



Nurses of the 2/5th Australian General Hospital (AGH). AWM 006924  
Royal Red Cross (left). AWM REL29121

# Education Services 2012

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AUSTRALIAN  
WAR MEMORIAL



# Australian service nurses

## Devotion to duty

*You went to look after servicemen, because where there are men fighting, there are always nurses.*

**Sister Florence Syer**, Australian Army Nursing Service

Australian nurses have been going to war for over 100 years. Never far from the front line, but often far from home, they treat the sick and wounded in the air, and on land and sea. Despite their non-combatant status, some nurses have never returned home, losing their lives to accident or disease, or at the hands of the enemy.



At the start of the twentieth century, nursing was one way that women could participate directly in the war effort. Small groups of nurses from each Australian colony travelled to South Africa and worked in British hospitals during the Boer War. During the First World War over 3,000 nurses volunteered for military service, many with the hope of being closer to loved ones serving overseas. In their distinctive grey uniforms and red capes, they worked in field hospitals, on board hospital ships and trains, and in casualty clearing stations close to the frontline. Unmarried, and mostly aged from 25 to 40, they were well educated women from middle-class families. Despite working under difficult conditions and often with limited supplies, they showed that women were just as capable as men of meeting the challenges of war.

During the Second World War around 5,000 army, air force, and navy service nurses worked in various locations around the world, including the Middle East and the Mediterranean, Britain, the Pacific, and within Australia. Royal Australian Air Force nurses in Medical Air Evacuation Transport Units brought wounded men from battle areas back to base hospitals or home to Australia. They were affectionately known as "Flying Angels".

For 30 years after the Second World War, nurses accompanied Australian troops sent to campaigns against communist uprisings and civil unrest in countries including Korea, Malaya, and Vietnam. As in earlier wars, the nurses had to adapt rapidly to new environments, often with limited preparation, only basic military training, and heavy workloads. They had now been given officer ranks, and by the 1970s the first male nurses entered the services.



For her courage and efficiency throughout the evacuation from Greece, Matron Kathleen Best was awarded the Royal Red Cross.  
AWM P03725.007

In the current Australian Defence Force, as well as providing medical care to the war wounded, nursing officers are also frequently deployed in tri-service peacekeeping and humanitarian operations. They provide care to soldiers and civilians in countries ravaged by war or natural disasters. While modern nurses have a high level of specialist training and improved technology and equipment, the notions of patient care and "getting on with it", despite unfamiliar and often hostile surroundings, remain at the core of military nursing.

## Unpacking the photograph

**Examine the photograph on the front of the poster. Look at the terrain. What can it tell us about the climate and conditions? What difficulties would the nurses have faced?**

In 1940, during the Second World War, Australian nurses of the Australian Army Nursing Service travelled with the troops to the Middle East to care for the sick and wounded from the fighting in North Africa. Conditions in the tent hospitals were difficult and dangerous: the climate was extreme, sand storms were frequent, and enemy air raids common. Sick and wounded soldiers arrived at any time during the day or night, many still in dirty, bloodstained uniforms with wounds that had remained untreated for hours. The 2/5th AGH was established in Palestine, and the 74 nurses pictured here on parade were under the leadership of Matron Kathleen Best.

While possessing medical knowledge and skills, the nurses had little military training. All the same, they had to take part in drills and parades along with the rest of their unit. Despite the heat and discomfort, they continued to wear the traditional starched veil, collars and cuffs with their uniform.

As enemy air raids increased and conditions became too dangerous, the nurses were evacuated in early 1941.

Sister Bryant wrote in her diary that "everyone is upset about leaving patients".

### Where to next?

In April 1941, the nurses of the 2/5th AGH were sent to Greece. As they set up the hospital at Ekali, near Athens, they could hear the wail of air raid sirens. Within a week, convoys of wounded were being admitted. The German invasion continued down the Greek peninsula and once again nurses were ordered to evacuate. Matron Best was told that all but 40 of her nurses must leave. She was to decide who should stay. "I told them that those who volunteered to stay behind would almost certainly be taken prisoner. I asked them to write their name on a slip of paper, together with the word 'Stay' or 'Go'. Not one sister wrote 'Go'. I then selected 39 sisters to remain."

The departing nurses headed south in trucks, and arrived at Navplion harbour only to discover several ships on fire. Fishing boats ferried them to a waiting ship. "We sisters had to judge the gap, and leap to the destroyer, equipped with tin hat, respirator, great coat, and a very tight mid-length skirt." Despite attacks from enemy bombers, the nurses arrived on Crete and set to work at a British tent hospital as wounded troops flooded in. Meanwhile, the group left behind in Greece with Matron Best struggled on despite the air raids. To make themselves



Australian and New Zealand nurses arrive safely in Crete.  
AWM 007614

easily recognisable as non-combatants, they wore their red capes and white caps. Some days later, they too were evacuated to Crete.

### Nurses in New Guinea and the islands.

Nurses of the 2/5th AGH arrived in New Guinea in January 1943. In the three years that followed, they and hundreds of others worked in hospitals and casualty clearing stations across New Guinea and the nearby islands. The conditions were trying and the work demanding. As well as the wounded, there were many men suffering from tropical diseases who required constant care.

When the war ended, nurses assisted with the recovery and repatriation of thousands of Australian prisoners of war.

