

Women at War: The changing role of women in times of conflict

‘What did you do during the war mum?’

The roles played by women during times of conflict are vast and varied. In Australia’s wartime history women have been servicewomen, prisoners of war, nurses, doctors, entertainers, workers in munitions factories, technicians and peacekeepers – to mention but a few of the many ways in which women have directly participated in Australia’s war efforts.

To the teacher

In this investigation, students are presented with the opportunity to explore and describe the changing roles of women during times of conflict. The activities are varied and allow students to be creative, self-directed learners, while at the same time, focusing on change and continuity and identifying, using and analysing sources of historical information.

The Internet is a vast repository of visual and written information and there is a special focus on visual literacy in this investigation. A plethora of rich images exist on these websites and each has its own story to tell.

In this investigation, students will look at the roles of women in the medical corps and then engage in research about the variety of roles women undertake during times of conflict.

Recommended levels

Upper primary

Lower secondary

Middle secondary

Upper secondary



Background information

Today there is little that women are prevented from doing in the defence of Australia and they participate in the majority of employment opportunities presented by the Australian Defence Force (ADF). This is quite different from earlier times. During the Boer War in 1899 nurses first accompanied contingents as part of the NSW Army Medical Corps and by the end of World War I little had changed for women. They were still restricted to active participation in the defence of Australia through the Australian Army Nursing Service. Although nurses in World War I enjoyed the privileges of commissioned rank their ‘officer status’ was honorary and not officially recognised.



Lieutenant Ahern, one of the first army nurses to serve an operational duty in Vietnam, 1967.

AWM GIL/67/0483/VN



Australian Women's Army Service training in the handling of the Owen Gun, Queensland, 1944.

AWM 062586

World War II, however, was the moment in history that changed women's participation in the defence forces. It was during this war that the Women's Auxiliary Australian Air Force (WAAAF), the Australian Women's Army Service (AWAS), the Royal Australian Air Force Nursing Service (RAAFNS), the Australian Army Medical Women's Service (AAMWS), the Royal Australian Navy Nursing Service (RANNS), the Women's Royal Australian Naval Service (WRANS) and the Australian Women's Land Army (AWLA), a civilian service, were established. These organisations were ostensibly formed to release men for fighting duties, yet they were the catalyst which enabled women to have a fuller and more equal participation in the military by serving as aircraft ground staff, in administration, radar and signals, as telegraphists, drivers, in some intelligence and crypt analysis, in stores and maintenance, and in kitchens and messes. It was also during World War II that women were taken prisoners of war and their stories were harrowing and tragic, and often demonstrate an overwhelming desire to overcome adversity.

Marriage was seen as a barrier to a full career in the services and women were banned from serving at sea, in battle and in the air. In fact, it was not until the late 1970s that women began to be integrated into the army. Australia's first women air force pilots graduated in 1988 and the Royal Australian Navy welcomed its first woman pilot in 1998. Women's roles during times of war evolve and develop in response to changes in society and technology.

Historical literacies

Events of the past
Narratives of the past
Research skills
Historical concepts
ICT understandings
Representational expression
Historical explanation

Indicators of student achievement

At the end of this unit students should be able to:

- **hypothesise** about whether and why the roles of women have changed over time
- **identify** significant women and events relating to Australia's history
- **explain** some of the roles women played during times of war.

Introductory activity

Direct students to the photographs and questions on the Student resource sheet (page 52) and use the information to hypothesise what changes to women's roles have taken place and why.

Students may like to compare these images with current women's roles in the defence forces, and should go to the Australian Defence Force Academy (ADFA) website and follow the links to the navy, army and air force sections. Ask students what pictorial evidence says about the changing roles of women during times of conflict.

www.defencejobs.gov.au > ADFA > Navy (or Army or Air Force)

Activity 1: What were the changing roles of women in the medical corps?

Students will be asked to compare and contrast the similarities and changes across three different periods and hypothesise about the causes of change. The focus questions for Activity 1 are:

- 1 What roles did women have in the medical corps?
- 2 What were their daily lives like?
- 3 Where were they stationed?
- 4 What are the personal experiences of women who served in the medical corps?

Working the web

Look at one of the following periods: World War I, World War II, Vietnam in the 1960s. Students should create electronic folders for storing information or resources on their hard drives. Students may copy images or download documents and paste and save them in folders for future use. They may also bookmark websites they have visited in sub-folders on their browser.

