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**Nurse or not? Voluntary aids and the Australian Army Medical Women's Service during the Second World War : Organisational identity and the value of women's work**

**Smeaton, Jason James**

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# **Nurse or Not?**

## **Voluntary Aids and the Australian Army Medical Women's Service During the Second World War: Organisational Identity and the Value of Women's Work.**

Submitted by

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A thesis submitted in total fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of  
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## Abstract

This thesis explores the under-represented cohort of Australian servicewomen who worked in historically female-dominated roles – those being based in care and humanitarian related fields, such as nursing and domestic duties. Studies of Australian servicewomen have approached the cohort as a monolithic group with little regard given to their backgrounds, including their education, work experience, and their geography. This thesis forensically investigates the complexity and multi-layered category that is Australian servicewomen during the Second World War – a cohort that changes dramatically over the course of the war. Using feminist, labour and women’s history as its foundations, this research analyses the identities and experiences of the women who served as Voluntary Aids (VAs) and members of the Australian Army Medical Women’s Service (AAMWS) during the Second World War.

Two key lines of enquiry are pursued in this work. The first is to trace the educational and organisational challenges the VAs/AAMWS faced, and the opportunities afforded them, including the transition of the women’s service as VAs into the paid and khaki-clad military auxiliary service – the AAMWS. The other is to uncover the relationships and tensions that existed between the auxiliary service and the trained nurses, both organisationally and as individuals. These two areas of focus are brought together to interrogate the myth that VAs/AAMWS wanted to be nurses, questioning how this myth was shaped by and for the members of the auxiliary service. The identity and role of the nursing aid during the war, and their relationship with the nursing profession is the primary focus of this research as it questions how the military, governments, and the nursing profession challenged, shaped, and progressed the work and skill of the servicewomen of the VAD/AAMWS. In doing so, this thesis offers a new understanding of the role of the VAs/AAMWS, the war’s effect on women’s work, and it illuminates a new picture of how women shaped the war and how the war shaped women.

This thesis argues that Australian women's service during the Second World War contributed to the economy and efficiency of the nation's effort and their work holds significance without comparison or emphasis of men's experiences which have dominated the historical narrative. But this research also suggests that while the politics that surrounded women's labour shifted encouragingly during the war, attitudes also took a retrograde step. This thesis shows that the professional identity of VAs/AAMWS and the value of their work was assigned to them by others. While members of the service demonstrated skill and proficiency, it was the military, governments, and trained medical and nursing professionals that determined the place, albeit constantly changing, of the VA/AAMWS. At the junction of two male-dominated spheres—the hospital system that gave power to male doctors, and the military—the understanding of VAs/AAMWS was foremost as women and only secondarily as workers. Where at once women's work received recognition and approval by those including military doctors and nurses, there was little to separate the narratives of their service peddled by governments from gendered stereotypes historically used to characterise the nurse, the wife, and the mother.

# Declaration

This is to certify that:

- i. This thesis contains no material that has been extracted in whole or in part from a thesis that I have submitted towards the award of any other degree or diploma in any other tertiary institution.
- ii. No other person's work has been used without due acknowledgment in the main text of the thesis.
- iii. All research procedures reported in the thesis received the approval of the relevant Ethics/Safety Committees (where required).



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Jason Smeaton

[November 2022]

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# Contents

Abstract	i
Declaration	iii
Acknowledgements	iv
List of Abbreviations	vii
List of Illustrations	ix
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>PART I: Introducing the Nursing Aid</b>	
1    The Voluntary Aid Detachment and the Nursing Profession in in Australia, 1914-1939	32
2    Voluntary Aids Develop New Skills in the Middle East	56
<b>PART II: Disruptions, Tensions, and Controversies</b>	
3    VAs Become AAMWS: Questions of Identity and Skill	89
4    Portrayals of the VA and AAMWS	119
5    AAMWS Nursing in the Pacific	155
6    Aids to become Nurses: The AAMWS Nurse Training Scheme	182
<b>PART III: Historical Narrative and Reflection</b>	
7    Not All Nurses: AAMWS Beyond the Ward	216
8    Recollection and Reflection: Creating Their Own Story	248
<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>278</b>
Bibliography	286



## Abbreviations

AAG	Assistant Adjutant-General
AAMC	Australian Army Medical Corps
AAMWS	Australian Army Medical Women's Service
AANS	Australian Army Nursing Service
AGH	Australian General Hospital
AIF	Australian Imperial Force
ANF	Australian Nursing Federation
ARCS	Australian Red Cross Society
ATNA	Australian Trained Nurses Association
AWAS	Australian Women's Army Service
AWFA	Australians at War Film Archive
AWM	Australian War Memorial
DGMS	Director-General of Medical Services
DoI	Department of Information
ENT	Ear, Nose, and Throat
GOC	General Officer Commanding
GRO	General Routine Order
ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross
LHQ	Land Headquarters
Lt-Col	Lieutenant-Colonel
NAA	National Archives of Australia
NCO	Non-Commissioned Officer
NSW	New South Wales
ORs	Other Ranks
POW	Prisoner of War
R&SLA	Returned & Services League of Australia
RAP	Regimental Aid Post
RVCN	Royal Victorian College of Nursing
RVTNA	Royal Victorian Trained Nurses Association
SMO	Senior Medical Officer
SWPA	South West Pacific Area
VA	Voluntary Aid (a member of the VAD)
VAD	Voluntary Aid Detachment (the organisation or specific unit)

VE Day	Victory in Europe Day
WAAAF	Women's Auxiliary Australian Air Force
WEB	Women's Employment Board
WRANS	Women's Royal Australian Navy Service

# Illustrations

## Figures

1.	Geographic Location of Voluntary Aid Detachments by Strength, 1939 and 1942.	52
2.	Geographic Location of Voluntary Aid Detachments by Strength, 1939 and 1942: Melbourne and Sydney.	52
3.	Number of VAs Assigned to Roles in the Middle East by Home State.	72
4.	Percentage of VAs Assigned to Roles in the Middle East by Home State.	73
5.	Pre-War Civilian Occupations of VAs Sent to the Middle East.	78
6.	Enlistments and Discharges of AAMWS Other Ranks, January 1943 - August 1945.	115
7.	<i>Group of VADs</i> . William Dargie. Melbourne, 1942. AWM: ART22349.	123
8.	<i>Matron Annie Sage</i> . Nora Heysen. Melbourne, 1944. AWM: ART22218.	125
9.	<i>Lt-Col May Douglas</i> . Nora Heysen. Melbourne, 1944. AWM: ART22217.	125
10.	<i>The Needle Sharpener (Private Rosalin Dallas)</i> . Nora Heysen. Sydney, 1944. AWM: ART22407.	128
11.	<i>Sponging a Malaria Patient</i> . Nora Heysen. Cairns, 1945. AWM: ART24373.	128
12.	<i>AAMWS (Private Gwynneth Patterson)</i> . Nora Heysen. Sydney, 1944. AWM: ART22822.	128
13.	AWAS/AAMWS advert. <i>The Australian Women's Weekly</i> . 17 March 1945, 32.	134
14.	AAMWS advert. <i>The Australian Women's Weekly</i> . 26 May 1945, 14.	137
15.	Mazda Electric advert. <i>The Australian Women's Weekly</i> . 6 June 1942, 12.	141
16.	<i>The Australian Women's Weekly</i> . Cover by John Mills. 7 June 1941.	144
17.	'With the AAMWS'. Virgil Reilly. <i>The Australian Women's Weekly</i> . 5 May 1945, 11.	146
18.	<i>Washing Bottles (Private Dorene Lawrence)</i> . Nora Heysen. Sydney, 1944. AWM: ART22680.	221
19.	<i>Private EM Boyle sitting before Sergeant Powell</i> . Sydney. 15 March 1946. AWM: 126431.	226

## Tables

1.	Overseas Service Rates of Pay for the AANS and VAD.	65
2.	National Register of Women with Nursing Qualifications, May 1943.	186

# Introduction

Kathleen Best was a nurse to her core. Completing her training at the Western Suburbs Hospital in Sydney in 1932, Best then went onto train in midwifery and to hold leadership positions at several Sydney hospitals.<sup>1</sup> In May 1940, Best began her military career, joining the Australian Army Nursing Service (AANS) as Matron of the 2/5 Australian General Hospital (AGH). She soon became an experienced army matron and by 1942, Best had seen service in the Middle East and had been awarded the Royal Red Cross for her courage and efficiency during the 2/5 AGH's evacuation from Greece. Her service abroad with the Second Australian Imperial Force (AIF) early in the Second World War made Best well-versed in military organisation. Showing her understanding of the effective operation of the military medical service, in January 1943 Best stated, 'Every position in a medical unit is important for ultimate efficiency'.<sup>2</sup> Discussing opportunities for women to work with the Australian Army Medical Corps (AAMC), Best went on to say, 'and every girl in this service is helping to save lives'.<sup>3</sup> Yet, in this statement Best was not referring to the work of nurses or the AANS. The 'life-saving' work Best was referring to was that of the Australian Army Medical Women's Service (AAMWS).

As Controller of the AAMWS between July 1942 and February 1943, Lieutenant-Colonel (Lt-Col) Best oversaw the establishment of the AAMWS as a military auxiliary formed out of the organisation known as the Voluntary Aid Detachment (VAD). Building upon the work undertaken by Voluntary Aids (VAs) who were trained in first aid and home nursing, this military auxiliary became a service designed to alleviate the strain on trained nurses in the AANS and medical professionals of the AAMC. Assigned to wards in military hospitals, VAs and then AAMWS worked as orderlies as well as in the mess, laundry, on patient transport, and in many other areas

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<sup>1</sup> Marilyn Lincoln, 'Best, Kathleen Annie Louise (1910–1957),' *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, vol.13, ed. John Ritchie (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1993).

<sup>2</sup> *The Weekly Times* (Melbourne), 27 January 1943, 18.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

contributing to the function of medical establishments. Initially, their work was for the most part routine and required little to no training. Nevertheless, these tasks, and the servicewomen in the VAD and AAMWS to undertake them, were essential for the care of patients and the efficient organisation of the military medical service. From making cups of tea and delivering letters to patients, to peeling potatoes or mending linen, ‘tasks that might be considered menial in everyday life take on a new significance in the AAMWS’, explained Lt-Col Best.<sup>4</sup> At a passing-out ceremony in January 1943 at an AAMWS training school in Queensland, Lt-Col Best addressed the new members of the AAMWS, saying:

By joining this service, members assist to save life even if they do not do nursing duties in a medical unit, because the efficiency of the hospital depends on all the work being carried out in an efficient way.<sup>5</sup>

The objective given to members of the VAD then AAMWS was not to challenge the role or take the place of trained nurses, but to assist in the effective and efficient running of military hospitals. While this thesis discusses the ambiguous place of the auxiliary servicewomen and their position as nurse or not, the appointment of Kathleen Best—a nurse—as the first Controller of the AAMWS illustrates the deep connection that existed between nursing and the VAD/AAMWS.

