During the Vietnam War, Australian servicewomen were involved as nurses.

Australian women civilians were involved in a number of roles, including members of civilian medical teams, Red Cross support, entertainers, Australian Embassy staff, and journalists.

On the home front, some women were actively engaged in the peace and anti-war protest movements.

Some women also ‘watched and waited’ anxiously as their men served tours of duty with the Australian forces. Five hundred and twenty Australian families lost a loved one in Vietnam.

INVESTIGATIONS:
1. What were the roles and experiences of Australian nurses in Vietnam?
2. How were women involved in the war on the home front?
At the end of this topic students will have developed:
- knowledge of women’s main roles in the Vietnam War;
- understanding of some of the attitudes and values commonly held at the time; and
- empathy with the experiences of the women involved.

**Suggested classroom approaches**

1. Have students look at the *Forming Ideas* page. This will start them thinking about the image of the Australian nurses during the war. The quotations clearly suggest that they were valued by the troops, but do not tell students much about the reality of their experiences.

2. **Investigation 1** helps students explore the nurses’ experiences. It also encompasses the civilian nurses who had many similar experiences to their service counterparts, and asks students to reflect on the continuing impacts of war on participants after the fighting has finished.

3. **Investigation 2** looks at a variety of home front experiences of women. The popular home front image that students will have of Vietnam is probably one of protest. In fact, a minority of people were active in protests against the war. The sources ask students to think about the prevailing attitudes and values of the time, as well as the variety of motivations that existed for protests. It also reminds students that the cost of war is borne by families, and that out of the horror came a wave of migration by Vietnamese, many of whom had horrific experiences of the war that they put behind them in their new life in Australia.

4. If this is the only unit being studied, students may like to undertake the museum exercise in **Unit 7**.

**DVD**

*Chapter 4 of the DVD* provides a museum study approach to the way the Australian War Memorial represents Australian women’s involvement in modern conflicts and peace operations, including the Vietnam War.

It is suggested that this segment of the DVD be used as part of **Investigation 1**.

**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
- Australian women and the Vietnam War — Create your own documentary

**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>Vietnam War</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Period</td>
<td>1962–1973</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Background to the conflict</td>
<td>In 1962 Australia sent training advisers to South Vietnam as part of a policy to oppose communist expansion in Asia. These men were to help train South Vietnamese troops to fight a North Vietnamese-backed Communist insurgency.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In 1965 Australia sent combat troops to help the South Vietnamese in their fight, and in 1966 they included Australian conscripts. In 1969 the Australian Government began a gradual withdrawal of troops from Vietnam, with the last troops withdrawn in 1972.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nature of the conflict</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Australian troops were based initially with American forces in Bien Hoa Province just north of Saigon, and then in their own area of responsibility, Phuoc Tuy province, with troops based at Nui Dat, and at the port of Vung Tau. The troops were supported by the Royal Australian Air Force and the Royal Australian Navy. The main combat experience of most troops was patrolling of areas within the province to ambush enemy troops. There were occasional large-scale combat actions, but most soldiers did not see or come into contact with the enemy for much of the time they were in the field. Support for the infantry came from engineers, artillery, armoured personnel carriers tanks, helicopter gunships and medical evacuations. The Australians had a field hospital at the supply base at Vung Tau, with a smaller support field ambulance based at Nui Dat.</td>
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<tr>
<th>How Australian women were involved</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Forty-three nurses served as part of the Australian Army’s involvement in Vietnam between 1966 and 1972. Service nurses were also involved in the evacuation of casualties back to Australia. About 210 Australian women civilian nurses were involved in volunteer medical teams organised by the Department of Foreign Affairs. Other Australian women were involved in a variety of roles, including Red Cross support, entertainers, Australian Embassy staff, and journalists. On the home front some women were actively engaged in the peace and anti-war protest movements that were part of the divided Australian society at that time. Far fewer people, including women, were active in demonstrating their support for Australian involvement in the war. Women also ‘watched and waited’ anxiously as their men served their tours of duty with the Australian forces.</td>
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<tr>
<th>Key statistics</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Over 50,000 Australians served. Five hundred and twenty Australian service personnel are officially accepted as having died while on service. One of those was an Australian nurse, Barbara Black.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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

Forming ideas

These photographs show the National Australian Forces Vietnam War Memorial.

One wall is devoted to statements about the war. There are three of these that relate to nurses’ roles:

THE EFFORT REQUIRED OF THE NURSING SISTERS INDICATES THEIR TOUR OF DUTY SHOULD BE REDUCED.

AN EXTREME EFFORT WAS DEMANDED FROM NURSING STAFF ON THESE OCCASIONS - OVER 24 HOURS ON DUTY WAS DONE ON MOST OF THE DAYS MENTIONED.