Students should go to the Australian War Memorial (AWM) website to search for images by entering a variety of terms such as: nurses, doctors, medical camps, hospitals, ambulance, wounded, health, Australian Army Nursing Service, Volunteer Aid Detachment and Australian Army Medical Women's Service.

www.awm.gov.au > Collection Databases > Collections Search

Ask students to go to the Australian Service Nurses National Memorial, which commemorates 100 years of military nursing, and suggest that students download this document.

www.awm.gov > Encyclopedia > Nurses memorial

Direct students to the Anzac website and download 'The nurses experience of Gallipoli from their letters', which includes extracts from the letters of Sisters Nellie Pike, Ella Tucker, Daisy Richmond, Grace Wilson, Louise Young, Lydia King and Evelyn Davies.

www.anzacsite.gov.au > Links > Researching > Nurses at Gallipoli

Direct students to the Australians at War website and download Sister Sylvia Duke's letter to her friend Sophie Healy in 'Nurses survive evacuation from Greece'.

www.australiansatwar.gov.au > Find > Sylvia Duke

Investigation 5



AWM 027454

Extensive Air Raid Precaution (ARP) exercises were carried out by 5000 ARP workers in municipalities across Melbourne, Victoria, 1942.



AWM J00346

Women volunteers at Federal Government House, the headquarters of the Red Cross, sorting and packing parcels to be sent to troops, Melbourne, 1916.

And the story of Sister Ellen Savage at:

www.dva.gov.au > Media Centre > Publications > Commemorative Publications > Sinking of the Centaur > Sister Ellen Savage

And the story of Glyneath Cody in the Case study section of the Memorial Box at:

www.awm.gov.au > Education > Memorial Boxes > Box 05 > Glyneath Cody

Go to the AWM website and locate the Case study on Major Susan Felsche.

www.awm.gov.au > Education > Memorial Boxes > Box 07 > Major Susan Felsche

Identifying and analysing

Bring the class together for discussions about their research – what the information is telling them about the role of women in the medical corps, where women served and the dangers they faced.

Ask students to hypothesise about the changing nature of women's roles, the reasons their roles changed and what generalisations can be made about the roles of women in the medical corps during times of conflict.

Presenting the findings

Based on their research and reading, working in small groups students are to complete one of the following tasks:

- a play about women medical personnel, where the students take on the voices of the women they have researched to describe their experiences of treating the sick and wounded during three different conflicts
- a poem dedicated to women who have served in the medical corps.

Activity 2: What did women do during times of conflict?

This investigation encourages students to explore the websites noted on pages 49 and 50 in a creative and self-directed way and to investigate the variety of roles women played. During this activity students should be encouraged to research the broad and various ways in which women have contributed in times of conflict. Instead of focus questions for this activity, statements have been provided on which students should base their research:

- 1 Women were strong during times of conflict.
- 2 Women were hopeful during times of conflict.
- 3 Women were in danger during times of conflict.
- 4 Women showed confidence during times of conflict.
- 5 Women offered support during times of conflict.

- 6 Women were frightened during times of conflict.
- 7 Women were competent during times of conflict.
- 8 Women demonstrated compassion during times of conflict.
- 9 Women were brave during times of conflict.
- 10 Women were helpful during times of conflict.

The purpose of this activity is for students to:

- use at least two of the websites
- find three examples of support for three of the statements.

Students should comment on how the image supports the statement.

Students should store any information they download in an electronic folder for easy access and organise their research in table format in a word-processed document. One example has been completed.

Focus statements: Example

Statement	Women and their roles	Website
Women offered support during times of conflict	Connie Hobbs – entertainer	www.australiansatwar.gov.au > Find > Connie Hobbs
Women offered support during times of conflict	Jessie Vasey – founder of the War Widows’ Guild of Australia	www.warwidowsnsw.com.au > Table of Contents > History of the Guild > Jessie Vasey story and others
Women offered support during times of conflict	Isobel Anstee – Australian Women’s Land Army	www.australiansatwar.gov.au > Find > Isobel Anstee



AWM CAMUN92/067/17

Leading Aircraftwoman Kylie Kiddle and Corporal Mick Hicklin at the Communication Centre, HQ UNTAC (United Nations Transitional Authority) Phnom Penh, Cambodia, 1992.

Working the web

Students should begin their search using the list below as a starting point and follow the links to deepen their research on the AWM website.

www.awm.gov.au > Collection Databases > Collections Search

- servicewomen, Australian Women’s Army Service (AWAS)
- Women’s Auxiliary Australian Air Force (WAAAF)
- Women’s Royal Australian Naval Service (WRANS)
- Australian Women’s Land Army (AWLA)
- prisoners of war
- munitions (engineers, technicians, war effort, aircraft, rivets, training)
- communications
- Red Cross
- war widows

- war reporting and war artists
- peacekeeping
- home front (rationing, ration books, catering, food preparation, austerity measures, knitting, volunteers, Australian Comforts Fund)
- entertainment.

There are many stories and images on the web about what women did during times of conflict and a good place to start is at the text links below.

