

INTRODUCTION: 'WAR IS WOMEN'S BUSINESS'

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War is Women's Business

Who face death in order to give life to men? WOMEN.

Who love and work to rear the sons who then are killed in battle? WOMEN.

Who plant fields and harvest crops when all able-bodied men are called to war? WOMEN.

Who keep shops and schools and work in factories while men are in the trenches? WOMEN.

Who nurse the wounded, feed the sick, support the helpless, brave all danger? WOMEN.

Who see their homes destroyed by shell and fire, their little ones made destitute, their daughters outraged? WOMEN.

Who are sent adrift, alone, no food, no hope, no shelter for the unborn child? WOMEN.

Who must suffer agony for every soldier killed? WOMEN.

Who are called upon to make sacrifices to pay the terrible tax of war? WOMEN.

Who dares to say that war is not their business? In the name of Justice and Civilisation give women a voice in Government and in the councils that make or prevent war.

(*Woman Voter*, 21 March 1916)

In 1993, a party of Australian soldiers and civilians gathered at Villers-Bretonneux. Seventy-five years earlier, the site had been the scene of one of the bloodiest battles of the First World War – the Great War. Today it is the final resting place of thousands of Australian soldiers who died there, defending a French village 20 000 kilometres from their home.

For a time the group walked slowly around the cemetery, pausing over the names of men they had never known. One grave was chosen among thousands of others; 'Known only to God' read

the inscription on the stone. The remains of this unknown soldier were shaken free of soil, placed in a coffin and draped with an Australian flag. Before the group left, someone scribbled a message in the visitors book: 'We will take care of him now.'

They took him home. On Remembrance Day 1993, the body of Australia's Unknown Soldier was placed in a crypt at the centre of the War Memorial in Canberra. He was buried with full military honours, with pomp and solemn ceremony, with speeches and flowers. A slouch hat rested on the centre of the coffin; it was a powerful symbol of national identity. No one knew the name of this soldier killed a lifetime ago; but he was an Australian — one of our own. The Prime Minister went even further. In a moving address, Paul Keating depicted the Unknown Soldier as a representative not only of the dead of the Great War but of all the conflicts this century, wars in near and distant lands that had claimed 100 000 Australian lives: 'He is *all* of them', Mr Keating declared, 'and he is all of us.'

The entombment of the Unknown Soldier raises a number of important themes. As the Prime Minister himself put it, it was part of the making and remaking of a distinctly Australian legend. The landing of Australian troops at Gallipoli, our first bloody engagement in a long and bloody war, is remembered not as a military defeat, but as a triumph of Australian courage and resourcefulness, a nation's 'baptism of fire'.

For generations, the Anzac legend has been celebrated in our history books; it is part of our national folklore, part of our sense of ourselves. But as the Prime Minister's speech also suggested, this legend, like all other legends, rested on a number of exclusions. It was a legend which excluded those who had not gone to war; and it was a legend made exclusively by men. A nation had found its identity not in peace but in war, in destruction and chaos, in fear, pain and death. It is something of an irony that men are seen as giving 'birth' to a nation and that the birth of a nation is found in the death of its youth.

Legends aside, the reality is that the soldier buried in Canberra can never represent Australia's experience of the Great War. War, as our opening poem suggests, is not just soldiers' business; it alters and claims the lives of women as well as men. Our memory of that conflict is alarmingly incomplete. We remember the men who fought and fell in battle but not the sacrifice of those who nursed the dying and wounded; we celebrate the achievement of armies but not those who toiled to feed and clothe them; we pay tribute to the remains of unknown soldiers but know surprisingly little about the pain of bereavement and loss. And we know little of these things because they are essentially women's experience of war: the experience of nurses not soldiers; of the home front, not the battlefield; of those who knew the grief, not the 'glory', of war.

If war is not simply men's business, it isn't *simply* women's either. Women's (and men's) experience of war is varied and diverse. This book explores differences and conflicts among women: between the women who supported the war and those who opposed it; between those who suffered the loss of husbands, sons and fathers and those who did not. It also identifies groups of women who contested or threatened the so-called national interest: women of German descent and women whose sexual or political behaviour undermined the war effort in a number of different ways.

