

# WARTIME SNAPSHOTS

## Australian Service Nursing

Ever since the first military nurses sailed for the Boer War in South Africa in January 1900, Australian nurses have served in theatres of war and conflict around the world. They have worked under the most hazardous conditions, endured extreme discomfort in the most harrowing of circumstances and sometimes lost their lives.



## Background

For more than a hundred years, women have served as nurses in Australia's armed forces. During the First World War nurses serving with the Australian Army Nursing Service (AANS) were the only women in the Australian Imperial Force – the force that Australia sent to the war. A number of Australian women also served with Queen Alexandra's Imperial Military Nursing Service (QAIMNS) or contributed to the war effort overseas through associations like the British, French or Belgian Red Cross or the Young Women's Christian Association. Australian nurses served in the Mediterranean, France, Belgium, England, Salonika and India, as well as on hospital ships. On the Western Front they worked in advanced dressing stations and field hospitals behind the lines, often within range of artillery and subject to aerial bombardment. By the end of the war more than twenty AANS nurses had died and seven had been awarded the Military Medal for courage under fire.

More than 4000 women served with the AANS during the Second World War, more than 600 with the Royal Australian Air Force Nursing Service and sixty with the Royal Australian Naval Nursing Service. They deployed to an even wider variety of locales than their predecessors, reflecting the global nature of the war and the extent of Australia's involvement in the campaigns against Germany and her European allies, and against Japan in Asia and the Pacific. Australia's Second World War nurses faced considerable danger and seventy-eight lost their lives. Nurses were among the thousands of Australians who became prisoners of the Japanese, suffering more than three years of severe privation in poorly equipped, crowded and unsanitary camps.

After the Second World War Australian military nurses served with the British Commonwealth Occupation Force in Japan, where they tended British Commonwealth servicemen and their families and worked in the major British Commonwealth hospital alongside British Commonwealth doctors and nurses. During the Korean War in the early 1950s, Australian nurses served in South Korea and Japan and on medical evacuation flights. In the following decade they played an important role in Australia's longest war of the twentieth century, the Vietnam War, many of them serving in the main Australian hospital at Vung Tau.

Over recent decades the ranks of female military personnel have swelled and women are now to be found in most branches of the Australian Defence Force. From 1972 onwards, men were permitted to serve within the Royal Australian Army Nursing Corps. Women still serve as military nurses, but now also as doctors and in other fields of military medicine. As well as treating those wounded in the wars and conflicts in which Australians have fought, military nurses now also deploy on peacekeeping operations treating wounded service men and women from Australia and from other countries' armed forces, and often also local civilians.

## Sources

- Jan Bassett, *Guns and Brooches*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 2008.  
Kirsty Harris, *More than Bombs and Bandages*, Big Sky, Sydney, 2011.  
Melanie Oppenheimer, *Australian Women and War*, Department of Veterans' Affairs, Canberra, 2008.  
Richard Reid, *Just wanted to be there: Australian service nurses, 1899-1999*, Department of Veterans' Affairs, 1999.  
Patsy Adam Smith, *Australian Women at War*, Thomas Nelson, Victoria, 1984.

## Teaching activities

- Look at the Anzac Day poster.
  - What can you see? Describe the people and what they are doing.
  - Describe how the military nurses' uniforms are different. What do you think is the reason for these changes?
  - How might the Australian nurses be feeling?
- Use the link below to locate the areas mentioned in the background information:
    - The Mediterranean
    - France
    - Belgium
    - England
    - Salonika
    - India
    - Germany
    - Japan
    - South Korea
    - Vietnam
  - What do you notice about the locations where Australian service nurses have worked?
- Read the background information.
  - What does AANS stand for?
  - Where did Australian nurses serve during the Second World War?
  - What role did Australian nurses have during the Korean War?
  - What change to the Royal Australian Army Nursing Corps occurred in 1972?
- Matron Kathleen Best was a military nurse based in Greece during the Second World War. Use the link below to answer the following questions:
  - Where in Australia did Kathleen come from?
  - What award did Kathleen receive after her service during the war? What was she given this award for?
  - Kathleen asked her nurses who would like to 'stay' and who would 'go' during the evacuation to safety. Not one Sister wrote 'go'. Why do you think that was?
  - What would you have done?
- The Geneva Convention is a set of international rules which many, but not all, countries agree to follow during wartime. Article Nine states 'Personnel charged with the transportation and treatment of the wounded and sick shall be respected and protected under all circumstances. If they fall into the hands of the enemy they shall not be treated as prisoners of war.'
  - Use the link below to find out when the Geneva Convention was created.
  - During the Second World War, Japanese forces did not follow this rule. Of the sixty-five Australian nurses evacuated on the SS *Vyner Brooke* in 1942, how many became prisoners of war?
  - Use the link below to research the conditions of Palembang camp, Sumatra, where those Australian nurses were sent. Imagine you are one of these nurses, and write a secret diary entry about daily life in the camp.
- Use the link below to learn about military nursing today, and read about the experience of Captain Roneel Chandra.
  - Why was it important for Roneel to stay calm during the helicopter crash?
  - Imagine you are Roneel and must call for help on the radio. What would you say?



Image of Kathleen Best – AWM ART22216

## Activity websites

- Q2. [mapsofworld.com/](http://mapsofworld.com/)
- Q4. [anzacportal.dva.gov.au/multimedia/publications/greece-and-crete/biographyfancy-seeing-aussie-girl-too](http://anzacportal.dva.gov.au/multimedia/publications/greece-and-crete/biographyfancy-seeing-aussie-girl-too)
- Q5. [anzacportal.dva.gov.au/history/conflicts/thaiburma-railway-and-hellfire-pass/locations/australian-prisoners-asia-pacific-8](http://anzacportal.dva.gov.au/history/conflicts/thaiburma-railway-and-hellfire-pass/locations/australian-prisoners-asia-pacific-8)
- Q6. [awm.gov.au/visit/exhibitions/nurses/today](http://awm.gov.au/visit/exhibitions/nurses/today)