AT VAMPIRE PAD OUR OWN DOCTORS AND NURSES TOOK OVER - WE KNEW WE HAD MADE IT.

What do these statements mean? Are they accurate? Are they an adequate representation of women’s roles in the war? Record your initial ideas. You will be asked to look at these answers again at the end of this unit.

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

UNIT 1 (pages 77–86)

DVD:
CHAPTER 4 Modern Conflicts and Peace Operations

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
• Australian women and the Vietnam War — Create your own documentary
What were the roles and experiences of Australian nurses in Vietnam?

1. Look at Chapter 4 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 Vietnam War. They are a starting point for your investigations in this unit.

The Royal Australian Army Nursing Corps (RAANC) nurses were posted to Vietnam, rather than volunteering to go. They were poorly prepared for the experience, receiving no special training. The first nurses arrived to very primitive conditions, and had to make do. Most served in field hospitals, and therefore treated all aspects of war casualties — from inoculations and minor illnesses linked to gunshot wounds and mine injuries. They treated enemy prisoners, as well as Australian, allied and civilian victims of the war.

Most RAANC nurses were based at the hospital at Vung Tau, or in Saigon.

Vietnam service illustrated the great changes which had occurred in military nursing since World War I and World War II.

Look at the information in Source 1 on nursing in Vietnam, and answer the questions that follow.

2. What were the main tasks that the nurses performed?

3. In what ways did the war have an impact on their nursing role?

4. What do you think would have been the impacts on them?

5. What do you think would have been the best and worst aspects of their experiences?

Source 1

Australian service nurses

[The over-riding concern for most of the army nurses was the condition of their own troops — ‘the boys’. Their injuries, from shellfire, explosions, gunfire and mines, were horrific — so bad, in fact, that in any other circumstances many would never even have had to be treated, because they would have died before reaching a hospital …

[Army nurse] Trish Ferguson recalls: ‘ … as soon as there was a contact, a siren would go all over the hospital as far down as the beach, and anyone who was off-duty would either turn up or phone in and see how many wounded there were and if they were needed … when the wounded boy came in on a stretcher, there’d be someone standing by with scissors and you’d cut straight through their shoelaces right up their clothes so you could lift them up and examine their back before they were even put on the bed. The back was examined and then the front and the anaesthetist would be there to put the drip in and straight away the pathologist would take the blood for cross-match and everyone else had their own jobs to do, and the boys would be inside scrubbing the theatre, and you’d take the patient through to the theatre within twenty minutes of them being wounded.’ …

Once, while routinely cutting through an injured man’s shoelaces in triage, Trish Ferguson was appalled when his foot came away in her hand — only the boot had held it in place. Sometimes the injuries were less obvious — shell fragments had to be meticulously removed, along with bits of mud and scrub, before a minuscule perforation of the abdomen could be detected …

Few of the nurses had ever seen anything like it before … Despite the seriousness of their injuries, the soldiers’ survival rate was very high — only about 2.6 per cent of those admitted to hospital died, about half the mortality rate in the Second World War …

The Australian women earned only two-thirds of what a male officer of similar rank earned. The American nurses, who had equal pay, were aghast at the discrepancy, but the Australian made no protest — after all it was the same back home …

[Army Nurse] Colleen Mealy reckons that seeing the women in a clean starched uniform, however unglamorous, was reassuring to the injured men: ‘You had to look the part, just for our boys to come in and say “we’re home, we’re right, somebody’s looking after us”.’ …

[RAAF nurse] Del Waterman … accompanied the injured troops back to Australia … Sometimes coffins had to be transported in the body of the plane with the injured men. ‘One time which was particularly sad, we had two brothers, and one was alive and one was in the coffin’, Del recalls. ‘He just said to me, “Look after him Sis, that’s my brother”.’ …

Programmed to put others first, the nurses soldiered on,shouldering the enormous emotional burden of their sick and dying ‘boys’ … for the women who had known the harrowing intimacy of sharing someone’s last moments, there would be no forgetting. As ‘Dusty’, an American army nurse, tried to explain: ‘That act of helping someone die is more intimate [than anything], and once you have done that, you can never be ordinary again.’

Siobhan McHugh, Minefields to Miniskirts, Australian Women and the Vietnam War, Doubleday, Sydney, 1993, pp17-23 passim
Source 2

A report on the medical status of nurses after the war

Recognising the sampling limitations (due to the small number of nurses studied) the conditions in the female study for which there is apparently statistical significant excess in comparison with the general community are:

- asthma
- breast cancer
- depression
- eczema and dermatitis
- gastric reflux
- haemorrhoids
- hearing and ear problems
- hepatitis (A and B)
- hydatidiform mole
- ischaemic heart disease
- live births with labour complications
- malaria
- overall total of cancers
- panic attacks
- self-assessed rating of fair or poor health
- stillbirths

An excess level is defined as statistically in excess of what may be expected in a community sample …

It is a reasonable hypothesis that some aspect of the association between the veterans and their service in Vietnam may have contributed to these conditions …

The overall outcome lends some weight to the hypothesis that the general health of female Vietnam veterans is worse than that of other Australian women of comparable age …


6 Using Sources 1 and 2, why do you think war experience would continue to have an effect on the nurses’ health after the war?

