on the home front?

Source 1

Women teachers in South Africa

Of the Australian teachers [who went to South Africa to teach children who had been locked up in concentration camps] most came from New South Wales and Victoria, with four from Queensland and six from South Australia (the selectors considered Tasmania and Western Australia too remote). Ten of the New South Wales teachers worked in state schools while five were described as ‘teachers of high attainment and long experience outside Dept’. Emily Kennedy had a university degree and Isabel Whitton was also highly qualified: employed at Sydney Presbyterian Ladies’ College, she had previously been Principal of St Warburgh’s College for young ladies in Goulburn …

Among the Australian teachers, Ida M. Robertson provides a particularly interesting case. Robertson had strong links with the United Kingdom and a sister living in Ulster. A solicitor’s daughter, she grew up in the Australian bush and began teaching at seventeen, later working in a large school in Sydney. But she had also spent four years in Ireland as a music teacher. Robertson’s brother had been killed in November 1901 while serving in South Africa with the New South Wales Mounted Infantry, and according to her referee it was this that had ‘turned her mind to this work … she is ambitious to do her small part in helping the Motherland’. Robertson herself, however, merely says that since his death she had ‘had a great struggle’: she was currently working ‘12 hours a day, but wish to give this life up as payment for teachers in the colonies is very poor and one has to work so very hard before an income of any size can be made’. Indeed, while a significant number of Australian applicants were British born, economic necessity as much as patriotism seems to have been a common factor. Unusually, several of the Australian teachers were married women, presumably widows thrown on their own resources.

Eliza Riedl: ‘Teaching Empire: British and Dominions Women Teachers in the South African War Concentration Camp’ in English Historical Review, CXX, 489 (Dec. 2005), pp.1330-1 and 1333-4

'Australian lady teachers for South Africa'. The Australasian, 9 August 1902. NLA

1. Compare the roles and qualities of these teachers with the nurses. What similarities and differences exist?

2. What motives existed for women taking on a teaching job in a foreign country during war time?
Women as fundraisers

A less well-known story from the Boer War was the work of Australian women with the patriotic funds. Men and women came together to raise funds for the dependants of imperial and colonial soldiers. Major patriotic funds were established in every colony. The funds were almost always administered by men while the women did most of the organising and fundraising. There were some exceptions such as the dynamic and wealthy doyen of Victorian society, Janet, Lady Clarke, who established the Victorian Contingent Fund specifically to assist wives, mothers and children of men killed in the war. A Ladies’ Patriotic League was established in Sydney using the network of colonial Lady Mayoresses across New South Wales. Comforts for the soldiers were made, boxed up, and despatched to South Africa. Other groups in the community, such as the public school teachers and their students rallied behind the cause, and held concerts, sold penny coupons, and played sporting matches, with all proceeds donated to the funds.

Melanie Oppenheimer, Australian Women and War, Department of Veterans’ Affairs, Canberra, 2008 p9

'Patriotic Australian Girls'

3 Why would people in Australia raise funds for ‘comforts’ for the troops?
4 Why would mainly women and children be involved?
Of the three roles of nurses, teachers and fundraisers, which would you say was:

- the most common role performed by women?
- the most significant role?

Justify your answers.

Many of the returned nurses joined the new army reserve nursing force set up after the Boer War, and set its professional tone. Their experience in South Africa had also helped to dispel doubts about the value of women nurses in war theatres. When world war broke out in 1914 many Boer War nursing veterans joined and served in World War I. From this information, what impacts did nurses have on women's roles and status in society? What impacts might the war have had on them?

What would you now suggest as an appropriate way of including an acknowledgement of the role of women in any new national Boer War memorial?