DEVELOPMENT OF THE
WOMEN’S SERVICES
IN THE
AUSTRALIAN DEFENCE FORCE

Mary Bryant and Matt Walsh
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Introduction

When Australia’s Military History is recorded and people write about it there is a focus on the causes, battles and outcomes of events. There is a lot about the men who were involved and very little on the contribution of women. Australia’s women have been involved with our military forces since 1898 and have served in all theatres of war and campaigns alongside the men since this time.

Whilst the following briefly describes the development and involvement of women within the three Services of the Australian Defence Force, it is more a social history than a chronological listing of military events.

Australian Army Nursing Service

The Military Nursing Service began just prior to the commencement of the Boer War on the 30th August when the New South Wales Army Nursing Service Reserve (NSWANSR) was formed as part of the New South Wales Army Medical Corps. The Service under the command of a Lady Superintendent E.J. Gould and Superintendent Julia Bligh Johnston recruited twenty four nursing sisters, all of whom “…were expected to be female….have at least three years service,… Be between twenty four and forty and give their marital status”. (Bassett, 1997) Whilst being married did not disqualify them, the records suggest that the majority were single. They were provided with a uniform and paid two pounds ($4) on joining and one pound ($2) each year while efficient. These first nurses were sworn in, that is they were commissioned rather than enlisted (Bassett, 1997).

Australian Nursing Service Sister Boer War

On the 17th January 1900 the first contingent of fourteen nurses from the New South Wales Nursing Service sailed for South Africa. The New South Wales Government was the only colonial government to pay the fares and salaries of nurses for South Africa. Before any more could follow money needed to be raised privately to cover their costs (travel, clothing, salaries and insurance). South Australia on the 21st February 1900 sent five nurses known as the South Australian Transvaal Nurses, under the leadership of Miss Martha Bidmead. Miss Marianne Rawson from Victoria took nine other nurses on the 10th March 1900. They were paid for by the British Government and were under the auspices of the British Army Nursing Service Reserve. The Western Australian public raised funds to pay the steerage fares for Miss Mary Ann Nicolay and ten other nurses who sailed on the 21st March 1900; local firms and individuals donated deckchairs, surgical scissors, and other equipment to them.
One of our nurses, Sister Fanny Hines died on active service on the 7th August at Bulawayo. “…she was quite alone with as many as twenty-six patients at one time, no possibility of assistance or relief, and without sufficient nourishment”. (Bassett, 1997) It is estimated that some 60 nurses in official groups from the Australian colonies saw service in South Africa between 1900 and 1902. (Reid, Page and Pounds, 1999)

Nurses N.S.W. Army Medical Corps (Boer War)
Miss Austin. Miss Lister. Miss Steele. Miss Hoadet. Miss Pocock. Miss Martin. (Rear Row)
Miss Nixon. Miss Gordon. Miss Newton.

Federation

Federation in 1901 saw the creation of the Commonwealth Military Forces and was a catalyst for the Nursing Service which was to become part of the military structure. On the 1st July 1901 a General Order No. 123/1902 was promulgated authorising the establishment of the ‘Australian Army Nursing Service Reserve’. Paragraph 9 of this order stated. “an Army Nursing Service Reserve will be organised from the trained nurses who are qualified and willing to serve as such with stationary field hospitals and base hospitals when required upon a national emergency”. (Commonwealth Government Gazette) They had to be between 21 and 40, three year trained and their marital status declared. Whilst there was no regulation stating that they be single, records suggest that married women were ‘eased’ out of the service. This Order took effect on 1st July 1903 and Lady Superintendents were appointed in New South Wales, Queensland and Victoria, a further one was appointed in 1906 in Tasmania.

World War I

With the outbreak of war in 1914, nurses again ‘just wanted to be there’. The desire of young women to be part of what was happening overseas was not limited to the military services. On the 20th August 1914 seven civilian nurses arrived at Garden Island and offered their services. They sailed on the Hospital ship the Grantalala on the 30th August. This group complimented Mrs Bordern Turner (an American) who recruited young women from all over the western world (four of whom were Australians) to nurse at her mobile hospital behind the lines on the Western Front.

World War I Nurse
The first members of the Australian Army Nursing Service (AANS) to serve overseas were the twenty-five who sailed with the first draft of Australian troops who departed from Australia in November 1914.

Between 1914 and 1918, 2,139 women served overseas in the Australian Army Nursing Service with the first Imperial Forces, working in hospital ships, hospitals and casualty clearing stations. Never before had men and women had to cope with such a mass of sick, wounded and dying human beings. During World War I twenty nurses lost their lives in operational areas, whilst 385 were decorated for duty under fire. Of the 10,000 members of the 1st AIF awarded Military Medals ‘for Bravery in the Field’ seven went to members of the Australian Army Nursing Service. In the area near Ypres (Ieper) the Australian Nursing Service, served in Casualty Clearing Stations (CCS’s).

It was at the 3rd Casualty Clearing Station at Branhoek that Sister Alicia Kelly of the Australian Army Nursing Service refused to leave her bed ridden patients during a heavy artillery bombardment. For her gallantry under fire Sister Kelly was awarded the Military Medal (MM). Alicia Kelly was also awarded the Royal Red Cross and Mentioned in Dispatches (MID). She also served in World War II and in 1949 was awarded the Florence Nightingale Medal.

