

Australian women and the Second World War

Even when I first learnt Morse... we never really thought the navy or any service would take women in to do that work. We knew they would have them as nurses... but it was beyond our wildest dreams that we would ever be doing that sort of work. Although it was proved we were just as good as the men, and did the same job, and everything worked out well for everybody concerned.

Marion Stevens, WRANS telegraphist, Second World War

During the First World War, Australian women served as nurses, performed medical support roles, and volunteered for civilian organisations that raised funds and provided comforts for servicemen. Some women actively encouraged men to enlist, while others campaigned against conscription and promoted peace. More than 60,000 Australians died as a result of their service, and many men returned to their female relatives physically or mentally transformed by their experiences. Women's traditional roles as homemakers and caregivers went largely unchallenged.

With the start of the Second World War in 1939, women again contributed to military nursing as part of the Australian Army Nursing Service, performing vital work overseas and in Australia. They were not immune to the dangers of the fighting; 78 nurses died, while others endured hardship as prisoners of war. The war saw the establishment of additional services such as the Royal Australian Air Force Nursing Service, the Royal Australian Naval Nursing Service, and the Australian Army Medical Women's Service.

With war in the Pacific beginning in December 1941, fighting came close to home. Everyday life was affected by rationing of food and materials, and some – including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in northern Australia – were displaced by bombing. Many withstood long separations from loved ones and fear of an uncertain future.

The number of men in the armed forces led to labour shortages, resulting in campaigns for women to enter the workforce and undertake roles previously limited to men. Women went to work in factories, farms and other essential industries, but were paid less than men doing the same work.

Women volunteered for civilian organisations such as the Women's Flying Club, Women's Australian National Service and the Women's Emergency Signalling Corps. Some went on to serve in an official capacity – encouraged to “release a man” for overseas combat – as women were allowed to enlist in non-medical roles for the first time.

From 1942, thousands of American servicemen were stationed in Australia. Many dated and married Australian women. Social clubs were formed for Australian war brides to acquaint themselves with American culture and their future in a new country.



AWM REL34259

AWAS servicewomen march in Melbourne, 1942.

The Herald, AWM 136911

Translating for the troops

Anita Pritchard had a natural ability to learn and speak different languages. Encouraged by her father to learn Japanese, she joined the AWAS in 1944 and was deployed to New Guinea as a translator at the age of 21. Responsible for translating documents, she also travelled to prisoner-of-war camps to interview Japanese prisoners, gathering information about Australians who had been killed and the mistreatment of Allied prisoners of war.



Anita with Australian Prime Minister Ben Chifley during his Christmas Day visit to Lae, New Guinea, 1945.

AWM 099452

Radio receiver with headphones.

AWM REL/19422



AWM VIC1177A

I think some of the old fellows who were still in the senior positions in the services thought that a woman's place was in the home and the kitchen and rearing and so on. But fortunately some of them were a bit more progressive and then I think they were surprised when they found that so many of the women could do as well as the men... why shouldn't you show what you're able to do and what you want to do.

Hazel Mayes, WAAAF flight mechanic, Second World War

Courtesy of Australians at War Film Archive

The photograph featured on the cover shows a group of WAAAF trainee flight mechanics working on an aircraft engine at RAAF Station Laverton in 1942. The largest of the women's services in the Second World War, the WAAAF was formed after lobbying from women who wanted to serve. With a growing need to fulfil roles traditionally performed by men, 27,000 women served as wireless telegraphists, intelligence officers, cooks, clerks, mechanics, drivers and more, taking on 72 of the 120 roles that were part of the air force. Operating from 1941 to 1947, the WAAAF was succeeded by the Women's Royal Australian Air Force in 1950. From 1977 women have served in the RAAF.

Do you think the reasons women enlist to serve have changed since the Second World War? Explain your reasoning. What sources could you use to find out more about WAAAF and RAAF servicewomen?

Aircraft captain Flight Lieutenant Caitlin Rytenksild (centre) leads an all-female C-17A Globemaster III aircrew, alongside co-pilot Flying Officer Gemma Dorn (left) and Loadmaster Corporal Charlotte Roe, July 2020.