This book is an attempt to retrieve women's experience from the carnage and the myth making of the Great War. It relies on the voices of the women themselves. From private and public testimonies, letters, diaries, contemporary books, journals and newspapers, and a host of historical studies, we have tried to glean different versions of our past. And we have reproduced these voices in many documents and illustrations so that students of history might listen and judge for themselves.



Figure 1.1

The burden of war
(Mitchell Library, Ref. GPO 1
Frame 23180)

■ This sculpture, 'Sacrifice', dominates the War Memorial in Sydney. What point is it making?

WORK IN THE BATTLE ZONES: NURSING THE TROOPS

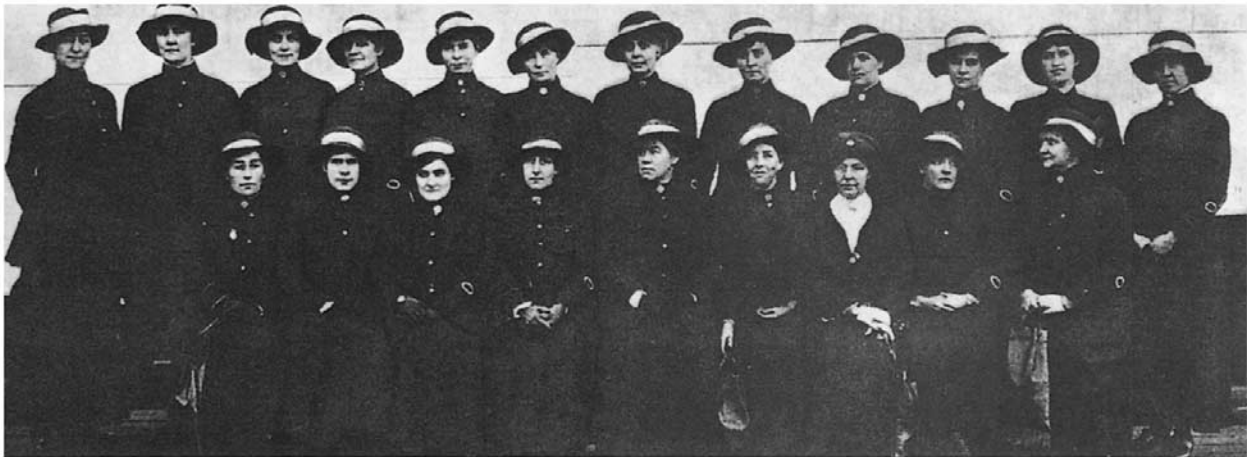
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Anzac Day is the public holiday which probably means most to the majority of Australians. For generations, old and young have gathered together in the grey light of dawn, stood in silence and remembered. Even 80 years after the Anzac landing, the services have lost none of their sorrow, none of their solemnity. The parades which take place on Anzac Day and the response of the thousands of spectators tell us a great deal about the way in which Australians remember the wars in which we have fought. At the 1995 Sydney parade, for instance, a boy was seen enthusiastically waving a placard which read: 'Good on you boys!' Yet, in the lines which marched past him were hundreds of women war veterans. Most prominent of these were the women from the Australian Army Nursing Service, which has a distinguished history of service in combat zones dating back to that first fateful landing at Gallipoli.

Figure 2.1
*NSW nurses embarking
for France*
(*Punch*, 13 July 1916)

■ How old do these
women appear to be?

The 2500 nurses who served during the Great War have been largely forgotten by Australians. We have focused our attention on



the heroic figure of the digger, arguably one of the most compelling symbols of our national identity. This is understandable; men were far more likely to die at war than women; men paid the heavy price of victory. But that does not change the fact that women also worked and suffered for their country in wartime; many died in the same cause and lie buried among their menfolk. The experiences of these Australian women at war form the focus of this chapter.