Another outstanding member of the AANS was Sister Constance Mable Keys, who served in Egypt, England and France. It was at the 2nd Casualty Clearing Station during a major German offensive where she was in charge, that she was ordered to evacuate all the staff and patients. For her gallantry under fire Sister Keys was awarded the Medaille des Epidemis by the French Government. She was also awarded the Royal Red Cross 1st and 2nd Class and twice Mentioned in Dispatches. On the 22nd July 1917 four members of the AANS, Sisters Caywood, Deacon, Ross-King and Staff Nurse Derrer were awarded Military Medals (MM) for rescuing patients in burning Casualty Clearing Stations. Other Australian nurses to be awarded Military Medal during World War I were Sisters, Pearl Corkhill and Mary Kelly.

Although Australian Army Nurses looked after only a fraction of the 2,942,967 battle casualties whilst serving overseas in places such as Egypt, Salonika, France, Belgium, Mesopotamia, Lemnos and on the ships off Gallipoli and isolated posts in India, 423 of their comrades were looking after our servicemen in hospitals in Australia.

Families –Sisters and Brothers serve together

A little known and reported aspect of the service by our women (nurses) during World War 1 was that on a number of occasions it was a family affair, with both brothers and sisters and husband and wife signing up to serve in World War 1. Some of these families were:

The Beavan Family of Bowral New South Wales-

Sister Stella L Beavan – born Bowral 4/1/1883 and undertook her nursing training at Kenmore Asylum and Coast Hospital, embarked during May 1915 for service with the Queen Alexandria’s Imperial Nursing Service at Roxel Tin Hospital. By 1916 she was appointed to transport duties in London, India, Bombay, Basra, Salonica. During September 1916 she contracted Cholera and survived. She was invalided back to Australia and discharged in July 1916. She tried to re-enlist but was rejected as Medically Unfit.

Driver (Dvr) -3138 Leslie E. Beavan –born Bowral 19/11/1885 enlisted in the 2nd Battery Field Artillery during October 1914, he embarked for overseas on the 23/12/1914 with the 1st DAC and saw service in Egypt – Gallipoli (from the landing to the evacuation) – France where he serve in all areas of the Campaign. He returned to Australia on the 28/1/1919 and was discharged in April 1919. Gunner (Gnr) -2693 Leonard J. Beavan –born Bowral 11/1/1891 enlisted with the 2nd Battalion during August 1915 and embarked for France on 2/11/1915 – he contracted an illness in January 1917 and returned to Australia and was discharged as Medically Unfit.

One can only imagine the feeling of pride by their parents John and Annie Beavan.

The Church Family of Five Dock New South Wales-
Nurse Edith L. Church born 4/2/1892 and educated Ladies College Cobbitty, enlisted during 1915 and saw 2 ½ years war service at King George’s Hospital London, she returned to Australia on 4/11/1918 and continued her service at the Military Hospital Randwick.

Her brother Gunner (Gnr) -71505 Darcy W. Church enlisted during 1916 with the 30th Reinforcement Battalion – owing to an illness he did not serve overseas but served for 304 days in Australia.

The Barrow Family of Marrickville New South Wales-
Nurse Lucy Barrow – embarked 10/5/1915, for service in Egypt and Salonica.

Lieutenant (Lt.) -220 Percival G. Barrow born 12/11/1880 enlisted October 1914 with the 6th Light Horse and embarked for overseas in December 1914- served in Egypt, Gallipoli (landing to evacuation), Killed (KIA) in Palestine on 8 November 1917 by a sniper.
The Hind Family of Campsie New South Wales- (Husband and Wife)

Nurse Violet Hind of Ninth Avenue Campsie was the wife of Private- 651 Jack Hind, “D” Coy 4th Battalion it would appear that she saw service during WWI whilst her husband was a POW having been captured at Dernancourt on the 15th April 1917 and was transported to Germany and released after the signing of the Armistice, he returned to Australia on 23rd April 1919.

Pte. Jack Hind Nurse Violet Hind

The Dorrity Family of Glebe New South Wales- (brothers and husband & wife)

Sister Effie M. Dorrity was a member of the A.A.N.S and embarked for overseas service on 27/11/1914 she saw service in Egypt, France and returned to Australia in January 1919. She was the wife of R.Q.M.S -677 J.L Dorrity born Glebe and enlisted in the AMC in October, 1914, embarked for Egypt and France 25th November 1914, and returned to Australia 1918. It is interesting to note that Effie departed for overseas service two days after her husband.

Sergeant (Sergt) – 678, G. Dorrity born Glebe 28 October 1895 enlisted September 1914 in the AMC and embarked for overseas on the 25th November 1914 the same date has his brother. He also saw service in Egypt and France.

R.Q.M.S J.L. Dorrity Sister Effie Dorrity Sergt G. Dorrity

The Kenny Family of Guyra N.S.W. (brother and sister)

Staff Nurse Elizabeth Kenny

WOII. William Kenny

Staff Nurse (Sister) Elizabeth Kenny was born in Guyra NSW in 1886 and died 1952. She trained as a Nurse in a Private Hospital in Sydney and then as a Bush Nurse in Queensland. In 1915 she enlisted in the Australian Army Nursing Service and left Australia for overseas service on 30th April 1916 she returned to Australia on the 20th October 1918.
In 1933 during a Polio epidemic she developed a controversial treatment for the rehabilitation of Polio victims. This upset the establishment and she was investigated by a Royal Commission in 1938 and the Commission found against her. She moved to the USA where she received a sympathetic hearing. In 1946 a film on her life was made with Rosalind Russell playing the part of Elizabeth Kenny.