Source 3

Some images of Australian service nurses in Vietnam

A Two Australian RAANC nurses, part of an operating theatre team.
AWM P01702.009

B An RAAF nurse tending patients aboard an aeromedical evacuation flight.
AWM P01948.008

C An RAANC nurse gives voluntary English lessons to two Vietnamese girls.
AWM EKN/69/0034/VN

7 How do these images contribute to your knowledge and appreciation of the role of Australian service nurses in Vietnam?
Civilian nurses in Vietnam

About 210 Australian nurses travelled to South Vietnam between 1964 and 1972 to care for injured civilians during the war.

The tour of duty was generally six months for nurses, although some spent a full year in Vietnam. Many returned for a second or even a third time …

They worked in intensely crowded wards to care for adults and children, many of whom had dreadful wounds caused by exploding mines. It wasn’t uncommon for two or three patients to share a bed …

The nurses worked during the day and were on-call every second night, both as ward and theatre nurses. They had two days off every three weeks.

When things were quiet at the hospital, surgeons, accompanied by off-duty nurses, would travel 50 kilometres to a leprosarium to perform plastic surgery. Hygiene and sterility were always an issue and the nurses had to apply some lateral thinking to maintain both standards and supplies. Sometimes theatre packs were put out on the grass to dry, where a local pig would weave its way delicately past the precious drying linen …

The nurses also tried to look after their own health, but illness was unavoidable for some. ‘One of our problems was the icy poles that the children would excitedly bring us,’ Von says. ‘We knew they were made from contaminated local water, but we couldn’t refuse to eat them.’

This diplomacy was often rewarded by incapacitating bouts of diarrhoea and vomiting …

Everyone has come back changed in some way … Some had severe health problems which have lingered, although they agree it would be difficult to prove these things were caused in Vietnam.

Most Australian medical and nursing personnel returned home by December 1972. There was no de-briefing, no official welcome. They simply returned to work.

Using Sources 4 and 5, why do you think these women volunteered for this service?

What qualities did they show?

Compare their experiences and attitudes with those of the service nurses — would you say they were mostly the same, or mostly different? Why?

Would you expect these women to suffer similar post-war health problems as their service counterparts? Explain your reasons.

What do the photographs and captions in Source 5 tell you about some of the other Australian women’s activities in Vietnam?
A popular image of the home front during the Vietnam War is one of protest.

In fact it was probably only a small minority of people who actively protested. You could test this statement by interviewing people from that time.

But even when there were protests there were different types of protest, against different things, and reflecting different motives or values.

Look at the evidence of protest in Sources 1–6. Comment on what it tells you about women and protests during the Vietnam War.

Source 1

University students protest

Source 2

A first demonstration

My first demonstration was a trifling affair, no more than 500 strong. It was led by several scruffy and uncouth young men … I was given a placard which stated, THE NLF FIGHTS FOR FREEDOM, and wondered if I should carry it if I had no idea who or what the NLF was. [The NLF was the National Liberation Front, the Vietnamese Communist Party in South Vietnam.] I did carry it, sheepishly, and joined half-heartedly in chants of ‘Out now!’ and ‘No! No! We won’t go!’ A man leaned out of the pub and spat, ‘You all need a good bath!’ … One woman pushed through the crowd, clasped my arm, and said, ‘God bless you, dear!’ There was no riot, not even an arrest, and I walked back to college, footsore, half disappointed, half relieved, and chiefly interested in the boy beside me and whether he would suggest a cup of coffee or a movie. He didn’t.


Source 3

A peace protest

Source 4

Women remember (1)

We were at uni and enjoying life. We thought the war was wrong, and marched a few times against it down to the city, sat down to stop traffic for a while, then went back to uni. We thought we were doing a good thing. I now believe that a fair bit of it was just being part of the crowd. We thought it was wrong, but we were not really putting our lives on the line to protest.

Another of the tactics of protest at the time was trying to help destroy the draft by putting in false papers — ‘fill in a falsie’ it was called. I registered myself, a female, to try and foul up the system. I also know that Michael Mouse, Ginger Meggs and P. Lap were also in the system, waiting to be called up for military service!

Interview in 1996 with Ros, a 16 year old student in 1968. Ryebuck Media

Source 5

A man remembers

My memories of this period are contradictory.

On the one hand there was the deep moral commitment, and the exhilaration of feeling that you were right, that you had taken a stand. There was the sense of standing up before history, of trying to have an effect on that history.