Image courtesy of the Department of Defence
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Munition girls

Sybil Craig was appointed an official war artist in 1945, partly due to the Australian artistic community's requests for the official war artist scheme to represent contemporary artistic styles. The third woman to serve in this capacity, Sybil was a modernist painter who experimented with colour, line and shapes, presenting her subject matter in innovative ways. A member of the Women Painters National Service Group which engaged in fundraising for the war effort, she was the first woman to paint female munitions workers. These workers in a Melbourne ordnance factory were responsible for producing military weapons using heavy machinery designed for male labourers. They undertook dangerous tasks, such as making explosives and detonators. Sybil spent four months at the factory, producing a valuable record of the women's work through a series of paintings and drawings held in the collection of the Australian War Memorial.



Sheepskin flying vest made by members of the Country Women's Association of Victoria. These vests helped keep RAAF crew warm during the often freezing flights endured in bombing missions over Europe.

How might the RAAF crew feel to receive these vests made in Australia?

AWM REL36979

Sybil Craig, Women workers in the Paper Room Fuse Section, Commonwealth explosives factory, Maribyrnong (1945), oil on canvas board, 45.4 x 40.4 cm, AWM ART22139



Female relatives badge worn by Mrs Elsie Cave during the Second World War, with four stars to represent each of her sons on active service overseas. These badges were issued to mothers, wives or the nearest female relatives of Australian servicemen.

AWM REL24261/001

Did you know?

“Manpower” refers to the number of people working or available to work. During the Second World War, the government reserved certain skilled workers from voluntary military service in order to maintain manpower in essential and war-related industries. Because of labour shortages, the Manpower Directive was established in 1942, and a national register of male and female workers was implemented. The government had control over Australia's workforce, and could decide the jobs that people were allocated in the military, war or civilian industries.

The Herald, AWM 136465



Enrich your students' learning

We look forward to welcoming your group to the Memorial. Bookings are essential for all visiting school and school-aged groups. We offer Australian curriculum-linked facilitated programs for pre-school, foundation, primary, and secondary levels. The School Wreath Laying Ceremony is also available to book. For details, prices and to make a booking, please visit our website.

Planning your visit

- Choose the curriculum-based program that best suits the needs of your students. Make sure you advise your tour operator of your preference.
- If you are organising your own excursion, book your visit online. Owing to increased demand, it is recommended that bookings are made as early as possible.

- Ensure that there will be adequate supervision by teachers and other accompanying adults, with no more than one supervising adult per 11 students.

- Important information regarding your visit, including a risk assessment guide can be found on our website.
- If you have questions after reviewing the information on our website, please contact school.bookings@awm.gov.au

Preparing your students

- Talk to your group about appropriate behaviour for a national place of commemoration.
- Link classroom activities to your impending visit. Free online resources are available on our website.

During your visit

- Bottled water and cameras are permitted in the galleries, but all school bags must be left on the bus. Teacher's bags must be opened for inspection by security prior to entry.
- Bring your PACER paperwork for validation and stamping.
- Teachers and supervisors are to remain with students at all times inside the Memorial.
- Self-guiding is no longer available due to reduced gallery capacity.



Memorial Development Project

The Australian War Memorial is undergoing a period of development to tell contemporary stories of service and sacrifice. We continue to welcome schools, however education programs and gallery space may be impacted. To learn more about the project, visit www.awm.gov.au/ourcontinuingstory

Get your school involved

Since the Boer War, memorials have been erected across Australia to commemorate the nation's service during war and in peacekeeping and humanitarian operations. *Places of Pride* is the National Register of War Memorials.

To explore your local memorials and to contribute photos and discoveries, please visit placesofpride-awm.gov.au



Visit virtually

A Virtual Excursion runs like a video conference: students visit the Memorial in Canberra and explore some of the galleries, viewing photographs, objects, artwork, and film through a live, interactive session with educators. Students participate in activities in Australian curriculum-linked programs which cater for lower primary, upper primary, and secondary students.

Memorial Box outreach program

Memorial Boxes are rich learning resources available for loan Australia-wide. Containing real and replica uniforms, equipment, and artefacts, each box also connects to online material that helps you explore the contents with your students. Box themes include the First World War, the Second World War, Australia's wartime and peacekeeping service from 1946 to today, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander wartime service.

For further information about our onsite and online programs and resources, please visit www.awm.gov.au/schools



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Cover objects: AWM REL25317, AWM REL38946, AWM REL31363



Education Services

Book an onsite or online program for a rich learning experience