WOII – 172, William Kenny DCM – Anzac Provost Corps  Joined the Militia in 1908 - 1st Light Horse Regiment and served until 1913 when he joined the Queensland Police. With the outbreak of WWI he enlisted in “A” Squadron Australian Light Horse and whilst overseas transferred to the Provost Corps (Military Police).

The work of our Nurses during World War I was recognised with a large number being awarded Military Decorations and or Awards for their works and care they gave to our soldiers during often dangerous and difficult times.

The Award most received was the Royal Red Cross either 1st or 2nd Class. The following is a list of Nurses who were awarded “The Royal Red Cross” during World War 1.

The Royal Red Cross 1st Class

The following Australian Nurses were awarded the “Royal Red Cross 1st Class” for their service during World War I.

Miss M. Anderson – Head Sister  Miss J.N. Miles-Walker - Matron
Miss E.A Conyers- Matron in Chief  Mrs. J. McHardie-White – Principal Matron
Miss E. S. Davidson – Matron  Miss L. O’Dwyer- Head Sister
Miss C.M. Dickson – Sister  Miss M.F. Proctor - Sister
Miss. M.M. Finlay – Matron  Miss E.T. Richardson – Matron in Charge
Miss E.J. Gould – Principal Matron  Mrs. L. Stobo – Head Sister
Miss E. Gray- Matron  Miss G. Wilson - Matron
Miss E.A. Kellett – Matron  Miss E.F. Lee-Archer- Sister
Miss Constance Mable Keys – Sister* also awarded the Royal Red Cross 2nd Class: MID (twice) and the Medaille de Epidemis by the French Government.

The following Australian Nurses were awarded the “Royal Red Cross 2nd Class”.

Miss L.S.A. Bell – Staff Nurse  Miss E.G. Fleming - Sister
Miss A. Barton – Matron  Miss B.L. Gibbon - Sister
Miss E. E. Bishop – Matron  Miss E.M. Hanock - Matron
Miss P. M. Boissier – Sister  Miss E.W. Jeffries - Sister
Miss L. Broughton – Staff Nurse  Miss J.B Johnson - Sister
Miss E.C. Cameron – Sister  Miss M. Keenan - Matron
Miss A.M. Cropper – Matron  Miss Alicia Kelly – Sister- MM -MID
Miss M.L. Craven – Staff Nurse  Miss E.A. Kemp – Staff Nurse
Miss G.M. Doherty – Staff Nurse  Miss J.M. Kennedy - Sister
Miss A.G. Douglas – Sister  Miss R.G. Kidd - Matron
Miss G. I. Echlin – Sister  Miss A. Kidd-Hart - Sister
Miss M.F. Eldridge – Staff Nurse  Miss N. Leake – Staff Nurse

Between 1918 and 1939 the Australian Army Nursing Service was maintained on a Reserve basis.
World War II

“Just wanted to be there” Alva Kelway Storrie (Bassett. 1992)

1939 and the commencement of World War II brought about a change in Military Nursing. From 1940 these nurses were supported by their sisters in the Royal Australian Air Force Nursing Service (RAFNS) and the Royal Australian Naval Nursing Service (RANNS).

From 1940 to 1945 Australian Service Nurses tended the sick and wounded in many locations, including Palestine, Egypt, Libya, Greece, Crete, New Britain, Papua, New Guinea, Malaya, Singapore, Britain and in every State and Territory of Australia. Figures show that some 4000 of these served with the Australian Army Nursing Service (AANS) a further 660 served in the Royal Australian Air Force Nursing Service (RAAFNS) and 60 with the Royal Australian Naval Nursing Service (RANNS). Army Nurses served in all theatres of war in which Australians were involved. They served in England, the Middle East, Greece, Crete, Malaya, New Guinea, Ceylon, and on the hospital ships and of course home in Australia.

The first contingent of Army Nurses 49 of them attached to the 2/1st Australian General Hospital (AGH) to leave Australia for overseas did so with the 6th Division in January 1940, when it left for the Middle East. On 13th September 1945 two nurses from this group were asked to witness the end of Australia’s war on the mainland of New Guinea. (Reid (1999) writes “it was appropriate that nurses of the 6th Division were present to watch the surrender, ….ironically, they had sailed in 1940 on board the liner Empress of Japan”.

A feature of service nursing in World War II was the number of these women who became battle casualties. Some died as a result of enemy action while others became prisoners of war (POWs). It is the sad, sometimes tragic recounting of their stories which tells us so much about Service nurses contribution to Australia’s war effort.

In mid 1941 a detachment of six nurses led by Sister Kay Parkewr arrived in Rabaul, New Britain to look after medical needs of the Australian garrison – Lark Force. On the 23rd January 1942 they surrendered the hospital to the enemy.

Another group of AANS were those sent to Malaya with the men of the 8th Division. As the Japanese closed in, the flight from Singapore began. The nurses were taken off on three ships, the Wah Sui, the Empire Star and the Vyner Brook. Only those on the Wah Sui managed after some difficult times, to make it home. 120 Australian and British Nurses sailed on the Empire Star, and on its way to Batavia it was constantly attacked with many on board being killed or injured and finally imprisoned. Two Nurses were awarded medals for bravery on this ship, Margaret Anderson the George Medal and Veronica Torney a MBE. The last group of 60 Australian nurses sailed on the Vyner Brook in February 1942 which was dive bombed and sunk off Banka Island, Sumatra. Twelve of these nurses were either killed or drowned. The remaining nurses managed to reach Banka Island in two groups. One group 22 nurses, one civilian woman and about 50 men came ashore at a deserted beach and were divided into two groups. The men were taken to another beach and killed and the women were marched into the water and machine gunned from behind. Of the twenty two nurses who reached the beach 21 were massacred and only one was to survive, she was Sister Vivian Bullwinkel.
After feigning death and spending eighteen hours in the sea Vivian and a male survivor, a British soldier (Pte. Kingsley) lived in the jungle for the next twelve days, before surrendering to the Japanese. Along with the other 31 AANS survivors of the Vyner Brook, she became a prisoner of war of the Japanese for the next three and a half years. During this time eight Australian nurses would die whilst in captivity.