Enlisting

When war was declared in August 1914, Australians generally greeted the news with great excitement and enthusiasm. Men and women alike rushed to offer their services for the war effort. Nurses were particularly keen to join up, seeing an obvious need for their skills in the inevitable conflict. This would not necessarily be their first experience of military nursing. Some had already served their country in the so-called Boer War of 1898–1902, when each of the colonies had sent military contingents to help the British Government defeat the Afrikaners in South Africa. Many of the nurses who had volunteered for service in South Africa (many paying their own fares) did so out of a desire to improve the status of the nursing profession in general. The English nurse, Florence Nightingale, had started this process some 40 years earlier during the Crimean War. Her ideals of professional, ladylike nursing practice, with its scrupulous attention to order and cleanliness, were being introduced in Australia in the 1880s and 1890s.

The nurses who went to South Africa hoped that serving their country would further improve the reputation of nursing as a respectable occupation for well-brought-up young ladies. They were not disappointed. The British military authorities were originally reluctant to employ female nurses, as they believed them unsuited to the demands of military nursing. Eventually, however, these prejudices were overcome and after the war it was accepted that women would perform an important part in future medical care of troops.

In 1902, soon after the six colonies had joined to form the Commonwealth of Australia, the Australian Army Nursing Service was formed. The first nurses left for active service within months of the declaration of war and their numbers would be added to with each ship leaving for the theatre of war.

Who were these women and why were they so keen to go to war? To join the Army, nurses had to be aged between 21 and 40 years. Most were at least 24 since in those days nurses did not usually begin training until they were 20 or 21. Some worked for

the Red Cross and others found their own way to Europe and worked in British or French hospitals.

Nurses generally shared a common class background. Trainees needed to have some source of income other than the tiny wages they received – a factor which made it very difficult for working-class women to undertake the three-year course. By the early twentieth century, nurses tended to come from middle-class families, often with fathers in the professions or business, or in farming. It was fortunate that most of these women came from relatively well-off families, since going to war involved them in a lot of personal expense. In some states they were given donations to help with these expenses but in others they had to find the money themselves. A Victorian nurse, Sister Evelyn Davies, complained about the lack of proper provisioning: ‘Look at...how much it cost [us] in Australia, then since coming to London [we] have had to buy Primus Stoves, Mackintoshes, Gum Boots, Mess kit and several odds and ends.’¹ The Army provided none of these items.

For most nurses, the motives in volunteering were no doubt mixed. Many felt it was their patriotic duty to do what they could to help their country and, perhaps more importantly, the Empire, in its hour of need. The war also offered opportunities which they would not have at home to gain valuable professional experience which would advance their careers when peace returned. And like so many of the soldiers, they were seized by a sense of adventure at the prospect of visiting new places and gaining new personal experiences. Sister Evelyn ‘Tevie’ Davies welcomed every opportunity for new experiences, the more remote and strange the location the better. As she wrote to her mother after volunteering to go to India, ‘I wouldn’t have an opportunity of living in India perhaps ever again it will be an experience quite apart from what we have before had.’² She felt sorry for her mother left behind with ‘always the same dull round’ while she was ‘always experiencing something new’. And for a good many, romance and adventure were inextricable. ‘Half the women here are keen on getting married’, Tevie told her mother, adding that ‘it is to be hoped there are men enough left for them.’³

For some nurses a major motive was their desire to be with loved ones who were leaving with the expeditionary force. Many of the nurses had brothers and sweethearts serving with the AIF (Australian Imperial Force) and some, like Sister Elsie Cook, were married – although, officially, sisters were supposed to be single. Elsie Sheppard had married Syd, the son of the former Prime Minister Joseph Cook, shortly before he left for the war. She followed a few months later. Four years later, with the war still going on, she recalled the high spirits and hopes they had had during their brief honeymoon: together they would ‘do their bit’ for the Empire.⁴

Document 2.1

A nurse's views on women

It has been argued that the war nurses were true pioneers in the cause of women, breaking down barriers to women's employment in the hitherto 'male' military sphere. Their diaries and letters give us some clues as to their views on women's role in society.

London, 15 July 1915
I have sent a paper Mum dear of the Women's procession yesterday. It was very long but still I don't see the sense of it much but the Suffragettes simply must keep before the public. Anyhow it's better than smashing windows etc. Still a woman's place is in her own home first I consider.