But the suggestion that the Second World War was a unifying experience that bound nurses and VAs/AAMWS together in the Army has not been the prevailing narrative. Based in a myth evoked during the First World War, public perceptions of the nursing aid were that they were or at least wanted to be nurses. Given nurses had to train for three or four years for their registration, it was assumed that any suggestion of an aid being a nurse would have seen any binding threads torn. However, this thesis shows, within the bounds of the military, registered nurses and servicewomen of the medical auxiliary did largely work together with professionalism and courtesy. Furthermore, this thesis reveals that the trained nurses of the AANS supported the servicewomen

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> ‘AAMWS in passing out ceremony,’ *The Telegraph* (Brisbane), 26 January 1943, 4.

of the VAD/AAMWS to develop their skill and capabilities in nursing. However, this thesis argues that it was the assumption underlying the myth that VAs and AAMWS saw themselves as nurses that saw others, such as Army medical and nursing professionals and government, impose upon VAs and AAMWS an identity that perpetuated the myth. This thesis traces the organisational identity of the VAD/AAMWS and highlights the changing nature of the service and their roles and responsibilities. Providing a strong narrative based in rich archival materials, this thesis argues that while the servicewomen saw themselves as VAs and AAMWS, and not as nurses, their identity was shaped by other influencing factors. For example, military and government leaders understood VAs and AAMWS primarily as women, and with their duties based in care roles that were socially understood to be women's work, perceptions of VAs/AAMWS always arched back to the gendered idea of the nurse.

## **The Nurse and the Aid During the Second World War**

Like many civil occupations in Australia during the Second World War, nursing faced many challenges imposed by the war. One such challenge was coping with the increased control and organisation of employment and services by government. For instance, in April 1942, the New South Wales (NSW) Government declared 162 public hospitals and 12 Red Cross hospitals and convalescent homes 'protected undertakings'.<sup>6</sup> An acknowledgement that these institutions were providing an essential service to their communities and the nation more broadly, this declaration, nevertheless, restricted the movement and employment of nurses, including those wishing to enlist with the military. At the same, in Victoria a compulsory register of trained nurses was established under the Premier's Emergency Nursing Services Order of May 1942.<sup>7</sup> Like that in NSW, this order instituted control of trained nurses' employment in that state.

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<sup>6</sup> University of Melbourne Archives, Australian Nursing Federation, Federal Office Collection, 1986.149.M/16.1 'Manpower regulations; 'Protected undertakings,' *The Australian Nurses' Journal*, 15 June 1942, 86.

<sup>7</sup> *Victoria Government Gazette*, no.163, 4 May 1942, 1761-1762.

Government restrictions imposed during the war to control the direction of labour was not unique to nursing. However, unlike many of the other protected services monitored by the government's Manpower Directorate, the nursing profession was being shaped and challenged within the military system. Consequently, civilian nurses were being left behind as their profession developed with military nurses learning new techniques and bearing witness to medical advancements brought by the war. The organisation and development of nursing in the military largely existed separate from their civilian counterparts. But challenges to the profession did not occur in isolation. Trained nurses in the services had largely come from civil hospitals and they would return to their civil positions after the war. Therefore, decisions made within a military context could create change for the profession more broadly.

A recurring question posed to and by the nursing profession throughout the war was the role of the nursing aid. Established in response to the First World War, the civilian VAD movement organised by the Red Cross and Order of St John offered a service of voluntary nursing aids. The women who joined the VAD were trained in first aid and home nursing and gained practical experience volunteering at their local civil hospital. When war was declared in 1939, members of the VAD were at the disposal of the military medical services. Soon after, civilian members of the VAD were called upon to enrol in the Army. VAs then shifted from a civilian voluntary body into a paid military auxiliary, which was renamed in December 1942 to the AAMWS.

The presence of VAs/AAMWS in the military as nursing aids, otherwise known as nursing orderlies, raised concerns amongst the nursing profession. An immediate issue that concerned some nurses was that the introduction of the aid into the Army hospital would see fewer opportunities for trained registered nurses to enlist. Similarly, the nursing profession was concerned that the experience and service training of the aid would see the VA/AAMWS position themselves as semi-trained nurses and challenge the authority and place of the fully qualified nurse

after the war. The great assumption underlying many of the tensions that existed during the war was that all VAs/AAMWS aspired to be, or more dramatically, identified as nurses. This being an affront to those women who had trained for many years to be a nurse. But as this thesis shows, this myth was based on a fear and not did not resonate with the aids who saw themselves as VAs or AAMWS. The identity and role of the nursing aid during the war, and their relationship with the nursing profession is the primary focus of this research.

This research contributes an original perspective to nursing in Australia by approaching the profession from a new angle – through an exploration of the untrained nursing aid. The presence of the aid working alongside trained nurses in the Army saw many benefits, as well created many challenges. By tracing the tensions that existed between trained nurses and the nursing aids, as well as those that were manifested by civilian nurses and their professional associations, this research provides a more detailed and significant understanding of what principles and advances the nursing profession deemed important to defend and improve during this period. By commenting on the professionalisation of nursing from the perspective of the aid, this thesis contributes a sustained exploration of the story of the around 8500 women in the VAD/AAMWS in the Second World War, which has largely been underrepresented by public and academic historians.

## **Research Aims and Scope**

One question that this research set out to ask was to what extent VAs and AAMWS challenged, shaped, and progressed the role and professional status of nursing in Australia. But in so doing, this thesis delves deeper, and more significantly, into the reverse: how the military and professional nurses challenged, shaped, and progressed the work and skill of the VAD/AAMWS and its members. This question surrounding the immediate and ongoing impact that the wartime service had on members of the VAD and AAMWS and their lives, and women's work more broadly, is



the key focus of this research. Providing a forensic investigation of who the servicewomen of the VAD and AAMWS were, alongside an analysis of the service, training, and opportunities afforded to them during the war, this research offers a new understanding of women's wartime work in Australia. Until now, histories of servicewomen who worked as VAs and AAMWS during the Second World War have largely been overshadowed by other narratives of Australians during the war. For example, the homefront experience of Australian women, as well as the story of women who gained wartime employment in previously male occupations have dominated the historiography as detailed below. This thesis explores the under-represented cohort of Australian servicewomen who worked in historically female-dominated roles – those being based in care and humanitarian related fields, such as nursing and domestic duties. Women have also been studied as a monolithic category with little regard given to their backgrounds, including their education, work experience, and their geography. This thesis works to forensically investigate the complexity and multi-layered category that is Australian servicewomen during the Second World War – a cohort that changes dramatically over the course of the war but has largely been unstudied. This research, therefore, expands our knowledge of who these servicewomen were and the politics surrounding women's work.

The fundamental purpose of this research is to place the story of the VA and AAMWS into the broader historical narrative of Australia during the Second World War. As such, following the common Australian narrative, this thesis is defined by the two distinct periods of the war as experienced by Australia.<sup>8</sup> The first is the early years of the war where particular emphasis is given to the raising of the Second AIF and its deployment to Europe, the Mediterranean, and the Middle East. Serving as enrolled VAs alongside members of the AANS, the Middle East is an important case study for understanding the experience of Australian service personnel up to 1942, particularly servicewomen. The second period, beginning on 7 December 1941 with the Japanese attack on

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<sup>8</sup> See Joan Beaumont, ed., *Australia's War, 1939-45* (St Leonards: Allen & Unwin, 1996).

the United States at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii is defined by Australia's shift in focus to the Pacific area. With the sinking of the HMS *Sydney* off the West Australian coast in November 1941, Australia's concern for the Pacific was already mounting. When Singapore then fell to the Japanese on 15 February 1942, and with it 18,000 Australian troops captured, Australia felt the situation worsening. With the first bombing of Darwin in February 1942 soon after the fall of Singapore, war had reached the nation's shores and the threat of invasion became immediate. As such, Australia withdrew its troops from the Middle East, where the majority had been serving, and the defence of its own territory dominated Australia's consciousness. It was at this time, with the present threat of further attacks, that northern Australia was designated by the military as a forward operational area. This period that saw Australia focussed on the theatre of war in the Asia/Pacific region, which included Australia itself, is also characterised by its adoption of a 'total war' policy that mobilised the entire Australian nation for an 'all in' war effort. Bringing with it a strategy to mobilise women, the new military auxiliaries were formed, including the AAMWS in December 1942. While tracing the evolving identity of the service, including from its transition from the VAD to the AAMWS, this thesis pays particular attention to analysing the work, training, and experiences of the AAMWS posted to operational areas in northern Australia and the South West Pacific Area (SWPA).

Appreciating the broader context of Australia in the war across the various theatres and periods of the conflict characterised politically and strategically, this thesis maintains two key lines of enquiry to offer a more complete understanding of the work of the VAs/AAMWS during the war, and the war's effect on these women's work. The first is to trace the educational and organisational challenges and opportunities of the VAs/AAMWS, including the transition of the women's service as VAs into the paid and khaki-clad military auxiliary service – the AAMWS. The other is to uncover the relationships and tensions that existed between the auxiliary service and the trained nurses, both organisationally and as individuals. These two areas of focus are brought together to interrogate the myth that VAs/AAMWS wanted to be nurses, questioning how and in

what ways this myth was shaped by and for the members of the auxiliary service. As this thesis illustrates, the challenge for VAs/AAMWS was to build and maintain an organisational identity for themselves that clearly defined their place, and the value of their work, as distinct from others, whether it be trained nurses or their civilian counterparts. This approach also works to astutely trace the roles and responsibilities of VAs/AAMWS and how their place in the workforce was shaped during and by the war, again facing influencing factors of military hierarchy and the demands and opportunities afforded by members of the AAMC and AANS.