## Enrich your students' learning

Before you visit the Australian War Memorial book a facilitated program for your school group. A program will provide a much deeper learning experience. New programs, aligned to the Australian Curriculum for History, are now available.

The Australian War Memorial provides a wide range of educational programs aligned with the new Australian Curriculum for History. These programs are designed to suit your classroom and curriculum needs.

When you visit the Memorial and book a facilitated program, students gain a much deeper learning experience. Our trained educators draw on personal stories represented by the displays in the galleries and by real artefacts. The educators tell amazing tales of Australian wartime history, making the most of your students' time.

Bookings are essential for all school groups visiting the Memorial, whether you are choosing a facilitated program (led by Memorial staff) or a teacher-guided tour.

All school bookings are made at [www.awm.gov.au/education/bookings](http://www.awm.gov.au/education/bookings)

For further assistance, and for your school password to book online, please email the Memorial's Bookings Officer at [school.bookings@awm.gov.au](mailto:school.bookings@awm.gov.au)

### Teacher's checklist

- Log on to [www.awm.gov.au/education](http://www.awm.gov.au/education) and read about the Memorial's curriculum-based programs to choose which program best suits the needs of your students.
- Book your visit online and record your booking reference number.

- Arrange your transport; collect permission forms and money. A risk assessment guide is available from the NCETP website [www.ncetp.org.au](http://www.ncetp.org.au)
- Arrange adequate supervision by teachers and parents. Ensure a supervising adult accompanies each group of 15 students and remains with them at all times.
- Talk to your students, parents, and accompanying teachers about behaviour that is appropriate for a special place of remembrance and commemoration.
- Link your classroom activities with your impending visit.
- Bring your PACER paperwork for validation and stamping.
- If your group numbers change, please email your increase or decrease to [school.bookings@awm.gov.au](mailto:school.bookings@awm.gov.au), quoting your booking reference number. Cancellations should be made no less than five working days before your scheduled visit.

When you arrive at the Memorial, please enter via the Schools' Entrance, which can be found on the map on our website. Remember to leave school bags on the bus.

# Learning activities for classroom use

- Imagine that you are one of the nurses of the 2/5th AGH in Greece faced with the decision to "stay" or "go". What would you choose? Why? Imagine that you were selected to stay. How would you feel? Communicate this in a journal entry, poem, letter or drawing.
- Research the nurses from the 2/5th AGH who died during the Second World War: Staff Nurse Jean Gay and Sister Edith Morton. Go to the Australian War Memorial's website: [www.awm.gov.au](http://www.awm.gov.au), click on Roll of Honour and type these names into *name search*. What can you find out about these women on the Roll of Honour page?
- Imagine that you are going to interview Matron Kathleen Best. Research her story and develop a list of questions you would ask her. Suggest possible answers. Make your interview into a role play or video clip.
- Go to the National Archives of Australia website [www.naa.gov.au](http://www.naa.gov.au); click on *name search* and look up the following nurses:  
First World War nurse: Ellen Imlay  
Second World War nurse: Ellen Savage  
Vietnam War nurse: Barbara Black  
Research one of these nurses and present your findings to the class. Use her service records to answer the following questions:
  - What is her full name?
  - How old was she when she enlisted?
  - What is her date of birth?
  - Where was she born?
  - What were her parents' names?
  - Where did she serve?
  - When did she return to Australia?
  - Are these records primary or secondary sources?

- Give meanings for the following terms: **non-combatant, nation, colony, communist, civil, deployed, humanitarian, evacuate**. Create a find-a-word or crossword using these terms and their meanings.

- On a world map, mark the places where Australian nurses have served.
- Using the given text, develop a time line of conflicts in which Australians have been involved, from the Boer War to today.

- Go to the Australian War Memorial website [www.awm.gov.au](http://www.awm.gov.au) click on Roll of Honour and look up these names: Frances Hines (Boer War), Emily Clare, Jean Miles-Walker (First World War), Myrle Moston, Irene Drummond, Shirley Gardam (Second World War)  
Answer the following questions:
  - Where are they on the Roll of Honour?
  - Which nursing service were they with?
  - Where and when did they die?

- Go to the National Capital Authority website ([www.nationalcapital.gov.au](http://www.nationalcapital.gov.au)). Look at the image or download the podcast for the Australian Service Nurses National Memorial. Why do we have memorials like this? Create your own memorial for the nurses. What symbols/images/words would you include?

### TAKING IT FURTHER

#### More ideas for research and discussion

- Research a military nursing organisation — its development and role: e.g. AANS, RAAFNS, RANNS, MAETU.
- What part did Florence Nightingale play in the development of modern nursing practice?
- Eight Military Medals were awarded to Australian nurses during the First World War. Research their stories. Why were they not given the higher award of Victoria Cross for their bravery?
- Up until the 1970s, serving nurses had to resign their position if they married. Discuss the implications of being single or married while in service.
- Research the sinking of the AHS *Centaur*, and the attack on the *Vyner Brooke*. What was the public reaction to these tragedies in Australia?
- Why were Australian nurses sent to New Guinea? What was the new threat to Australia's safety in December 1941?
- Despite the rules of the Geneva Convention, some nurses were taken as prisoners of war by the Japanese during the Second World War and held captive under appalling conditions. Research the story of Vivian Bullwinkel or Betty Jeffrey. What does their survival tell you about them?
- Research the origin and history of the Royal Red Cross award.

For more information and images, go to: <http://www.awm.gov.au/exhibitions/nurses/>

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