On board ship from Egypt to Bombay, 22 March 1916
...Mrs Daniels who had been Matron at the Hostel was being given a send-off this night. She came on the stage dressed as a Sister minus the red cape and sang rather well [and] the boys applauded loudly. After a pause she came back gently mopping her eyes; however, she valiantly sang a bar of 'The Lost Chord' then with further

patting of her eyes she said in a tragic voice, 'It's no use boys, I can't sing tonight' (a kind of a ring-down-the-curtain act). The boys thought it most pathetic, but of course the Nurses thought it most affected, being unsentimental beings. At the close of the entertainment she was presented with a basket of flowers. She again wept, thereby gaining further applause. I think I'll have to adopt these feminine traits. Maybe I shall go off this season then [become engaged during the next social season].

Peshawar, India, 24 November 1916
We had an argument at the Mess recently. The head Sister said that women were practically the root of all evil, she didn't know what the world was coming to, that they were not dependable [and] she preferred a man for they [sic] were true. I flared up and asked her what about her own Mother? She caved in and said that nowadays the women were different. The fact of the matter [is that] she strives to keep up with officers' wives who do nothing but entertain Subalterns and lead gay lives. She finds they look down on a nursing Sister, then gets piqued with women in general. They make me tired.
(Letters of Sister Evelyn Davies [to her mother], 3DRL 3398, Australian War Memorial)

■ How would you describe Evelyn Davies' views on women?

Off to the war

Embarking for service overseas stirred a curious mixture of emotions. In the final hours before boarding the troopships, nurses spoke of their sadness at leaving home and loved ones, and of their wonder and apprehension at the great adventure before them. Whatever the feelings, the last few days in Australia were a flurry of activity: scribbling letters to friends and family, squeezing into ill-fitting uniforms and 'the awful shuffle' of cramming kit and belongings into a few cases.

On board ship, the pace of activity slowed considerably. It was a long journey. Nurses bound for England from eastern Australia called briefly at the port of Fremantle, then sailed to Cape Town and up the west coast of Africa to Britain. Others took the Suez route to Egypt, or travelled by ship and then by train and cart through the vast expanse of India. Women, who may never have left home before, left Australia 20 000 kilometres behind them.

Leaving for the war

(Letters of Sister
 Evelyn Davies,
 3DRL 3398B,
 Australian War
 Memorial)

Barrington Green
 East Kent
 17-5-'15

My Dear Mummie

I tried so hard to come home again tonight but couldn't manage it. I was awfully sorry too for I fully made up my mind to come anyhow perhaps it was as well we would only have had the party all over again. Mum Dear I know you will be feeling terribly lonely, but don't worry. Dear I'll soon be home again. Poor Mum you have always been the unselfish one, I'll always be thinking of you, and wishing I could help you to bed again. How I'll long for you all and the dear old Mountain goodness only knows, and I'm sure too never mind Mum I'll never alter, and will still help you milk when I come home. I got my uniform today, and will have to wear it tomorrow, it is not at all elegant however looks are not everything. I got the luggage away alright although it was an awful scuffle at the last. I got the Cheque from the Department alright, and settled up the accounts so tomorrow will be clear. I just dread thinking of going, but it will be alright once I get away. Good bye My dear Mummie Dear. Don't let you know the others are near. Rufe is son & daughter too far better than I have been. Cheer up Mum Darling I'll write soon.

■ This letter was written by Evelyn Davies to her mother just before embarkation. What emotions does it reveal and what does it tell us about Evelyn's social background and domestic responsibilities?

The months spent at sea often passed slowly. Sea sickness was a common complaint, particularly on that first rough crossing around the Bight to Fremantle. And on some ships nurses had to contend with even more serious illness. An outbreak of disease on one transport ship killed many soldiers; others were coaxed back to health by sick, exhausted nurses. It was on board ship that nurses had their first taste of Army regulations.