International literature has been relied upon throughout this research.<sup>9</sup> But this thesis does not aim to provide a comparative study. Both Britain and the United States approached the problems of nursing, nurse training, and the nursing aid differently during this period. In Britain, legislation was introduced that formerly acknowledged the place of the nursing aid, titling the position as ‘nursing assistant’; much to the horror of some Australian nurses who regarded this as a ‘failure’ to find a solution to the problem of the semi-trained nurse.<sup>10</sup> Contrastingly, the United States developed a Cadet Nurse Corps in July 1943 that offered subsidised and accelerated training for nurses to combat the shortage, offering assistance to almost 180,000 women before the program’s end in December 1948.<sup>11</sup> The case in Australia, which is to say the history of the VAD/AAMWS, is different again. Fundamentally, a thorough and sustained examination of the history of the VAD/AAMWS, which this thesis achieves, was first required to understand the complexities and uniqueness of this example. While there are similarities to Australia in the developments of the VAD in New Zealand and that nation’s approach to women’s mobilisation and wartime service, there remains little scholarship on the topic. Both Anna Rogers and Deborah

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<sup>9</sup> This is predominantly literature from the Anglo world, reflecting the comparative spread of the British VAD movement throughout the Commonwealth.

<sup>10</sup> See Brian Abel-Smith, *A History of the Nursing Profession* (London: Heinemann, 1960).

<sup>11</sup> See Elizabeth Speakman, ‘The Elephant in Our Living Room: Associate Degree Education in Nursing,’ in *A History of Nursing Ideas*, eds. Linda C Andrist, Patrice K Nicholas and Karen A Wolf (Sudbury: Jones and Bartlett Publishers, 2006); Joan I Roberts and Thetis M Group, *Feminism and Nursing: An Historical Perspective on Power, Status, and Political Activism in the Nursing Profession* (Westport: Praeger, 1995).

Montgomerie have written importantly on New Zealand women during the Second World War, including discussion of the VAD, but there is much research left to be conducted on this history.<sup>12</sup>

## **Historiography of Australian Women During the Second World War**

As noted by Joy Damousi, an effort has been made in recent decades to include women in histories of wartime.<sup>13</sup> Studies have focussed on mothers, wives, sisters, and nurses and Damousi argues that this has created a new cultural history of war.<sup>14</sup> However, the scholarship in Australia has largely focussed on the First World War, writing women into the narrative through two generalised narratives: that of the homefront, and the Army nurse. Where the Second World War offers varied experiences of Australian women at war, their story has also been understood by two dominant narratives, both driven by work: that being new liberties on the homefront, and new roles in the military auxiliaries. To an extent this has lessened the focus on the Army nurse despite nursing, as Glenda Strachan stated, holding an ‘essential place on the policy agenda’ of the Australian Government during the Second World War.<sup>15</sup> Where the women’s military auxiliaries were an early area of interest for historians recovering women’s wartime work, this thesis now brings the VAD/AAMWS back into focus to complexify the story and de-homogenise our understanding of the period.

The perceived nature of VAs/AAMWS’ work as unskilled and, therefore, uninteresting has also given way to more technical histories of women’s wartime work. Attached to the medical and nursing services which advanced their scientific skills and techniques during the war, VAs and AAMWS are overshadowed by such developments of the professions. In a precedence set by the

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<sup>12</sup> Anna Rogers, *While You’re Away: New Zealand Nurses at War 1899-1948* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2003); Deborah Montgomerie, *The Women’s War: New Zealand Women 1939-45* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2001).

<sup>13</sup> Joy Damousi, ‘Does Feminist History Have a Future?’ *Australian Feminist Studies* 29, no.80 (2014), 198.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Glenda Strachan, ‘Employment Conditions for Nurses in Australia During World War II,’ in *Nursing History and the Politics of Welfare*, eds. Anne Marie Rafferty, Jane Robinson and Ruth Elkan (London: Routledge, 1997), 192.

official history, AAMWS feature in brief section on women in the Army Medical Service only after a chapter each on physiotherapists, occupational therapists, and one the AANS – which alone makes up more than two thirds of the mere 71 pages in the section.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, the initial detachment of VAs as a voluntary auxiliary has given cause to exclude them from military histories. Additionally, militaristic narratives of war fail to provide productive accounts of servicewomen in humanitarian services that operate in the masculine sphere of the military. The change of name for the service part way through the war, and the ambiguous nature of their work has also hidden them beneath the dominant historical narratives that are more easily defined. Yet, the story of the VAs and AAMWS provides a rich account of Australian women that offers insights into women's labour, highlights developments in the nursing profession, and provides a unique perspective to Australia's military medical response during the war.

### *The Homefront Experience*

One of the most dominant narratives of Australian women and the Second World War is the homefront experience. In the history of Australia and the Second World War, the homefront and the theatre of war is intertwined. The war in the Pacific turned northern Australia into a region under attack when Japan bombed Darwin in December 1942. It also brought American troops to Australia and saw a change in the Australian Government's approach to the homefront war effort. This shifted Australia's attention towards its war production and preparation for conflict on the nation's shores and worked to mobilise women's labour. Owing to the heightened touchpoints between war and the Australian community, the history of Australia in the Second World War has created space for women's narratives to be included in the historiography. The impact of war on Australian women, particularly from 1942, has been discussed at length by social historians

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<sup>16</sup> Allan S Walker, *Australia in the War of 1939-1945, Series Five – Medical, Volume IV – Medical Services of the RAN and RAAF with a Section on Women in the Army Medical Services* (Canberra: Australian War Memorial, 1961), 419-490.

adopting women's, gender, feminist, and labour history approaches.<sup>17</sup> Still the literature has focused on the changing social, economic, and political spaces and roles women occupied during wartime. This has included the greater sexual freedoms borne by the arrival of American GIs in Australia, the unprecedented opportunity to enter paid work with mobilisation in industrial employment, and the challenge to traditional gender roles with the enlistment of women in the military.<sup>18</sup>

The presence of American servicemen in Australia and their relations with women, while many Australian men were serving in the military, is a significant example of the increased touchpoints between war and the homefront in Australia during the Second World War. In his work, *Over-Sexed, Over-Paid and Over Here*, John Hammond Moore traces the political and military history, as well as highlights the social and economic aspects of the American forces being based in Australia from 1941.<sup>19</sup> Although Moore briefly notes that sexual relations between American troops and Australian women existed, he does not offer a female voice. Feminist historians, including Kate Darian-Smith and Kay Saunders address this omission in arguing that the presence of American GIs in Australia and the proximity of the war in the Pacific led to an increase in

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<sup>17</sup> Joy Damousi and Marilyn Lake, eds., *Gender and War: Australians at War in the Twentieth Century* (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Jan Bassett, *Guns and Brooches: Australian Army Nursing from the Boer War to the Gulf War* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1992); Jan Bassett, ed., *As We Wave You Goodbye: Australian Women and War* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1998); Penelope Johnson, 'Gender, Class and Work: The Council of Action for Equal Pay and the Equal Pay Campaign in Australia during World War II,' *Labour History*, no.50 (1986); Kate Darian-Smith, *On the Home Front: Melbourne in Wartime, 1939-1945* (South Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1990); Melanie Oppenheimer, *All Work, No Pay: Australian Civilian Volunteers in War* (Walcha: Ohio Productions, 2002); Kay Saunders, *War on the Homefront: State Intervention in Queensland, 1938-1948* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1993); Patsy Adam-Smith, *Australian Women at War* (Melbourne: Thomas Nelson, 1984).

<sup>18</sup> Kay Saunders, 'In a Cloud of Lust: Black GIs and Sex in World War II', in *Gender and War*, Marilyn Lake, 'Female Desires: The Meaning of World War II', in *Gender and War*; Carol Fallows, *Love & War: Stories of War Brides from the Great War to Vietnam* (Sydney: Bantam Books, 2002); Susan Lemar, 'Sexually Cursed, Mentally Weak and Socially Untouchable?: Women and Venereal Diseases in World War Two Adelaide,' *Journal of Australian Studies* 27, no.79 (2003); Margaret Bevege, Margaret James, and Carmel Shute, eds., *Worth Her Salt: Women at Work in Australia* (Sydney: Hale & Iremonger, 1982); Darian-Smith, *On the Home Front*; Beaumont, *Australia's War, 1939-45*; Annette Potts and Lucinda Strauss, *For the Love of a Soldier: Australian War-Brides and Their GIs* (Crows Nest: ABC Enterprises, 1987); Joyce Thomson, 'Clare Stevenson: Director WAAAF,' in *Double Time: Women in Victoria, 150 Years*, eds. Marilyn Lake and Farley Kelly (Ringwood: Penguin, 1985); Kay Saunders and Geoffrey Bolton, 'Girdled for War: Women's Mobilisations in World War II,' in *Gender Relations in Australia: Domination and Negotiation*, ed. Kay Saunders and Raymond Evans (Sydney: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1992).

<sup>19</sup> John Hammond Moore, *Over-Sexed, Over-Paid and Over Here: Americans in Australia, 1941-1945* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1981).

Australian women's sexual liberties and assertiveness.<sup>20</sup> The subsequent experience of Australian women becoming 'war brides', being those who married foreign servicemen, has also been explored. Historians, including Annette Potts and Lucinda Strauss, have traced the challenges that these war brides faced as they aspired to new lives in America.<sup>21</sup> The presence of American servicemen in Australia and the story of war brides has become an important theme in Australian historiography, and one that demonstrates social changes brought by the war.

Alongside the arrival of American GIs in Australia in late 1941, the government turned to a 'total war' footing as the conflict intensified throughout 1942. As a result of this policy change, Australian women were increasingly expected to enter the workforce and release more men for the battlefield. Owing to pre-war societal expectations for most white middle-class Australian women, historians have noted that the war gave these women a reason to enter the workforce and 'encouraged some middle-class women, who may have lacked the desire or economic need to work in peacetime, to become workers'.<sup>22</sup> The government's objective to mobilise women was enhanced with its the establishment of the Manpower Directorate. With license to control men and women's employment, the orders of the Manpower Directorate resulted in more opportunities for women to enter paid employment, including in roles previously inaccessible to them. The number of women in paid work increased by almost 50 per cent to nearly one third of all Australian women aged 15 to 65, peaking in 1944 at 25 per cent of Australia's total paid workforce.<sup>23</sup> As such, the topic of employment overwhelms the narrative of Australian women during the Second World War.<sup>24</sup> Industrial employment of women in munitions factories and resourcing other areas of wartime production has been a topic of research adopted by a breadth of historians, including

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<sup>20</sup> Darian-Smith, *On the Homefront*; Saunders, 'In a Cloud of Lust'.