The 32 nurses spent three and a half years as Prisoner’s of War (POW’s) in a number of Camps one of them was referred to as the ‘Coolie Lines’. One of the Sisters, Betty Jeffries kept a diary, much of which was written on scraps of paper about their captivity. After returning from the war she wrote a book, which was originally presented as a radio serial and later a movie “White Coolies”. As Vivian Bullwinkel was the only survivor of the massacre her identity was kept from the Japanese for fear that they would kill her to prevent her telling about it at the end of the war. She survived captivity and gave evidence at the Tokyo War Crimes Trials. By mid February 1942, thirty eight members of the AANS were in Japanese captivity. Six other nurses captured in Rabaul spent three years as POW’s in Japan.

In total 53 nurses lost their life as a result of enemy action, of which 41 died when Singapore fell or were interned and further 18 died as a result of sickness or accident. On the night of 14th May the hospital ship Centaur travelling off the coast of Queensland was attacked by Japanese submarine 1-77 on board were 12 nurses in the charge of Matron Anne Jewell. Of the Centaur’s complement of 332, only 64 survived, Sister Ellen Savage among them. The eleven other survivors spent 32 hours in the water on makeshift rafts. “for her courage and inspiring behaviour during this period, Sister Ellen Savage was awarded the George Medal” (Reid, 1999) Another nurse died when the ‘Manunda’ was bombed in Darwin Harbour.

For their actions during service in World War II, 55 received decorations, a MBE, 18 received the Royal Red Cross, 29 Associate Royal Red Cross, 2 George Medals, 2 Florence Nightingale Medals, 3, (USA) Bronze Stars and 82 Mentioned in Dispatches.

**Post War**

In November 1948 the Service was granted the title ‘Royal”. In 1949 the Nursing Service was approved to be incorporated into the Australian Regular Army (ARA), some two years later in February 1951 approval was given for the Nursing Service to become a ‘Corps’ it then became the Royal Australian Army Nursing Corps (RAANC) and given a position in the Order of Precedence of Corps and the Order of Battle (Orbat). This movement from Service to Corps emphasised the army nurses ‘integration into army mainstream’. (Reid 1999)
In 1951 Her Majesty the Queen graciously accepted the appointment of Colonel in Chief of the Corps.

Since World War II Australian Military Nurses have served in many areas. They have served in Japan, as part of the Occupation Force (BCOF) British Commonwealth Occupation Force, Korea, the Malayan Emergency and Vietnam. They have in recent times seen service in the Gulf War and part of United Nations Peace Keeping Missions in Somalia (1992), Cambodia (1993/4), Rwanda (1994), Bougainville and East Timor, Iraq and emergencies such as Banda Aceh.

**Badge of the Royal Australian Army Nursing Corps**

![Badge](image)

The Lamp of Learning (associated with Hygica, the Greek goddess of health), within a circle inscribed with the corps’ title; below a scroll bearing the corps’ motto *PRO HUMANITATE* (for humanity). The whole is ensigned by the crown and backed with a scarlet coloured cloth.

**Other Women’s Army Services**

**Voluntary Aid Detachment (VAD)**

The concept of this service can be traced back to World War I and the Voluntary Aid Detachments (VAD) which was formed from the Australian Red Cross and the Order of St John. This was done to release men for active duty by training women to work in medical support roles.

They were volunteers and therefore received no payment for their service. In 1916 the Australian Government recognised the VAD as auxiliaries to the Medical Service and they began working in military hospital in Australia. Several volunteered with the British VAD and served in Flanders and France, often very close to the front line.

In 1937 the Australian Red Cross and the order of St John began establishing VA Detachments to train young women in first aid, home nursing and community work, plus marching and discipline. With the outbreak of World War II and the shortage of men Voluntary Aids (VA’s) were once more used to free up males from work in military Hospitals. By January 1940 Voluntary Aids were working full time and to receive pay. In June 1941 permission was granted for them to serve overseas and in October that year 20 VA’s left with Margaret Stephen to work with the 2/12 Australian General Hospital (AGH) in Ceylon (Sri Lanka). (Revelle, 2005) A further 200 who were selected from every State left on the Queen Mary to serve in the Middle East. Other Voluntary Aids soon followed serving on hospital ships and in Australian General Hospitals (AGHs) in such places as Cairo, Gaza, and Rehovet. In 1942, 16 VA’s served on the Hospital Ship Oranje bringing wounded troops home to Australia.

In March of 1942 the Military Board decided to call up members of the VA for full time service in the Army and the VAD began to be administered as a service within the Army Medical Service. December 1942 saw another change to the VAD’s as the military sought to distinguish full-time from those still on a voluntary basis, thus the full-time members became the Australian Army Medical Women’s Service (AAMWS). In 1943 all members of the VA’s serving in Europe returned with the 9th Division to Australia where they were transferred to the newly formed Australian Army Medical Women’s Service.
Their use in other areas of the Service soon followed and they were carrying out the roles of clerks, ambulance drivers, radiographers, dental orderlies, storekeepers and laundry staff.