- Elizabeth Agar was trained during World War II to intercept German naval signals.

www.australiansatwar.gov.au > Find > Elizabeth Agar

- Bonnie Pickup was among the first women to be posted to the first Fighter Sector.

www.australiansatwar.gov.au > Find > Bonnie Pickup

- For the story of the women knitters during World War II (and you can also find the difference between a Franklin, a Bruce and a Keith!) go to the following website.

www.australiansatwar.gov.au > Find > Women of Australia

- Extracts of Annie 'Daisy' Boyden's letters to her son Arthur, who served in Singapore, are available from this website. She also describes her fears while waiting to hear news.

www.australiansatwar.gov.au > Find > Daisy Boyden

Identifying and analysing

Engage students in discussions about the material and information they are gathering and whether it provides evidence for the 'statements' about women.

Students should share information and what that information tells them about the variety of roles women had during war.

Presenting the findings

Based on their research students are to create a story board with images and text to demonstrate their findings of their three 'statements'. On completion the story board could also be presented to the class as an oral activity.

Alternatively, using information students have gathered, they could create a historical website for use in the school library which supports each of the ten statements about women's roles during times of conflict.

Going further

Students could go on to make further investigations into women's roles in times of conflict by contacting their local veterans' organisations and interviewing women from a range of conflicts.

This would be an ideal opportunity for students to write short histories of women in the local community who have a story to tell about their memories of times of conflict.

The *Valuing our Veterans* section of the DVA website has valuable information about contacting veterans.

www.dva.gov.au > Media Centre > Publications > Commemorative Publications > Valuing our Veterans

Other resources

Biographical and other information about women's associations can be found on the website of the National Foundation for Australian Women.

www.womenaustralia.info

Generic entries into search engines will yield a variety of articles on women's roles in the medical corps during times of war. Nurses Vivian Bullwinkel and Wilma Oram (later Young) can be researched online and students should be encouraged to investigate the heroines of the *Empire Star*, when nurses protected patients with their own bodies during an attack, and the sinking of the *Vyner Brooke*, when 21 nurses, together with a civilian woman and a number of men, were shot to death by the Japanese after surrendering. The Red Cross or other overseas aid agencies may be able to direct students to information about Australian women serving with non-government organisations (NGOs) overseas.

Libraries may hold copies of the following texts for those interested in a more detailed history of women in the Australian services.

M Curtis-Otter, *W.R.A.N.S. The Women's Royal Australian Naval Service*, Sydney, Naval Historical Society of Australia, 1975.

Sue Hardisty, *Thanks Girls and Goodbye! The Story of the Australian Women's Land Army 1942-45*, Melbourne, Viking O'Neil, 1990.

Just Wanted to Be There – Australian services nurses 1899-1999, Canberra, ACT, Department of Veterans' Affairs, 1999.

Lorna Ollif, *Colonel Best and her Soldiers*, Sydney, Ollif Publishing Company, 1985.

Joyce Thomson, *The WAAAF in Wartime Australia*, Melbourne, Melbourne University Press, 1991.

MAD MOUSE

- 1 Who was Captain Kay Parker?
- 2 Who was Dorothy Drain?
- 3 Why is Natalee McDougall a part of Australian history?
- 4 Who was 'the White Mouse'?
- 5 What did Tokyo Rose do during World War II?

Student resource sheet

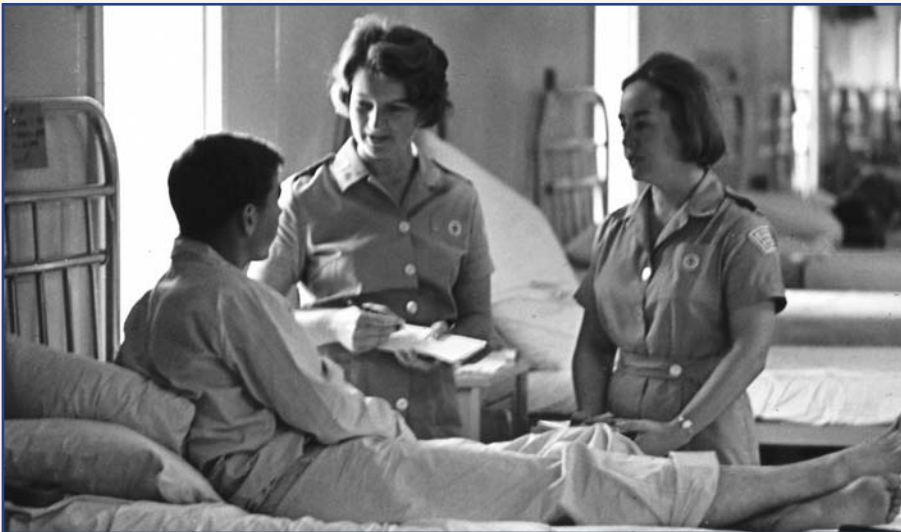
Divide each image into nine equal sectors and 'read' it from left to right. List what you see.



AWM P02825.004



AWM A03962



AWM EKN/69/0166/VN



AWM 91750



AWM 088627



AWM 014928