



# AUSTRALIAN NURSES IN THE GREAT WAR

Over 3500 Australian women served overseas in the Great War.

They were nurses and masseuses (physiotherapists), doctors and surgeons, paid professionals and volunteers.

The majority served in the Australian Army Nursing Service (AANS). Others joined the Queen Alexandra Imperial Military Nursing Service Reserve, the Red Cross and other voluntary hospitals and organisations.

AANS members had to have 'at least three years' training in medical and surgical nursing in a duly recognised hospital, and 'must be either single or a widow, and between the ages of 20 and 45 years.'

The deluge of casualties flooding into hospitals on Lemnos and in Cairo from the disastrous Gallipoli campaign in 1915 was their first work. From 1916, they served on the Western Front in British and Australian General Hospitals, and in Casualty Clearing Stations within sight and sound of fighting.

Hundreds served in India, where seriously ill troops from the campaign in Mesopotamia (Iraq) were brought for treatment.

Many nursed in England, where they cared for Australian troops who had lost limbs, suffered severe facial injuries, and were afflicted with shell shock.

They also nursed on hospital trains and transport ships. Duty on transport ships was particularly hazardous because of the danger of enemy attacks at sea.

Their patients had blast injuries and gas poisoning and/or illnesses including dysentery and typhoid, trench foot and influenza. The sheer volume of patients was daunting: hundreds of sick and wounded troops arrived at the hospitals in endless convoys.

The nurses like the doctors improvised. They learnt new treatments and techniques, such as giving anaesthetics.

Their conditions varied greatly. Sometimes they worked in well-equipped hospitals and lived in comfortable billets with servants provided. They and their patients enjoyed comforts and entertainments. Other times, they and their patients endured extreme cold or intense heat, shortages of food and water, lack of medical supplies, bombardment and air raid alerts. Many nursed on the Western Front during the notorious Somme winter of 1916–17.

In the course of their service, many nurses became ill. The majority recovered and continued nursing. Some returned to lighter duties or recuperation in Australia before resuming overseas service. Others were permanently discharged. More than 20 died of their illnesses.

Despite the demands of their work, nurses took every chance they could to relax and sightsee. Many had cameras. When off duty and on leave, they explored their surroundings: the pyramids and sphinx in Egypt, cities like London and Paris, Cape Town and Bombay (Mumbai), villages in France and England, hill stations in India.

When the war ended, the nurses were still on duty. As thousands of Australian soldiers gradually returned to Australia on troop transports in 1919 and 1920, the nurses looked after their health.

After discharge from the AANS, the nurses resumed their civilian lives. Some married, some travelled. Most returned to nursing, often in repatriation hospitals. Their lives would never be quite the same again.

Nearly 400 Australian nurses were decorated for their service in the Great War. Seven won the Military Medal (equivalent to the Military Cross) for gallantry and devotion to duty under fire. One received the International Red Cross Florence Nightingale Medal, the highest international distinction a nurse can receive. More than twenty received decorations from the Empire's allies. Others were given the highest award for military nursing, the Royal Red Cross, for exceptional devotion.

Now read on about the Great War nurses connected with East Melbourne.



Nurses (left) watch HMAT Kyarra load medical supplies at Port Melbourne, November 1914, (AWM P00356.002)



Outdoor beds at the Citadel Hospital, Cairo, 1915, (private collection)



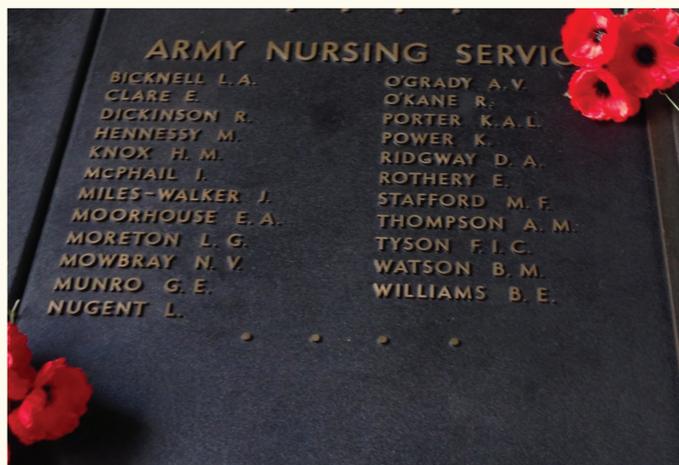
Nurses took every chance to sightsee. Here Matron McHardie White and a nurse enjoy Salonika's spring beauty in 1918, (AWM H15764)



AANS nurses form a guard of honour for Queen Mary, Rouen, July 1917, (AWM K00019)



Ward at 2AAH, Heliopolis, Cairo, c1915 (Agnes Wotherspoon King [r]), (family collection)



AANS nurses who died on active service in the Great War are commemorated in the Wall of Honour at the Australian War Memorial (private collection)



Many nurses had cameras and were keen photographers, Cairo, 1915, (AWM C00360)