Catholic United Service Auxiliary (CUSA)

Another group similar to the VAD’s was the Catholic United Service Auxiliary (CUSA). It was mainly women, although there were some men who were involved with this group. These women worked in canteens, learned map reading, how to handle incendiary bombs, and signals. They also did first aid certificates, home nursing certificates, and air raid precautions, all in case of an invasion.

Members spent one night a week at what was called a First Aid Station, usually the local school. It was manned every night in case of attack, as it was intended to be a clearing station for people who were injured in the area.

One CUSA member, Mary Bruce said “…They slept on straw palliasses the same type used by the Army, Army beds and grey Army blankets. We also used to wear a white uniform.” (Phippen & Welsh, 2004)

Australian Army Medical Women’s Service (AAMWS)

The Australian Army Medical Women’s Service (AAMWS) was formed in December 1942. After it was formed, its members were employed in Army hospitals throughout Australia. Their first Commanding Officer was Lt Col Mary Douglas. Members of the Service were to continue to wear the ‘Red Cross’ emblem on their uniforms.
Whilst these women also wanted to ‘serve’ there was an uneasy relationship AAMWS and the AANS and appears to be based on professional skills, the AANS were Officers, (although they continued to refer to themselves as Sisters and Matrons), and rates of pay. The outcome of this discord was to have AAMWS enlisted as female ‘other ranks’ (privates, corporals, sergeants and warrant officers).

During the remainder of World War II the AAMWS served in hospitals in Northern Australia. In June 1943 a small group were sent to Koitaki in New Guinea, more followed in September that year. Others were sent to Bougainville, New Britain, Borneo, and Morotai. They were also involved in the repatriation of Australian Ex-POW’s. In 1946 a group went to Japan with the British Commonwealth Occupation Force (BCOF).

In February 1951 the Service partly in response to concerns over duplication of administration and other duties within the three female branches of the Army, AAMWS was disbanded and incorporated into the newly formed Royal Australian Nursing Corps. This new Corps included both full and part-time members, the latter were known as the Citizen Military Forces and more recently as the Army Reserve.

AAMWS

_Australian Women’s Army Service (AWAS)_

Because Australia had such a small population in 1939, it was important to look for ways to free up men so that they could be posted to fighting units. In May of 1941 a plan was submitted to the Government to establish a Women’s Auxiliary as part of the Australian Military Forces and to call it the Australian Women’s Army Service (AWAS). It was not until 13th August 1941 that the service was approved Lt. Col. Sybil Irving as its first Commanding Officer.

This Service followed the same guidelines as the Nursing Service and in order to enlist as a member of the AWAS women had to be between 18 years and 45 years of age and produce proof of good character. The instance on these women being single was relaxed due to the demands of WWII and the need to release men for active service. However the criteria for being single was re-introduced post-war and remained in force until the 1970’s.

The role of the women was to work as clerks, typists, drivers, orderlies, dispatch riders, cypher clerks, signallers, and A.A. (Anti Aircraft) Gun crews, and also work on Searchlight crews.
The Service remained until June 1947 when it was disbanded and replaced in July 1950 by the Australian Women’s Army Corps (AWAC). On the 12 February the Corps was reorganised as the Women’s Australian Army Corps (WAAC) with its first Director being Colonel Kathleen Best OBE RRC. In 1951 King George VI approved the use of the title “Royal” and the Corps became the Women’s Royal Australian Army Corps (WRAAC). The Corps in 1959 was granted permanent status in the Australian Army and a position in the Order of Precedence of Corps and included on the Order of Battle (Orbat). This new Corps enlisted both regular and reserve members.

The Corps was originally based at the Army Barracks at Studley Park near Camden the site of a Second World War training camp. The first intake of forty one (41) ladies who had been selected from seventy (70) applicants marched in on the 6th July 1951, three weeks later on the 27th July they marched out at a Parade held at Victoria Barracks Paddington (Sydney).

As the Corps expanded the WRAAC Training Company moved from New South Wales to Victoria.

**CMF – Part time soldiers**

The raising of the Citizen Military Forces (CMF) element of the Corps was approved by the Government on the 6th December 1951 with recruiting commencing in June 1953.

A contingent of three represented the Corps and Australia in 1953 at the Coronation of Queen Elizabeth II. In June of the same year the Queen appointed her sister Princess Margaret as the Honorary Colonel in Chief of the Corps.

With a change in thinking within the Government and the Defence Force women were being permitted to enlist in individual Corps subject to restrictions relating to certain fighting arms e.g. infantry, as a result the Corps was disbanded in 1985.

**The Corps Badge**

![Corps Badge](image)

The Corps Badge was designed by its first Director Colonel Kathleen Best OBE RCC.

The Badge includes the Stars of the Southern Cross representing the Southern Hemisphere which are superimposed on a Silver Lozenge which in Heraldry is a Shield for young women and can be worn only in accordance with certain specifications.

Surrounding the Lozenge are Gilt Gum-leaves to designate an Australian Corps. This is surrounded by the Crown which indicates the wearer swears allegiance to the Sovereign.

The whole is mounted above the letters WRAAC which identifies the Corps.

**Women’s Royal Australian Naval Service (WRANS)**

Prior to World War I the involvement of women in the defence force had been restricted to nursing. In 1917 the Navy was the first Service to introduce a Women’s Auxiliary when it formed the Women’s Royal Naval Service.
During World War II the service being provided by women in the Navy was quickly recognised and the Women’s Royal Australian Naval Service was official recognised and formed. The WRANS carried out similar roles to their Army counterparts. By the end of World War II some 2,617 women had seen service in the WRANS.