On the other hand, there was the factional infighting of the left of the movement, the astounding levels of sexism amongst the young student men, the moral ambiguities surrounding ‘our boys’, the sense of being out of step with the society, especially in the early phases of the movement.

Source 6

Women remember (2)

Well I just accepted what we were told by the government. They knew the state of the war, and what was going on. I trusted and followed our representatives, and believed in the war. That belief was a bit strained by 1970 and 1971, and I was glad to leave the war. I still believed that it was right to try and stop communism. I did not believe that the South Vietnamese would survive very long after we left, but I suppose we all felt drained and tired and looking for an ‘honourable’ way out. I could not agree with the radicals who not only opposed the war but supported the enemy — that was traitorous. I did respect the conscientious objectors, but I thought a lot of the anti-war people were wrong. Looking back now, however, they were a lot more right than I was — though at the time I could not have seen or said that.

Interview in 1994 with Lorraine, a 30 year old secretary in 1968. Ryebuck Media

As in all wars, a major role of women is to wait anxiously for news of their loved ones in danger. Here is an account of the return of the remains of a soldier who was killed in 1971, but whose body was not recovered until 2007.

A digger is returned

A fallen Digger finally got the welcome home he deserved when his coffin landed at a Melbourne air base yesterday, 36 years after he was killed in Vietnam.

John Gillespie was just 24 years old and had a young wife and toddler daughter at home when he died serving his country, killed when the RAAF helicopter he was in was shot down during a rescue mission in the Long Hai hills on April 17, 1971.

His remains were returned to his family for burial after they were flown in to the Point Cook RAAF base. His coffin was draped in the Australian flag, and troops formed a guard of honour.

Lance Cpl Gillespie’s widow, Carmel Hendry, daughter Fiona Pike, two sisters and a brother were there, along with federal Veterans’ Affairs Minister Alan Griffin, Vietnam veterans, and Australian Defence Force officials and personnel.

Ms Hendry said while the return of her husband’s remains closed a chapter in the family’s history, it would herald a new beginning in which her daughter and her daughter’s children would have a proper place to mourn and reflect on his life and ultimate sacrifice.

‘It hasn’t been easy for any of us,’ she said. ‘But with support from everyone, particularly the Government, we have made it. We have done this. We’ve got him home.

‘We’re relieved. We’re exhausted. But we’re just so happy he’s on home soil and that we can say hello and have a beer with him.’

Shannon McRae, Herald Sun, December 20, 2007
Why do you think it was so important for this family to have the remains of their loved one returned?

In World Wars I and II the Australian dead were buried in official cemeteries near where they died. Why do you think this policy of returning the dead from war began only during the Vietnam War?

Another perspective

Between 1975 and 1981 over 40,000 Vietnamese refugees have been settled in Australia. Look at Source 8 as an account of one Vietnamese woman’s experience as a refugee.

Source 8

Coming to Australia

I came from a middle class Catholic family in Vietnam. My parents were former officers of the South Vietnamese army and my father was active in the anti-communist movement. My parents were made refugees twice: the first time fleeing from North Vietnam to South Vietnam when communists took government in 1954; the second was when we left Vietnam bound for Australia following the fall of South Vietnam to the Viet Cong. While many people probably benefited from the new regime, my parents were not one of them. They witnessed the arbitrary arrests, torture, executions and persecution for certain classes of people considered bourgeoisie or traitors by the communists. They witnessed the devastation of terrorism and civil war.

To flee one’s country is not an easy choice to make. You’re leaving behind your homes, your relatives and friends, your culture, your possessions, your memories, your childhood. Fleeing a country on a boat is also a dangerous affair. People speak of the savagery of being looted, raped and killed by pirates at sea. People talk about the unspeakable horrors of resorting to cannibalism of the dead to regain enough strength to fix the boat’s engine. Many of us had knowledge of this so why did we take the risk?

We seek freedom because the government we were escaping did not respect our freedom. You will find this is a common story among refugees.

We were the relatively lucky boatpeople who did not encounter pirates, whose boat was not blown off course by storms, and who were rescued just in time. However, the journey was no less perilous. One infant, who would be my age today, died during the journey. On the third day our water supply was contaminated. We were all thirsty and frightened to the point where we could have given up all together. But we took the gamble because we believed the risk at sea was still better than staying in communist Vietnam.

Minh Nguyen, Extract from a talk given to high school students at St Scholastica College, Glebe, Sydney, 8 March 2004  
www.acmica.org/pub_nguyen-refugees.html


Why did her family risk everything to escape?

What qualities did Minh Nguyen show?

Do you think this experience is part of Australian women’s war experience? Explain your reasons.

Go back to your initial ideas about the Vietnam War Memorial. What would you add to your initial comments?