<sup>21</sup> Potts and Strauss, *For the Love of a Soldier*.

<sup>22</sup> Beaumont, *Australia's War, 1939-45*, 64.

<sup>23</sup> Marilyn Lake, *Getting Equal: The History of Australian Feminism* (St Leonards, Allen & Unwin, 1999), 188; Darian-Smith, *On the Homefront*, 57; Kate Darian-Smith, 'World War 2 and Post-War Reconstruction, 1939-49', in *Cambridge History of Australia: Volume 2, The Commonwealth of Australia*, eds. Alison Bashford and Stuart Macintyre (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 100.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

labour, social, and war historians.<sup>25</sup> Yet, the impact of the war on women has largely been undertaken only by feminist historians. The development of women's political and industrial rights during the Second World War has been discussed by feminist historians, including Marilyn Lake and Penelope Johnson, who have highlighted the progress towards equal pay and rights through the wartime tribunal, the Women's Employment Board (WEB).<sup>26</sup> This history of white middle-class women entering new occupations and spaces during the Second World War has dominated the research on Australian women during the war.

The increased employment opportunities for women and the ability to enter new spaces has lessened discussion on the impact of war on historically female occupations. While historians note the rise in women employed in industrial work, few mention that this period coincided with a decline in the largely female-dominated occupation of domestic service.<sup>27</sup> Similarly, the nursing profession suffered a national shortage of available trained nurses and a reduction in women joining the profession as trainees. This topic and the impact of the Second World War on the traditionally female occupation of nursing more broadly, have largely been unexplored until now.

### *Histories of Australian Second World War Servicewomen*

By 1939, nursing had generally been accepted in Australian society as a profession for unmarried females and an acceptable space for educated white women to occupy. But, as the Second World War advanced and the nation turned to a total war footing, new job opportunities were offered to women in industrial employment and spaces vacated by men enlisting for service at the front. At the same time, the AANS lost its prestigious label as being the only avenue for women to join the military. Through the creation of the various women's military auxiliaries, Australian

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<sup>25</sup> Darian-Smith, *On the Homefront*; Michael McKernan, *The Strength of a Nation: Six Years of Australians Fighting for the Nation and Defending the Homefront in WWII* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2006); Beaumont, *Australia's War, 1939-45*.

<sup>26</sup> Lake, *Getting Equal*; Johnson, 'Gender, Class and Work'.

<sup>27</sup> Those who do make mention of this include Michael McKernan, *All In!: Australia During the Second World War* (Melbourne: Nelson, 1983), 80–81; Beaumont, *Australia's War, 1939-45*, 64.



women were given the opportunity to join the forces in an array of positions. The establishment of the Women's Land Army agricultural service and the women's auxiliaries to the military, including the Australian Women's Army Service (AWAS), Women's Royal Australian Navy Service (WRANS) and the Women's Auxiliary Australian Air Force (WAAAF) extended the accepted space for women in the military beyond the hospital. These auxiliaries also afforded women new skills and has been of great interest to historiographical studies. In these services women had the chance to learn over one hundred trades and could undertake the duties of, but not limited to a mechanic, signaller, wireless telegraph operator, and coastal artillery and anti-aircraft gunner. The VAD/AAMWS was at the time and has since been perceived to have not offered new opportunities or skills to women. In comparison to the already defined and established work of nurses and domestic orderlies, the new skills and employment opportunities for women in the other auxiliaries has been of greater focus to historians, like their focus on women's industrial employment.<sup>28</sup>

The new women's auxiliaries in the Second World War have also drawn attention away from the VAs/AAMWS because of historical markers, such as sources and chronology of events. For example, the AWAS had significantly more members than the other women's services—it enlisted more than 24,000 women in contrast to the AAMWS 8500—as such, the AWAS has afforded social historians more research material to analyse, including personal case studies.<sup>29</sup> While for war and political historians, the focus of their research regarding the women's auxiliaries has been on the WAAAF.<sup>30</sup> As the first auxiliary service established, the inauguration of the WAAAF in 1940 provides the overarching narrative of the auxiliaries' creation and the associated

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<sup>28</sup> This is evident by the number of histories published on the other services, including Sue Hardisty, *Thanks Girls and Goodbye: The Story of the Australian Women's Land Army 1942-45* (Melbourne: Viking O'Neil, 1990); Ann Howard, *You'll Be Sorry!: How World War II Changed Women's Lives* (Newport: Big Sky Publishing, 2016); Lorna Ollif, *Women in Khaki* (Sydney: Ollif Publishing, 1981); Jean Scott, *Girls with Grit: Memories of the Australian Women's Land Army* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1986); Clare Stevenson and Honor Darling, eds., *The WAAAF Book* (Sydney: Hale & Iremonger, 1984); Joyce Thomson, *The WAAAF in Wartime Australia* (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 1991).

<sup>29</sup> See Ollif, *Women in Khaki*; Howard, *You'll Be Sorry*.

<sup>30</sup> See David Horner, *Inside the War Cabinet: Directing Australia's War Effort* (St Leonards: Allen & Unwin, 1996), 39; Beaumont, *Australia's War, 1939-45*, 62.

political debate surrounding women in the military. Again, this stands in contrast to the AAMWS being the last women's military auxiliary created in December 1942. Historians' attention on the WAAAF is also substantiated by the archival materials available regarding the establishment of the women's auxiliaries. That is, much of the War Cabinet's decision-making about the auxiliaries simply refers to previous discussions that had been had regarding the WAAAF as the first established.<sup>31</sup> Yet, the progression of the Red Cross and St John's VADs from a humanitarian-based charity into a paid military auxiliary offers a rich corpus and subject for analysis by political historians. It also intersects with the social history narrative of Australian women during the Second World War owing to the significant change in the organisational face of the VAs once becoming the AAMWS. However, the history of the VAD and the AAMWS is overlooked in military histories and overshadowed in social histories.

While nursing lost its exclusivity as the story of women at war when the military began to enlist women in the new auxiliaries, the experience of Second World War nurses has been maintained in the historiography alongside those of women in new occupations. One reason for this is that the AANS highlights one wartime experience largely not offered by the women's auxiliaries – overseas service. Unlike the women's services, other than the VAD/AAMWS, Australian military nurses were posted overseas alongside troops in most theatres of the war. Unfortunately, Australian nurses also suffered death at the hands of the enemy and were prisoners of war (POWs) captured by the Japanese. These horrific but important stories of Australian women during the Second World War have been told.<sup>32</sup> In addition to the trauma caused by these

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<sup>31</sup> For example, see NAA: A2673.

<sup>32</sup> See Bassett, *Guns and Brooches*; Rupert Goodman, *Our War Nurses: The History of the Royal Australian Army Nursing Corps 1902-1988* (Brisbane: Boolarong Publications, 1988); Patsy Adam-Smith, *Prisoners of War: From Gallipoli to Korea* (Melbourne: Viking, 1992); Christina Twomey, 'Australian Nurse POWs: Gender, War and Captivity,' *Australian Historical Studies* 36, no.124 (2004); Christina Twomey, *The Battle Within: POWs in Postwar Australia* (Sydney: NewSouth, 2018); Michael McKernan, *This War Never Ends: The Pain of Separation and Return* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2001); Catherine Kenny, *Captives: Australian Army Nurses in Japanese Prison Camps* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1986); Norman G Manners, *Bullwinkel: The True Story of Vivian Bullwinkel, a Young Army Nursing Sister, who was the Sole Survivor of a World War Two Massacre by the Japanese* (Carlisle: Hesperian Press, 1999); Ian W Shaw, *On Radji Beach* (Sydney: Pan Macmillan, 2010).

events, the rise in war and trauma studies has also seen nurses included in the historiography. In these works, nurses feature both as those effected by sites of trauma, particularly mutilated patients, as well as the proponents of care and those who worked with patients and developed nursing techniques for psychological cases. It must also be noted that nurses themselves contributed to their presence in the scholarship by offering published memoirs and reflections, with the first seen in the 1950s before a resurgence of publications in the 1990s.<sup>33</sup> This is unlike VAs/AAMWS who have just four service histories penned by former members and only two known memoirs having been published.<sup>34</sup>

Over her career, Melanie Oppenheimer has been one of the few historians to explore the Australian Red Cross and the VAD.<sup>35</sup> Oppenheimer's work sits within a rich corpus of international literature regarding the work of the Red Cross, both as an international organisation and as a charity in various nations.<sup>36</sup> This previous work has given space for this thesis. In her work exploring why voluntary labour is omitted from history, Oppenheimer has argued that as a voluntary labour force, the Red Cross VAs are disregarded by historians who rely on formal paid employment to interpret one's value and contribution to the war effort.<sup>37</sup> Paired with their separation from the official regulations of the military and government, the voluntary aspect of

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<sup>33</sup> A selection includes, Betty Jeffrey, *White Coolies* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1954); Jessie Simons, *While History Passed: The Story of the Australian Nurses Who Were Prisoners of the Japanese for Three and a Half Years* (Melbourne: William Heinemann, 1954); Gwynedd Hunter-Payne, *On the Duckboards: Experiences of the Other Side of War* (St Leonards: Allen & Unwin, 1995); Fedora Gould Fisher, ed., *We Too, Were There: Stories Recalled by the Nursing Sisters of World War II, 1939-1945* (Brisbane: Returned Sisters Sub-Branch R&SLA, 1995).

<sup>34</sup> See Chapter 8 for further discussion of these works.

<sup>35</sup> See Melanie Oppenheimer, *The Power of Humanity: 100 Years of the Red Cross in Australia* (Sydney: HarperCollins Australia, 2014); Melanie Oppenheimer, *Red Cross VAs: A History of the VAD Movement in New South Wales* (Walcha: Ohio Productions, 1999); Melanie Oppenheimer, *All Work, No Pay*; Melanie Oppenheimer, 'Gifts for France: Australian Red Cross Nurses in France, 1916-1919', *Journal of Australian Studies* 17, no.39 (1993); Melanie Oppenheimer, 'Shaping the Legend: The Role of the Australian Red Cross and Anzac', *Labour History*, no.106 (2014); Melanie Oppenheimer, 'The 'Imperial' Girl: Lady Helen Munro Ferguson, the Imperial Woman and Her Imperial Childhood', *Journal of Australian Studies* 34, no.4 (2010); see also, Jonathan A Spear, 'Embedded: The Australian Red Cross in the Second World War,' (PhD thesis, the University of Melbourne, 2007).