WRAN

Royal Australian Naval Nursing Service (RANNS)

As with the other Services, the increased number of men enlisting in the Navy called for shore-based hospitals and the Royal Australian Naval Nursing Service (RANNS) was established in October 1942. Ironically the Australian Army Nursing Service played a part in this new Service as the woman selected to head the RANNS was Annie Laidlaw. She had enlisted in the AANS in June 1917 and served in military hospitals in Bombay and Poona. On returning to Australia she returned to civilian nursing. In 1942 Surgeon Captain W.J. Carr nominated Laidlaw to head the fledgling RANNS with the rank of Superintending Sister, (equivalent to Lieutenant Commander). She was personally involved in the recruitment of the new nurses as Naval Officers. Twelve came from Melbourne and twelve from Sydney. Between 1942 and the end of the war sixty Nurses served with the RANNS.

This service took place in the Naval Establishments along the Australian coastline, Sydney Darwin, Brisbane, Canberra, Townsville, Cairns and Fremantle. One of their principal tasks was the training of the male Sick Berth Attendants (SBA’s) who were the sea going personnel responsible for all nursing whilst the ships were at sea.

Despite encountering opposition from male members of the Medical Branch of the Navy who were concerned at being usurped in their duties as sick-berth attendants Laidlaw persevered and successfully proved the work of the RANNS.

They also had an Establishment at Milne Bay in Papua and were involved in the evacuation of POWs from Siam (Thailand), Sumatra and Singapore at the end of the war. They also served onboard the hospital ship Manundo.

Women’s Australian Auxiliary Air Force (WAAAF)

The year 1941 was a very active one for the Australian Government as it established a number of new Women’s Services including the formation of the Women’s Australian Auxiliary Air Force (WAAAF).

As with the other Services women between the ages of eighteen and forty who had training in Morse Code were able to join. Their first Commanding Officer was Wing Officer Clare Stevenson. Some 27,000 women were to serve during the course of World War II.

Members of the Service also carried out roles similar to their counter parts in the Army and Navy but they also fulfilled the roles of aircraft mechanics, armourers, refuellers and parachute packers. Since the finish of World War II the WAAAF has been absorbed into the RAAF and many women are now Commanding Officers of Squadrons and Bases.
Royal Australian Air Force Nursing Service (RAAFNS)

The RAAFNS had been formed in 1940 to cater for the nursing needs of the high increase in personnel in the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF). The RAAFNS looked after these men on the liners which took them overseas. These Sisters were also to be found at RAAF bases throughout Australia and New Guinea, where two of their members lost their lives.

Although nursing at these bases was often routine, such as at the RAAF Station at Kalgoorlie which was a dispersal base with a 32 bed hospital. This hospital looked after wounded from New Guinea and the only real challenge they experienced to this routine was a Japanese Prisoner of War. However there were times when these Sisters were in the thick of battle. Such a time was on the morning of the 19th February 1942 at the RAAF Station Darwin when the Japanese attacked. Sister Watt recalls “…the noise was terrific – roar of planes, rattle of machine guns, ack ack fire, explosions of bombs and petrol drums, and crackle of burning buildings”. (Halstead, 1994)

Royal Australian Air Force nurses also assisted in the repatriation of POWs from Singapore and Thailand.

WRAAFF

The Australian Women’s Land Army

‘The Food Front’, many Australians played an important role in the production of food for Allied Services during the war years. The first land army began in 1940 with the Country Women’s Association who brought together a group to help farmers who were short-staffed. Other groups doing similar things included the Women’s Agricultural Security Productions Service who provided part-time help with harvesting and fruit-picking and the WANS also had people working on the land. Land Army organisations existed at State level, but it was not until July 1942 that the Australian Women’s Land Army was established.

It was open to women from 18 to 50 years of age, younger with parental approval. Recruits could work on a permanent basis, or as casuals or seasonal workers as auxiliary members (Australian Post Philatelic Group, 1991).

It was ironic that the recruitment campaign, which occurred in the last six months of 1942 primarily, attracted city girls who had no previous experience of farming and no real training in this field. By 1944 there were 3068 women enrolled in the Land Army, however throughout its existence 6000 women served some time in the Australian Women’ Land Army (AWLA).
Living conditions varied widely, from billets with individual families to hostels and camps. In 1944 there were 69 camps operating in New South Wales. These women harvested, picked fruit, milked cows, drove tractors, baled hay and in some cases worked in the local canneries. They worked in the hot and cold, overcame their own homesickness and the scepticism of the local communities to become highly valued agricultural workers.

*Records of a member of the Land Army*

**The Garden Army**

The local community particularly the women were anxious to do their part to contribute to the war effort during WWII and more particularly when they had loved one serving in the forces.

Many of these efforts are forgotten when we talk about the history of Australia’s involvement and contribution to the war effort.
The establishment of the ‘Garden Army’ was an idea which germinated in the minds of members of the YWCA (Young Women’s Christian Association). It started with “Garden Army Week” in July 1942. It could be said that it was the ‘mother’ of the Land Army. In Victoria it raised 500 recruits in one month. Members set themselves ‘targets such as 50 tons of onions for the front’.

Despite efforts directed else the ‘the Garden Army’ remained important for those at home and survived other agricultural concepts and continued to raise funds and moral and help feed families throughout the war years.