So far as military etiquette was concerned, nurses were officers and not permitted to associate with the soldiers who travelled on the decks below them. If weather allowed they could promenade the length of the ship but after 9.30 p.m. they were confined

Document 2.3

A visit to Perth

At Subiaco, the streets are all well planted with Pepper Trees and Moreton Bay Figs. We went through beautiful country to Nedlands. It seems strange to us after Melbourne to have trams moving right through the bush. Such glorious colouring — the bush with its orange-coloured flowers and the flowering gum at its best. At Nedlands, we did full justice to a cup of tea with hot scones and cake. It is surprising how hungry one gets. The river here widens like a bay and there are many yachts and fishing boats on it. The men repairing the fishing nets, the children paddling at the water's edge and the beautiful gardens all...helped to make a charming picture.
(Diary of Sister Elsie Tranter, 11 January 1916, DRL 4081, Australian War Memorial)

■ Almost all the outward-bound nurses called in at Fremantle. For others, the bluff at Albany would be their last glimpse of Australia. In her account of her brief stay in Perth, why does Elsie Tranter describe the people and the landscape so fondly?

to their cabins. Writing, reading, sewing, coits and other deck games, filled up most of the day but many nurses longed to know 'the boys' a little better. Sister Elsie Tranter and her friends spent many a morning watching the men exercising; the evening church services were even more exciting: 'the boys and the nurses all grouped round the Padre singing...the moon making paths of gold across the water'.⁵ By their seventh week at sea, they had 'set up a lively correspondence with the decks below', several of the ship's officers 'acting as their postman'.⁶ And secretive letters led to even more secretive meetings:

We did not get much sleep last night... Peg came with us after dinner and I tried to steal a few minutes conversation with one of the 'Forbidden Diggers'. The sentry was bored enough to keep watch for us and he said to Peg, 'Love-makin' on the Ship is like mashin' a girl with her father watching. You've got to be up to all sorts of tricks.'⁷

■ What do Elsie Tranter's Ten Commandments tell us about the relationship between (a) the nurses and the SMOs, and (b) the nurses and the troops?
■ What does she mean by 'thou...must be kept sacred'?

Document 2.4

Ten Commandments for Sisters

- 1 The S.M.O. [Senior Medical Officer] is our only God. Thou shalt have no one but him.
- 2 Thou shalt not make graven images of the S.M.O. and officers that fly in the Heavens above [and]...think they own this boat.
- 3 Sisters, thou shalt not take the name of the S.M.O. in vain — when he punishes thee for being out of bounds after dark and gives thee three nights' hard labour on duty.
- 4 Six days shalt thou talk to thyself and on the seventh keep thy mouth shut.
- 5 Honour thy Steward[s]...for they only are essential to thy happiness.

- 6 Thou shalt kill rats and other vermin but leave the captain and Major...still alive.
- 7 Thou shalt not adulterate thy nurse's life with joy...
- 8 Thou shalt not steal kisses in the dark, cosy corners on the deck or in covered areas. At any rate, do not be found out.
- 9 Thou shalt not bear false witness against the lady passengers.
- 10 Thou shalt not covet thee civilian cabins, nor clothes, nor liberties, nor drinks, nor any other things that do not belong to thee — nor officers from other boats for thou art on active service and thou...must be kept sacred.
(Tranter Diary, 18 January 1917, 3DRL 4081, Australian War Memorial)

It is difficult to establish what the sentry really meant by 'love-makin'. For most nurses, meetings with the troops were confined to harmless flirtation; and while Elsie Tranter enjoyed the rough and ready company of the men, many young ladies preferred the polite conversation of the officers. On the other hand, a good many of the nurses who served abroad found husbands among their charges, some marrying men well 'beneath' their social station. Several were actually returned home for 'misbehaviour'; the authorities were determined to prevent such sexual liaisons.

Romance was not the only distraction on the journey out from Australia. A voyage across the oceans opened a city girl's eyes to the wonders of nature; diaries record 'the effect of sun upon the spray', 'the golden sunsets' and the moon 'rising like a ball of fire from the water'. And as the ships drew into port, Australian nurses prepared themselves for their first encounter with new lands, new peoples and new cultures. Letters home abound with descriptions of 'this Great Eastern Land' (Egypt); wide-eyed with wonder they strolled through the ruins of antiquity, fought their way through the bustle of the markets and gazed upon a landscape altogether new to them. Alice Kitchen scribbled excitedly in her diary:

Figure 2.2
Enthusiastic tourists:
Australian Army
Nursing Service sisters,
on their first tour of duty
in 1915
(AWM AO5410)

■ Why were such excursions so popular with nursing staff?