<sup>36</sup> For example, Margaret Tennant, *Across the Street, Across the World: A History of the Red Cross in New Zealand, 1915-2015* (Wellington: New Zealand Red Cross, 2015); Sarah Glassford, *Mobilizing Mercy. A History of the Canadian Red Cross* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2017); James Hinton, *Women, Social Leadership, and the Second World War: Continuities of Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

<sup>37</sup> Oppenheimer, *All Work, No Pay*.

the VAs may explain their omission from the narratives of the earlier parts of the war. Yet, despite becoming a paid auxiliary with enlistment and rank in the Army from 1942, detailed accounts of the AAMWS are marginalised in Australian social and military histories. I argue that this is fundamentally due to the VAD/AAMWS connection to the nursing service as it does not fit within the prescribed narrative of Australian women being that they entered new spaces and undertook new roles during the Second World War.

Consequently, those that have a connection to the service have produced the only sustained histories of VAs/AAMWS. The few works that give voice to the service's members and place it within the context of the military and government organisation are those compiled by former members of the VAD/AAMWS.<sup>38</sup> Patsy Adam-Smith's *Australian Women at War*, Rupert Goodman's *VADs in Peace and War* and Melanie Oppenheimer's *Red Cross VAs: A History of the VAD Movement in New South Wales* remain the only other detailed accounts of the VAD/AAMWS involvement in the Second World War.<sup>39</sup> Adam-Smith was herself a VA during the war, Goodman was a nursing orderly with the 2/4 AGH and his wife was a VA, while Oppenheimer's grandmother was a Second World War VA. These publications have added significantly to the Australian historiography of the VAs and AAMWS. For instance, in his 1991 book, Goodman astutely traces the origins and events that shaped the VAD/AAMWS experience, providing a compendium that highlights the contribution made by the servicewomen and lays the foundation for more critical analysis.<sup>40</sup>

Oppenheimer remains one of the few published historians to have developed our understanding of the Australian Red Cross, the VAD, and voluntary work. Yet, much of

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<sup>38</sup> Enid Dalton Herring, *They Wanted to be Nightingales: A Story of VAD/AAMWS in World War II* (Hawthorndene: Investigator Press, 1982); Mary Critch, *Our Kind of War: The History of the VAD/AAMWS* (Perth: Artlook Books Trust, 1981); Betty J Mount-Batten, *From Blue to Khaki: The Enlisted Voluntary Aids and Others Who Became Members of the Australian Army Medical Women's Service and Served from 1941-1951* (Wollstonecraft: self-published, 1995). For a detailed analysis of these works, see Chapter 8.

<sup>39</sup> Adam-Smith, *Australian Women at War*; Rupert Goodman, *VADs in Peace and War* (Brisbane: Boolarong Publications, 1991); Oppenheimer, *Red Cross VAs*.

<sup>40</sup> Goodman, *VADs*.

Oppenheimer's research has focused on the Red Cross VAD and its important history as a charitable endeavour, leaving the paid military auxiliary out of scope. In her 1999 work, *Red Cross VAs*, Oppenheimer produces a strong women's history that explores the role, image, motivation, and impact that the VAD service had on Australian women.<sup>41</sup> However, Oppenheimer limits her research to civilian VADs and so does not interrogate the experience of VAs enlisted in the Army or becoming the AAMWS. In her thorough and ground-breaking historical account of the various roles performed by Australian women during wartime from mothers, wives, fundraisers, to workers, Adam-Smith's chapter on the VAD/AAMWS during the Second World War exhibits her depth of knowledge by speaking to the individual impact of the key organisational changes and challenges of the service.<sup>42</sup> However, one aspect of the organisation and experience that these works have not fully explored is the relationship between the VAs/AAMWS and the educational opportunities they were offered by the AANS nurses and the Army more broadly. This thesis looks to address this and offers an insight into what opportunities were offered to VAD/AAMWS servicewomen in the military and what impact, if any, this had on their post-war lives and careers.

## **Thesis Methodology and Overview**

Grounded in Australian history, this research adopts methodological frameworks to create a social history of Australian women at war that highlights the impact they had on the war, and the impact that the war had on them. This study draws upon areas of social history, including labour history, to discuss the education, employment, and skills-development of women in humanitarian and care-giving spaces. As a core framework for this thesis, this research is based in women's, feminist, and gender histories. Albeit distinct, women's, feminist, and gender histories are intertwined and provide a foundation for this study into the history of VAs/AAMWS. In broad terms, these

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<sup>41</sup> Oppenheimer, *Red Cross VAs*.

<sup>42</sup> Adam-Smith, *Australian Women at War*.

approaches can be understood by their underlying aims. For women's history, this is to place women as the subject of research in order to give voice and narrative to women's experience, often produced where a history already exists but has excluded the female perspective. The aim of feminist research is to produce history that explores women as political actors, not only offering a history of women's efforts but of how they shaped their experience, including through education and employment.<sup>43</sup> Gender studies predominantly interrogates gender constructs and focuses on gender relations in social, political, and economic contexts that bring into question and offer an understanding of the spaces that women occupy.<sup>44</sup>

Although the topic of my research has been largely overlooked by historians, the methodological foundations provided by women's, feminist and gender historians has provided the structures for me to create a history of the VAs/AAMWS in the Second World War. In this thesis I draw on the foundational aspects of these methodological approaches to highlight the experience and narrative of these servicewomen in the Second World War as typical of women's histories; understand their political engagement and their education and employment opportunities that is core to a feminist approach; and discuss the challenges to and re-emphases of historical gendered perceptions and discourse exemplary of a gender analysis.

### *Gender and War*

Wartime periods, especially the First and Second World Wars, have captured the attention of feminist and gender historians as critical points when gender relations were disrupted and reorganised. In the 1987 edited volume, *Behind the Lines: Gender and the Two World Wars*, American feminist historian, Joan Scott, states that war enabled women to demonstrate their capabilities and

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<sup>43</sup> See Bevege, James and Shute, eds., *Worth Her Salt*; Verity Burgmann and Jenny Lee, eds., *Staining the Wattle: A People's History of Australia Since 1788* (Fitzroy: McPhee Gribble, 1988).

<sup>44</sup> See Kay Saunders and Raymond Evans, eds., *Gender Relations in Australia: Domination and Negotiation* (Sydney: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1992); Patricia Grimshaw et al., *Creating a Nation* (Ringwood: McPhee Gribble, 1994).

thus challenge the ‘irrational prejudices that had confined them to a separate sphere’.<sup>45</sup> While noting that ‘the wartime work of women constituted the most visible challenge to pre-war gender assignments’, *Behind the Lines* concludes that any disruption to gender norms were at once reconstructed.<sup>46</sup> Not only was the temporary nature of women’s work during the war a contributing factor to the reconstruction of gender relations, obstacles remained to women’s economic, educational, and political advancement.<sup>47</sup> Margaret Higonnet provides a framework for understanding gender relations as a double helix. Higonnet states that women’s exhibition of their skills and capabilities during the war, and any progress gained by women as a result, at once reinforced women’s subjectivity because masculine spaces, whether new or advanced, were given cultural priority and dominance.<sup>48</sup>

Interrogating our understanding of gender constructs within the nuance of Australian history and the Australian context, Damousi and Lake produced the 1995 edited volume *Gender and War: Australians at War in the Twentieth Century*.<sup>49</sup> In this, Damousi and Lake also explore the ways that war shapes gender and disrupts but at once reinforces and reconstructs traditional gender concepts. Perhaps most notably, chapters on wartime’s challenges to and reconstructions of ‘femininities’ and ‘masculinities’ are separated by Damousi and Lake’s use of ‘mobilisations’ as a category of analysis. This emphasis of the mobilisation and confrontations of gender relations, particularly regarding women’s activism in public debate during war, progresses an understanding of gender constructs as well as illustrates the conflicts between them.

As argued by Bart Ziino in 2020 on the 25th anniversary of the publication of *Gender and War*, despite its age, and I suggest the same for *Behind the Lines* here too, these works remain

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<sup>45</sup> Joan W Scott, ‘Rewriting History,’ in *Behind the Lines: Gender and the Two World Wars*, eds. Margaret Randolph Higonnet et al. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 23.

<sup>46</sup> Margaret Randolph Higonnet et al., eds., *Behind the Lines: Gender and the Two World Wars* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 9.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Damousi and Lake, *Gender and War*.

significant studies in the field. Specifically, they hold significance in their commentary on understanding women's subjectivity, questioning the prescription of gender norms, and exploring the gender constructs in wartime roles and employment, and how Australians at war have continued to be interpreted in historically gendered terms.<sup>50</sup> The structures of approaching gender analysis in the context of war, particularly women at war, provided by works such as *Behind the Lines* and *Gender and War* lay the foundations for my research to understand the discourse surrounding VAs/AAMWS. That is despite my line of enquiry diverging from existing frameworks by investigating servicewomen at work in gendered roles historically prescribed to women. Here, I explore the confrontations and challenges to understanding a cohort of women that did enter a new space—the male sphere of the military—but that largely did not take up new roles afforded to women.

Indeed, Australian feminist historians have questioned the masculine nature of war since Carmel Shute's 1975 article, 'Heroines and Heroes: Sexual Mythologies in Australia, 1914-18'.<sup>51</sup> Marilyn Lake has pursued an ongoing interrogation of Australia's reliance on this masculine and militarist ideal in forming national identity.<sup>52</sup> Yet, this theme has not waned and new feminist critiques and gender studies explorations of women, gender, and sexuality in the context of war and the masculine understandings and mythologies of Anzac continue to be produced. These recent scholarly discussions by feminist and gender historians include building social and cultural histories of war into the narratives of military history, exploring legacies, emotion, memory, and post-war life and (re)constructions.<sup>53</sup> The frameworks used in these works will also be drawn upon as I engage with related topics throughout this thesis.

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<sup>50</sup> Bart Ziino, 'Twenty-Five Years at the Front Line: *Gender and War* in Retrospect,' *History Australia* 17, no.1 (2020).

<sup>51</sup> Carmel Shute, 'Heroines and Heroes: Sexual Mythology in Australia 1914-1918,' *Hecate* 1, no.1 (1975).

<sup>52</sup> See Marilyn Lake et al, *What's Wrong with Anzac?: The Militarisation of Australian History* (Sydney: NewSouth, 2010); Marilyn Lake, 'Mission Impossible: How Men Gave Birth to the Australian Nation—Nationalism, Gender and Other Seminal Acts,' *Gender & History* 4, no.3 (1992).