Post World War II

Women from all these Services continued to serve their country both as full-time (regulars) and part-time (reserves) members. These women have served in Korea, Vietnam, and Bougainville, The Gulf War, East Timor, Iraq and a number of UN Peace Keeping Operations. It is interesting to note that the only Nursing group to still exist is the RAANC, but it is restricted to Officer only. All other Nursing Services have been incorporated in the general service Corps.

The initial enlistment rule of single women only, whilst relaxed during World War II, was re-instated in the early 1950’s and remained in place until the 1970’s. In today’s Services women regardless of status are allowed to enlist and develop a career within their chosen Service.
Cameos of

Women who have influenced

or impacted on

the Australian Defence Forces
Vera Deakin was born on 25th December 1891 in South Yarra Victoria, the daughter of Alfred Deakin who was later to become the Prime Minister of Australia. Vera Deakin attended University and studied English literature.

Vera showed an interest in Music and travelled to Europe to further her interests. She was in London when World War I, and returned to Australia and joined the local branch of the British Red Cross Society and studied nursing. She sought a role for her work overseas and with the Red Cross she travelled to Egypt. She arrived in Port Said on 20th October 1915 and established the ‘Wounded and Missing Inquiry Bureau’- an organisation to ascertain information on behalf of relatives of Australian soldiers fighting in Gallipoli.

In 1916 she shifted her base of operations to London. The Army (Government) were not very happy with her work as she was seen by relatives as being more helpful than the military. Her service grew until it was dealing with over 25,000 requests for information each year. Whilst overseas she met and married an Army Officer who had escaped from the Turkish.

On her return to Australia she raised a family and became involved in other charitable organisations such as the Children’s Hospital. With the commencement of WWII she reactivated the ‘Wounded and Missing Inquiry Bureau’ as well as the ‘Prisoner of War Department and Message Service to Occupied Europe’. In 1945 she was made a Life member of the Red Cross. Vera White (Deakin) died on the 9th August 1978.

Sister Agnes Betty Jeffrey OAM

Betty Jeffrey was born in Hobart Tasmania on the 14th May 1908. At the age of 29 she trained as a nurse at the Alfred Hospital in Melbourne and graduated in 1939 just in time to join the Australian Army Nursing Service.

In 1941 she was posted to the 2/10 Australian General Hospital at Malacca, Malaya. As the Japanese moved south the hospital was moved to Singapore and with the continued advances of the Japanese on the 12th February 1942 Betty Jeffrey and a number of other nurses – which included Captain Vivian Bullwinkel boarded the SS Vynner Brooke to escape capture. The Vynner Brooke was sunk by Japanese aircraft and those that survived made it to Banka Island which was already in the hands of the Japanese and so began her life as a POW. Her experiences as a POW can be found in her book “White Coolies” and her experiences were used as the basis for the movie ‘Paradise Road’. Jeffrey was also part of a Women’s Choir made up of various nationalities and which continues to day.

Jeffrey was released from Pelambang POW Camp on 8th August 1945 and returned to Australia on the 18th October 1945, she passed away on 20th September 2000 aged 92 years.
Colonel Sybil Howy Irvine, MBE

Sybil Irving was born in Victoria Barracks Melbourne on 25th February 1897 her father being an Army Officer.

During World War I Irving served in a Voluntary Aid Detachment (VAD). In 1940 she accepted the position of Assistant-Secretary of the Victorian Red Cross. After twelve months in this position she accepted an offer to establish and organise the Australian Women’s Army Service (AWAS), by 1941 she was on a round Australia recruiting exercise and was promoted to the rank of Lieutenant Colonel.

In February 1943 Irving was promoted to the rank of Colonel and by 1944 the AWAS comprised more than 20,000 women. Irving remained at the helm until 1946. Irving was a strong believer that women should not bear arms, one wonders how she would cope with the current climate and that all women now serving receive weapons training and carry arms.

In 1951 as a result of a reorganisation of the Army Irving was given the Honorary Rank of Colonel in Women’s Royal Australian Army Service (WRAAC) a position she held until 1961. Unfortunately, following a further reorganisation of the Army the WRAAC was disbanded in 1985 and women are now allocated to mainline units.

Colonel Kathleen Annie Louise Best, OBE, RRC

Kathleen Best was born on 28th August 1910 at Summer Hill NSW, and trained as a nurse at the Western Suburbs Hospital and undertook her Midwifery training at Crown Street Women’s Hospital, Surry Hills. On completion of her training she worked in a number of hospitals before accepting an appointment as the Deputy Matron at the Masonic Hospital at Ashfield.

Best joined the Army on 30th May 1940 when she enlisted in the Australian Army Nursing Service and was posted as Matron to the 2/5th Australian General Hospital which was posted to Palestine in December 1940 and Greece in April 1941. Best and 39 of her colleagues volunteered to remain in Greece knowing that they risked being captured by the Germans. However they were ordered to Crete and were the last Australian Nurses to leave Greece before it fell to the Germans. They were subject to further German air attack on the boat to Crete and also on Crete before reaching Alexandria.

On reaching Alexandria Best was placed in charge of a Nursing staging camp at Suez which was surrounded by a high barbed wire fence with only one gate. The Camp became known as ‘Katie’s Birdcage’.
By March 1942 Best had returned to Australia where she was discharged from the Army. On leaving the Army she was appointed the Controller of the full time Voluntary Aid detachments which was in September was made part of the Australian Army Medical Women’s Service (AAMWS) after some time she was promoted to the rank of Lieutenant Colonel.

In February 1951 Best became the founding Director of the Australian Women’s Army Corps, shortly after the Corps was given the prefix “Royal” and became the Women’s Royal Australian Army Corps (WRAAC), the Corps was disbanded following a reorganisation in 1985.