<sup>53</sup> Noah Riseman, Shirleene Robinson, and Graham Willett, *Serving in Silence?: Australian LGBT Servicemen and Women* (Sydney: NewSouth, 2018); Christina Twomey and Ernest Koh, eds., *The Pacific War: Aftermaths, Remembrance and Culture*



Attention has also been given recently to the experience of loss and trauma, including post-war memory and mourning, as topics still uncovering new perspectives and understandings of Australian society.<sup>54</sup> My research uses these discussions, particularly of war and trauma, to understand such topics. In applying this knowledge, however, I aim instead to examine how the untrained women of the VAD/AAMWS confronted sites of trauma, asking how this developed their skill and service throughout the war. The understanding of the military as a masculine hierarchy as offered by Lake and others, and the frameworks offered by Damousi, Twomey, and Riseman that position women into the social and cultural history of Australia at and post-war is referenced throughout this thesis.<sup>55</sup> For instance, these methodologies are used in my aim to understand how servicewomen positioned themselves within the gendered space of war and the hierarchical organisation of the military.

In this thesis, I join in another emerging focus in the field concerned with the developments brought about by, and the challenges and impact of, war as seen in the post-war periods that focussed on recovery, education, and employment. Although exploring the post-First World War and inter-war period, Kate Darian-Smith and James Waghorne's edited work *The First World War, the Universities and the Professions in Australia, 1914-1939*, showed the war as a turning

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(New York: Routledge, 2015); Yorick Smaal, *Sex, Soldiers and the South Pacific, 1939-45: Queer Identities in Australia in the Second World War* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015); Carolyn Holbrook, *Anzac, The Unauthorised Biography* (Sydney: NewSouth, 2014); Christina Twomey, 'Trauma and the Reinvigoration of Anzac: An Argument,' *History Australia* 10, no.3 (2013); Marilyn Lake et al., *What's Wrong with Anzac?*; Martin Crotty and Marina Larsson, eds., *Anzac Legacies: Australians and the Aftermath of War* (North Melbourne: Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2010).

<sup>54</sup> Twomey, *The Battle Within*; Joy Damousi, *Memory and Migration in the Shadow of War: Australia's Greek Immigrants after World War II and the Greek Civil War* (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Alistair Thomson, *Anzac Memories: Living with the Legend*, 2nd ed. (Clayton: Monash University Press, 2013); Joan Beaumont, *Broken Nation: Australians in the Great War* (Crows Nest: Allen & Unwin, 2013); Joy Damousi, *Living with the Aftermath: Trauma, Nostalgia, and Grief in Post-War Australia* (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Stephen Garton, *The Cost of War: Australians Return* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1996), Mia Martin Hobbs, *Return to Vietnam: An Oral History of American and Australian Veterans' Journeys* (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 2021); Paula A Michaels and Christina Twomey, eds., *Gender and Trauma Since 1900* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021); Amanda Laugesen and Catherine Fisher, eds., *Expressions of War in Australia and the Pacific: Language, Trauma, Memory, and Official Discourse* (Melbourne: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020).

<sup>55</sup> Lake et al, *What's Wrong with Anzac?*; Riseman, Robinson, and Willett, *Serving in Silence?*; Twomey, *The Battle Within*; Damousi, *Memory and Migration in the Shadow of War*; Damousi, *Living with the Aftermath*; Michaels and Twomey, *Gender and Trauma*; Laugesen and Fisher, *Expressions of War*.

point by spurring on change and creating, but not always, lasting developments.<sup>56</sup> Similarly, in *Australia's Boldest Experiment: War and Reconstruction in the 1940s* and 'Women's Leadership in War and Reconstruction', Stuart Macintyre notes the impact of reconstruction following the Second World War and highlights the attempt by women to secure greater representation and acknowledgement for their economic worth.<sup>57</sup>

By taking the methodological frameworks set by these works and building upon the important structures that they have developed, this thesis produces new scholarship that broadens our understanding of women at work and at war. This research adds another rich layer to the picture of women at war and as contributors to the economy, that has been illustrated in the scholarship discussed above. For example, this thesis is able to challenge our understanding of domestic duties and highlight its complexity and uniqueness in a wartime military environment. This is achieved by examining the primary sources that have been unexamined until now with an appreciation of the methodology used by the feminist and gender historians discussed above. Equally, the structures of labour and social historians have provided the foundations for this research to build a clearer narrative, while also highlighting the complexities of Second World War servicewomen and their changing organisational identity and the value placed on their work.

### *Overview of Sources*

This project is fundamentally based in archival research with the main collections being the Australian Red Cross Society and nurses' union records held at the University of Melbourne Archives, official government and military files at the National Archives of Australia (NAA), photographic and personal collections at the Australian War Memorial, and archived newspapers.

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<sup>56</sup> Kate Darian-Smith and James Waghorne, eds., *The First World War, the Universities and the Professions in Australia 1914-1939* (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 2019).

<sup>57</sup> Stuart Macintyre, *Australia's Boldest Experiment: War and Reconstruction in the 1940s* (Sydney: NewSouth, 2015); Stuart Macintyre, 'Women's Leadership in War and Reconstruction,' *Labour History* 104, no. 1 (2013).

Oral histories collected by the University of New South Wales (Canberra) as part of their Australians at War Film Archive have also been fundamental to identifying the stories and voices of VAs and AAMWS. Further discussion about individual source bases is included in the respective chapters. Referencing the diverse materials contained within various repositories, this thesis aims to contextualise the organisational and institutional changes of the VAD/AAMWS by using state collections, while also offering personal and lived experiences of the women who were members of the service. By combining the two lines of enquiry—official organisation, and personal experience—this research provides an understanding of the developments of the VAs/AAMWS’ service and offers an insight into the disruption of the nursing profession.

The research method of the personal case study found within the archive and illuminated by oral testimony and personal ephemera remains a fundamental tool used in women’s histories. This thesis is no exception. Writing Australian women’s history has developed since the focus in the 1970s on including female voice in the mainstream interpretations of Australian national identity. So too has progress been made with feminist histories’ focus on women’s labour that offered new interpretations of Australia’s social landscape, and gender studies’ concern with power and gender relations. While the methodological structures have also developed, the practice of identifying and providing case studies of individuals, their struggles, and agency with a view to comment on the developments in Australian women’s lives and their subjectivity has remained prevalent.<sup>58</sup>

However, to create the case study and find the voice of VAs/AAMWS we must rely upon the sources at our disposal. Primarily, this consists of working within institutional repositories where the availability and mediation of sources regarding women’s lives remains problematic.

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<sup>58</sup> See Marilyn Lake and Farley Kelly, eds., *Double Time: Women in Victoria, 150 Years* (Ringwood: Penguin, 1985); Katie Holmes, *Spaces in Her Day: Australian Women’s Diaries of the 1920s and 1930s* (St Leonard: Allen & Unwin, 1995); Christina Twomey, *Australia’s Forgotten Prisoners: Civilians Interned by the Japanese in World War Two* (Port Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Ann Curthoys and Joy Damousi, eds., *What Did You Do in the Cold War Daddy?* (Sydney: NewSouth, 2014).

Personal accounts of servicewomen were largely not entered into collections until the late 1970s.<sup>59</sup> This process of collection also relied greatly on the willingness and capacity of individuals and families to donate materials. As such, working within these parameters to understand the history of the VAs/AAMWS, we must rely on these sources that have been mediated by censorship, politics, and social constructs. Adding further complexity to this issue, this research has been conducted during the height of the covid pandemic in Melbourne, thus creating additional barriers to physical access of materials and, of course, strained mental capacity. The vast corpus of sources exploring various themes contained within newspaper reports, which have been made more accessible by the National Library of Australia through their online repository, Trove has therefore been invaluable. However, the complex social and political censorship and limitations of these sources must also be noted. As such, their use throughout this thesis has been approached carefully. Mindful of the complicated nature of their creation, newspaper reports do capture the voice of VAs/AAMWS. Included throughout this thesis, articles have been drawn from both regional and metropolitan press, reflecting the breadth and geographical reach of the VAD/AAMWS.

Further complicating the process to locate VAs and AAMWS within the archive is that one must already know the name of a servicewomen to be able to search for records relating to her service. The basis for identifying a former servicewoman or man's military experience often lies within their military personnel dossier. The NAA are working to assess the service records of Second World War veterans with the objective of making the files open to the public, before embarking on a process to digitise them. However, the searchable metadata for the dossier files does not include the service branch or unit, thus making it impossible to identify those who served in the AAMWS or other specific units of the armed forces. Delving into thorough and methodological searches using various databases and archival collections has enabled me to

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<sup>59</sup> See AWM: 3DRL/8023.

identify individual VAs and AAMWS. This includes eight VAD/AAMWS leaders who are discussed at various points of this thesis, alongside 77 VAs/AAMWS that served in military medical establishments in Australia and overseas during the Second World War. The experiences and perspectives of these servicewomen are supported by the many more VAs/AAMWS that I have located within the records and collections, including the 200 VAs sent to the Middle East in 1940 and the 55 whose names appear in the various state nurse registers after training in the Army as pupil nurses.

### *Thesis Outline*

At the beginning of this introduction, I drew attention to Lt-Col Kathleen Best. I suggested that as a trained nurse, her appointment as Controller of the Army's VAs/AAMWS added a thread that bound the nursing profession and the auxiliary movement together. This was not, however, the beginning of the relationship between the two. To understand the origins of the story, Chapter 1 traces the civilian VAD movement from its creation during the First World War through the interwar years. With their arrival in hospitals during the First World War, we see at first that VAs disrupted the nursing profession. The resulting tensions that emerged are highlighted in this chapter as we see them revived in a new context during the next war.

But despite the troubled relationship during the First World War, the interwar period was a different time. Established in response to war, the period after the First World War was a time of change for the VAD movement. An identity and a purpose had to be found in peacetime. Looking at the interwar period, Chapter 1 continues the exploration of how the VAD became intertwined with the nursing service. Specific examples are given of individual women who served as Army nurses during the First World War and became fundamental to the civilian VAD movement prior to the Second World War. Offering expertise, leadership, and encouragement,

these former Army nurses gave their time to the VAD and so developed a connection between the two organisations.

Having explored the interwar changes that effected the civilian VAD in Chapter 1, this thesis then turns to the mobilisation of the VAD as the hostilities of the Second World War commenced. Specifically, Chapter 2 explores the first major change to the use of VAs in the Second World War – enrolment with the Army for overseas service. Until this time, VAs had largely occupied similar domestic spaces within military establishments in Australia as they had during the First World War. Looking to the first large-scale draft of VAs to be sent overseas with the Australian forces, Chapter 2 discusses who the VAs were, the work assigned to them, and analyses in what ways their gender and their status as an ‘unskilled’ auxiliary shaped their experience. Chapter 2 also explores the VAs’ perception of their role and capabilities, which is a point of interrogation that continues throughout the rest of the thesis.

Brought by the war in the Pacific, the national strategy for Australia in the war saw the government recognise the need to increase the nation’s war efforts and their control of the services. One way this was achieved was through the establishment of the women’s military auxiliaries. Already functioning as an auxiliary, the Army VAD was nevertheless part of this strategic change as Chapter 3 shows. The establishment of the AAMWS in December 1942 saw the existing cohort of women serving with the military as VAs absorbed into the new service. This organisational change brought with it a shift in the configuration of its members and an increased focus on recruitment. No longer did women wishing to join the service need to be civilian VAs qualified in first aid or home nursing when they enlisted. The change in name, uniform, and membership provoked tensions between original VAs and newly enlisted AAMWS. Chapter 3 explores this part of the VAs/AAMWS’ history, including how these changes impacted the role and duties of these servicewomen.

The service's shift from the VAD to the AAMWS as discussed in Chapter 3 aimed to distinguish them from civilian VAs. Arguably, however, the more significant point of confusion was, and has remained, the distinction between professional service nurses and VAs/AAMWS whom worked as nursing aids or orderlies. Chapter 4 draws on a range of sources including advertisements, artworks, fictional stories, and photographs to analyse the image of the VA and AAMWS. Examining these cultural materials, I suggest that their creation relied upon a gendered understanding of women and women's work, including a conventional understanding of the nurse. As such, I argue that the depictions and characterisations of VAs/AAMWS only conflated public perceptions and reified the myth of the VA/AAMWS as being or wanting to be a nurse and show how VAs and AAMWS themselves aimed to demonstrate their own identity that moved them away from the tropes of a nurse.

Analysing the truth or deceptiveness of the abovementioned myth, Chapter 5 explores the idea of the AAMWS as nurse by examining their work in forward area hospitals during the Pacific Campaign. Using case studies, this chapter discusses the responsibilities assigned to AAMWS and highlights some of the opportunities afforded to them to further their skill and develop their capabilities. Offering an understanding of the spaces that they were permitted to assume within the military medical system, this thesis argues that the nature of the work undertaken by AAMWS did draw them closer to the nursing profession, but not wholly by their own doing. In Chapter 5, I argue that without pupil nurses in the military hospital system, as had become fundamental to the organisation of civil hospitals, AAMWS were called upon by medical officers and professional nurses to fill the labour gap that was caused by the absence of nurse trainees in the military.

During the war, authorities did come to realise that AAMWS had, in some regards, begun to resemble nurse trainees. Chapter 6 discusses the scheme envisaged by military and government officials to capitalise on this situation. Coinciding with a national shortage of trained nurses and nurse trainees in civil hospitals, this scheme sought to train AAMWS for their professional nurse

registration in military hospitals. While this plan adds further complexity to creating a definition between nurses and AAMWS, the tensions that manifested in protest to this scheme highlights the division, specifically those between civilian nurses and nurse associations, against the nursing aid. The thorough analysis of the scheme and the debates that surrounded it presented here illustrates that despite the war being commonly regarded as a unifying experience in Australia, public protest was mounted against the government and contributed to political and interjurisdictional tensions.

While chapters 1 to 6 examine the relationship between VAs/AAMWS and professional nurses and discuss the notion of the VA/AAMWS as a nurse, Chapter 7 offers a different perspective to the work of this auxiliary service. This alternative understanding of AAMWS does not rely on the hospital ward. Instead, it explores the countless other roles that servicewomen undertook in the AAMWS as part of the war effort. Chapter 7 works to demonstrate that servicewomen cannot be understood by a singular narrative and highlights just a sample of the many other experiences of servicewomen. Some roles, such as those based in clerical or kitchen work were not necessarily new spaces for women. Yet, as Chapter 7 shows, whether these jobs were being filled by women for the first time or not, the work AAMWS undertook gained greater significance within the context of war. I argue that the numerous spaces AAMWS occupied as servicewomen during the Second World War, and the skill and determination they brought to their duties, contributed significantly to the efficient organisation of the military medical services.

The final chapter of this thesis, Chapter 8, explores moments of reflection offered by those who served as VAs and/or AAMWS. Poems, memoirs, oral histories, and service narratives published by members of the VAs/AAMWS are used to examine how these women understood their place in the war, and how they remembered and described the impact that their service had on their lives. As the contention that women were unable to enact any lasting changes to societal gender norms after the war ended refers primarily to women occupying historically male roles, Chapter 8 asks whether women in traditionally female roles were able to convert their gains of



experience and education. Particular attention is given to moments of reflection that look at the end of the war and the period that followed, both as the women were discharged from the military and as they shaped their post-war lives. By focussing on the words of servicewomen in the final chapter, I aim to highlight how their story is one that has largely been unduly forgotten.

**PART I**  
**Introducing the Nursing Aid**

# Chapter 1

## The Voluntary Aid Detachment and the Nursing Profession in Australia, 1914-1939

Alice Appleford was recognised and respected for her career as a nurse and a community leader, both in a civil and military setting. Honouring her strong character and sense of service, Appleford was awarded the Florence Nightingale Medal in 1949 by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). Part of her citation reads:

No one who came in contact with Major Appleford could fail to recognise her as a leader of women. Her sense of duty, her sterling solidarity of character, her humanity, sincerity, and kindness of heart set for others a very high example.<sup>1</sup>

Named for the Englishwoman that was credited for designing modern nursing, the Florence Nightingale Medal was instituted by the ICRC in 1912 as the highest international award for a member of the nursing profession.<sup>2</sup> Before her marriage to Sydney Appleford, Alice had achieved a sterling career as a nurse. Known then as Alice Ross-King, she had trained at Melbourne's Alfred Hospital and in November 1914 embarked for Egypt to serve with the AANS.<sup>3</sup> Awarded both the Royal Red Cross and the Military Medal, Sister Ross-King became one of Australia's most highly decorated women of the First World War. The Florence Nightingale Medal in 1949 added to her deserved accolades, but this medal was awarded for her contribution during a different war and to a different service. Although a trained nurse with a dedicated career to the profession, it was Alice Appleford's interest in training and organising VADs, those not technically part of the nursing profession, during the Second World War that saw her receive this honour from the ICRC.

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<sup>1</sup> AWM: PR02082, 'Copy of Florence Nightingale Medal citation of Alice Appleford from the Australian Red Cross Society, Victorian Division, September 1949'.

<sup>2</sup> Though Nightingale's career has been challenged by some, see for example 'Beyond Florence,' *Nursing Clio*, accessed 20 September 2022, <https://nursingclio.org/topics/beyond-florence/>.

<sup>3</sup> NAA: B2455, Ross-King Alice.

During the First World War, Alice Appleford had briefly served alongside British VAs on the Western Front. But her own contribution to the VAD movement began in Australia during the interwar years. After her marriage in 1919, she was forced to leave her occupation as a nurse and took to training local women for the VAD in the regional Victorian area of Gippsland. Living in Lang-Lang, Appleford was responsible for establishing numerous VA detachments across Gippsland, where many local women gained their first aid and home nursing certificates. With the outbreak of war in 1939, Appleford and her civilian VAs were ready to serve. Owing to her recognised leadership and prior military experience, when the VAD was absorbed into military establishment in 1941, Appleford became the service's Victorian leader. This appointment was formalised in 1942 when the service was restructured and became the AAMWS and Alice became Major Appleford, AAMWS Assistant Controller.

Major Appleford's experience of military organisation, as well as her professional training as a nurse, proved her as a capable leader for the VAD and then the AAMWS. Her service also highlights the connectedness of the nursing profession and the VAD/AAMWS. It was not a coincidence that a nurse was responsible for training and organising the auxiliary of servicewomen to assist the work of military hospitals. This is further demonstrated by Major Appleford being awarded the highest international honour for the nursing profession, the Florence Nightingale Medal for her personal dedication to the training and service of VAs and AAMWS. In receiving this honour, Appleford exemplifies the regard for nursing aids held in some areas of the profession. This is evident in her citation, which acknowledges the Second World War service of the Victorian VAs and AAMWS who worked in the wards of military hospitals alongside trained nurses in the Army:

In all, 1,900 women passed through her hands and aided and encouraged by her leadership, were able to give excellent service in military hospitals both in Australia and other battle-fronts overseas.<sup>4</sup>

As a trained nurse who recognised the place for nursing aids in hospital wards, who then turned her attention to their proper training and organisation, Alice Appleford embodies the threads that weaved the nursing profession and the auxiliary support of the VAD/AAMWS together. However, the establishment of the VAD movement in the First World War and the initial wartime service of this new cohort of women was not immediately accepted by all in the nursing profession. Historian Christine Hallett has argued that in Britain, the myth that trained nurses and VAs were unable to work together in the First World War is belied in their personal accounts.<sup>5</sup> And while there is evidence of this in Australia, leaders in the nursing profession and nurses who did not work directly with VAs tell a different story, one that perpetuates the myth. This chapter explains how the VAD movement emerged in Australia in response to the First World War, highlights the initial reaction by the nursing profession towards VAs, and reveals how the VAD and the nursing profession were bound together by passionate community leaders.

## **Origins in Response to the First World War**

Grounded in and guided by the humanitarian principles of the Red Cross and the Order of St John, the VAD movement was designed to provide auxiliary support to the medical branches of the military. Based on the model first established in Britain, the VAD movement in Australia began in response to the needs created by the First World War. Historian Melanie Oppenheimer has stated that detachments were established in NSW soon after war was declared in 1914, but the movement

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<sup>4</sup> AWM: PR02082, 'Copy of Florence Nightingale Medal citation of Alice Appleford from the Australian Red Cross Society, National Headquarters, May 1949'.