**Major Susan Felsche**

Susan Felsche nee Stones was born in Brisbane on the 24th May 1961. Susan joined the Naval Reserve and was promoted to the rank of Petty Officer whilst undertaking her medical studies at the University of Queensland. In 1983 she joined the Army under the undergraduate recruitment scheme. By 1987 she had been posted to 5 Camp Hospital at Royal Military College Duntroon Canberra. In 1991 she was promoted to the Rank of Major in the Directorate of Army Health Services.

On the 17th May 193 Felsche was posted to a United Nations (UN) Peaces Keeping Force in Western Sahara. One the 21st June 1993 Felsche together with three other UN Peacekeepers were killed when their plane crashed during take off at Awasard airfield Western Sahara. Susan Felsche was the first female Australian soldier to be killed on operations since World War II.

**Verania (Rania) MacPhillamy**

Verania (Rania) MacPhillamy, was born at “Warroo” Forbes NSW in 1889 and can be considered another Australian woman ahead of her time. She was well educated attending ‘Ascham School’ in Sydney and then attending a Finishing School.

World War I was to change her life. The man in her life Ronald Macdonald of Mudgee joined the 1st Light Horse Regiment and was posted overseas. This prompted young Rania to seek adventure overseas and she went to Egypt and joined the VAD (Voluntary Aid Detachment), where she worked in a “Canteen” to be known as the ‘Empire Club’ in Cairo a place for soldiers to rest and relax after being on training or in action on the front.

Whilst in Egypt Rania was to suffer the loss of her sweetheart Ronnie who was killed on the 9th August 1916 at Romani. The efforts of Rani MacPhillamy and other women must have seemed like an oasis from home to the Australian diggers so far from home. She died in 1961.
Olive King was born at Croydon NSW in June of 1885 she was from a different mould to other women of her era. In her early life she had travelled extensively in Europe and in 1910 climbed Mount Popocatepetl in Mexico only the third women to do so.

Following the outbreak of WWI King was in England visiting her sister and decided to go to Belgium as a driver with the ‘Allied Field ambulance Corps (AFAC)’. At that time the Army already controlled all the available ambulances so she bought a large lorry and converted it into a 16 seater ambulance which she named “Ella”. King paid all the costs of the conversion and the shipping to Belgium.

When Rouen was captured by the Germans King and three other women were charged by the Germans as being spies. Eventually they were considered as harmless women by the Germans and released.

On her return to England King worked for the ‘Scottish Women’s Hospital which was staffed entirely by women. She was not impressed as she was informed that there would be ‘no lipstick, no rouge, no high heels – no jewellery- and no dancing in uniform- it also did not allow ‘dining unchaperoned in the company of men’ her reaction was ‘I refuse to be under any but Army discipline.. I had enough of women’s discipline or rather lack of it and I don’t want any more’.

Some months later King found herself, back at the front between Greece and Serbia and when the hospital was captured by the Austrians and the Bulgarians she was evacuated and joined the Serbian Army as a Driver attached to the Medical Headquarters in Salonika until the end of the war.

King was also involved during WWII when she was employed as a examiner at the De Havilland aircraft Factory At mascot and unusual position for a woman at that time. But she was Olive King.
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The Authors

Mary Bryant
enlisted in the Citizen Military Forces (CMF) in the Royal Australian Army Nursing Corps (2 RAANC Training Unit) at Paddington in February 1965 she served until July 1968 when she took her discharge as she was to be married. At that time married women were not allowed to remain in the Services. At the time of her discharge she had attained the rank of Corporal.

Mary has served on the Executive Committee of the Defence Reserves Association (NSW) and was the first female Vice President of the Ashfield RSL Sub Branch. She is also a member of the Military Police Association of Australia. She has been awarded the Australian Defence Medal. In January 2006 she was awarded the ‘Australia Day Achievement Medallion’ by the National Australia Day Council.

Matt Walsh JP. MLO ALGA (MCAE), Dip Bus & Corp Law (CPS)
was called up for National Service in 1957 and received a deferment, by late 1958 he had become tied of waiting and enlisted in the local Citizen Military Forces (CMF) Unit, 19 Coy (Tipper) Royal Australian Army Service Corps (RAASC) at Ashfield. He was later to find out that this was the same unit that his grandfather had served in during World War I.

In 1959 he was finally called up for National Service serving with the 13th National Service Training Battalion at Ingleburn, on completion of his full time training he was posted back to 19 Coy RAASC, until the cessation of National Service in 1960.

In 1961 he re-enlisted in the CMF with 5 Field Squadron Royal Australian Engineers (RAE) in 1963 transferred to 1 Division Provost Company (Military Police) and then to 2 Division Provost Company until his discharge in 1969 with the rank of Sergeant.

He has served on the Executive Committee of the Defence Reserves Association (NSW), the Military Police Association of Australia the Joint Committee for the Commemoration of the Battle of Crete and the Greek Campaign, the Reserve Forces Day Council and the Ashfield RSL Sub Branch and the NSW National Serviceman’s Association and is a Director of The Army Museum of New South Wales Foundation.

He has been awarded the ‘Australian Defence Medal’ and the ‘Anniversary of National Service Medal’ in January 2006 he was awarded the ‘Australia Day Achievement Medallion by the National Australia Day Council in 2007 he was appointed a “Member of the Order of Liverpool” by the Council of the City of Liverpool. In 2002 he wrote the “History of Ingleburn Military Camp”.