<sup>5</sup> Christine E Hallett, *Veiled Warriors: Allied Nurses of the First World War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 23.

was not officially recognised or registered in Australia until 1915.<sup>6</sup> Adopting a similar structure to the British organisation, the newly established Red Cross in Australia led the formation and organisation of detachments alongside the Order of St John, with the military overseeing their registration. As volunteers were trained in first aid and formed detachments, the movement grew and gained strength in order to support the functioning of military hospitals and medical transportation.<sup>7</sup>

Although provision was made for both men and women to form detachments in Australia, as per the British model, it was primarily women and girls who were attracted to the opportunity.<sup>8</sup> In Tasmania two detachments were formed in 1915 – one for men and the other for women. Contrastingly, by the middle of 1916 there were 59 detachments in NSW with only four of these being men's.<sup>9</sup> In all, the official history states that 10,000 women volunteered as part of the VAD during the First World War.<sup>10</sup> Oppenheimer has argued that the voluntary nature of the work and its direct connection to supporting the troops saw young women of independent means, those who did not necessarily need paid employment but that felt encouraged to participate in the war effort, enlist as VAs.<sup>11</sup> Gender had precluded women other than trained nurses from joining the military, and social mores saw few upper or middle class women pursue a career. As such, charitable work as a VA was as close as many of these women could get to the war effort.

Additionally, the leading figures of the Red Cross in Australia, and therefore the organisation's role in the VAD scheme, were prominent women in Australian society. This involvement by social figures helped increase the public standing of the organisation and forged

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<sup>6</sup> Oppenheimer, *Red Cross VAs*, 15-16.

<sup>7</sup> John Newman Morris, *The Origin & Growth of Voluntary Aid to the Medical Services in Time of War* (Melbourne: ARCS, 1940), 16-17.

<sup>8</sup> Oppenheimer, *The Power of Humanity*, 31.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 32; Oppenheimer, *Red Cross VAs*, 19.

<sup>10</sup> Ernest Scott, *The Official History of Australia in the War of 1914-1918, Volume XI – Australia During the War*, 7th ed., (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1941), 712.

<sup>11</sup> Oppenheimer, *The Power of Humanity*, 31.

its way as a suitable endeavour for women of the upper and middle classes.<sup>12</sup> Lady Helen Munro Ferguson, wife of the Governor-General, established the Red Cross in Australia and was a keystone in the VAD scheme. Lady Helen had been instrumental in raising the Red Cross and VAD movements in Scotland before the war. Through this experience, Lady Helen brought to Australia the belief that Red Cross work was primarily women's work.<sup>13</sup>

Soon too, the characterisation of the VA and her labour efforts were constructed through a gendered lens. The spaces assumed by VAs and the tasks they were assigned were akin to domestic labour, which at the time was predominantly undertaken by women. Supplementing their basic training in first aid and home nursing, many VAs undertook courses in home hygiene and invalid cooking. All these courses were based on care and homemaking, that which was considered feminine and the responsibility of women. This gendered understanding of VAs constructed the space for them in the military during the war. Supplementing the staff establishments of hospitals and convalescent homes, VAs primarily worked as domestic and ward orderlies. Described by an unnamed VA who served at the Royal Prince Alfred Hospital in Sydney, the work of the VA 'consists mainly of housework on a large scale'.<sup>14</sup> The day-to-day activity of the VA comprised largely of domestic labour – cooking, cleaning, laundry, making beds and organising stores, as well as assisting patients with simple tasks such as bathing and going outdoors. Yet, it was this voluntary work and domestic care for patients during the First World War that gained the VAD a positive reputation in Australian society.

Though their efforts were employed in numerous hospitals and convalescent homes across Australia, the wartime experience for VAs during the First World War did not extend to military

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<sup>12</sup> Melanie Oppenheimer, 'The Best P.M. for the Empire in War?': Lady Helen Munro Ferguson and the Australian Red Cross Society, 1914-1920,' *Australian Historical Studies* 33, no.119 (2002), 110; Oppenheimer, 'The 'Imperial' Girl,' 276.

<sup>13</sup> Melanie Oppenheimer, 'The Professionalisation of Nursing Through the 1920s and 1930s: The Impact of War and Voluntarism,' in *The First World War, the Universities and the Professions*, eds. Darian-Smith and Waghorne, 102; Oppenheimer, 'The Best P.M.,' 115.

<sup>14</sup> *NSW Red Cross Record* 3, no.7 (July 1917), 25, quoted in Oppenheimer, *Red Cross VAs*, 23.

postings with the Australian forces abroad. By preference of the government and military, and arguably owing to their gender, Australian VAs were not permitted to serve overseas. This differed from the example set by the British on the Western Front, which was noted by Australian Army sisters, including Sister Ida Mills who worked for a period at No.14 British General Hospital.<sup>15</sup> The approach that the British took in staffing their military hospitals was to have fewer trained nurses than seen in an Australian hospital, but to supplement this with VAs.<sup>16</sup> Where the resourcing of military medical establishments was a point of significance, Australia did not mobilise the labour force of VAs to its fullest extent. The conclusion drawn in Australia's official history of the First World War regarding the use of VAs was that with the demands on Australia's military hospitals, 'they [VAs] were missed'.<sup>17</sup>

This missed opportunity was largely owing to the opinion of the Australian Army's Director-General of Medical Services (DGMS), RHJ Fetherston.<sup>18</sup> Based in Melbourne during the war, it was following just one of two tours of inspection of the AAMC overseas where Fetherston witnessed the work done by British VAs, whom he referred to as 'Voluntary Workers'.<sup>19</sup> In his opinion, Fetherston found the work of the British VA was 'bad and wrong', and concluded in 1915 that, 'the employment of Voluntary Workers as Nurses is not a good thing'.<sup>20</sup> Having been a member and council executive of the Royal Victorian Trained Nurses Association (RVTNA) before the war, Fetherston remained a friend and advocate for trained nurses, many of whom opposed the civil and military employment of untrained aids in hospitals.

The policy decision prohibiting VAD service abroad was upheld throughout the war by Major-General Neville Howse, AIF Director of Medical Services. His belief was that the only

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<sup>15</sup> NAA: AWM41 1072, [Official History, 1914-18 War: Records of Arthur G Butler:] Interviews by Matron Kellett containing accounts of Nursing experiences in the AANS.

<sup>16</sup> AG Butler, *The Australian Army Medical Services in the War of 1914-1918, Volume III – Special Problems and Services* (Canberra: Australian War Memorial, 1943), 692.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, 556.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>19</sup> NAA: B539, AIF239/8/181, Reports Medical Services Abroad by General Fetherston.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*.



women who should be enlisted for overseas service with the AIF were trained nurses in the AANS.<sup>21</sup> However, a report commissioned by Howse in 1918 recommended the contrary. Prepared by Major Robert Scot Skirving following his tour of medical units on the Western Front, the report recommended that VAs be employed in Australian military hospitals as they were in British hospitals. 'If the whole skill and labour of the Sister could be devoted to the more difficult and technical part of their profession', stated Major Scot Skirving, 'then their comparatively small numbers, in proportion to the work required of them would not be so apparent'.<sup>22</sup> To Major Scot Skirving, the solution was that which was already present in British hospitals; to 'relieve the Sisters of much of the unskilled and less technical part of their duties by employing VAD assistance'.<sup>23</sup> It was recognised that VAs could be used in hospitals overseas, as they were in Australia, for duties that included cooking, cleaning, laundry, and ward preparation and maintenance. Although Major Scot Skirving's recommendation was not accepted during his military career, when Australians were deployed in the following war, two of his granddaughters were among the first VAs to be sent abroad with the troops.<sup>24</sup>

Although the Australian policy position was that only AANS nurses could serve overseas, there was a brief period during the First World War where VAs served aboard a hospital ship. In December 1915, the medical officers of the Australian hospital ship *Kanowna* recruited 14 VAs at short notice to serve as 'probationer nurses'. This title given to their positions was ambiguous given they were neither trained nurses, nor were they probationers as their work was not preparatory to becoming nurses. Nevertheless, they were brought on staff to replace male medical orderlies in the transportation of the sick and wounded between Australia, England, and Egypt. However, by the end of their first return voyage the so-called 'probationers' had been removed. The release of these VAs from service was not because of unsatisfactory work; indeed, the Senior

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<sup>21</sup> Butler, *Special Problems and Services*, 556.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> NAA: B883, NX76499 [Scot-Skirving, Susan Stephenie]; NAA: B883, NX76498 [Scot Skirving, Ann Margaret].

Medical Officer (SMO) noted that their capability and efficiency carrying out domestic duties was greater than their male counterparts.<sup>25</sup> Sister Ruth Taylor found while serving with the VAs onboard the *Kanowna* that they ‘worked excellently and were an undoubted boon to both Sisters and patients’.<sup>26</sup> However, objections to the use of untrained women by registered nurses and the civil nursing associations in Australia resulted in the women’s positions being reinstated with male orderlies. Sister Taylor did acknowledge that initially most of the AANS had also been opposed to the use of untrained women, but that after serving with the VAs, ‘found them willing, clever and obedient’, and after they were removed ‘were all genuinely sorry’.<sup>27</sup>

The public protest regarding the use of VAs on the *Kanowna* was purely owing to their gender as registered nurses saw the aids as the antithesis of nursing’s monopoly on women’s wartime work. As historian Jan Bassett noted, there had been no objections raised to the use of untrained male orderlies.<sup>28</sup> The tasks of the VA aboard the *Kanowna* were those that had been undertaken by the male orderlies. In fact, the VAs replaced men on the *Kanowna* who had been ‘left in Adelaide as inefficient’.<sup>29</sup> What’s more, after the 14 women were dismissed, 20 male orderlies were engaged to do the same work. In a letter to the editor, ‘EMT’ wrote to *The Sydney Morning Herald* deploring that the nation should ‘cry out for men, men, men’ to join the front, and then to replace 14 women with 20 men to be engaged in ‘women’s work, and at the same time treat women’s work, though faultless, as nothing, and dismiss them in the face of all facts’.<sup>30</sup> On arrival back in Australia, Lieutenant-Colonel Archibald Brockway, the Officer Commanding on the *Kanowna*, and Matron Ethel Strickland publicly acknowledged their regret that it had been decided to end the women’s enrolments.<sup>31</sup> Yet, the dedication and quality of work exhibited by the

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 692.

<sup>26</sup> AWM: AWM41 1051, [Official History, 1914-18 War: Records of Arthur G Butler:] Sister Ruth S Taylor.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Bassett, *Guns and Brooches*, 67.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 68.

<sup>30</sup> *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 18 April 1916, 6.

<sup>31</sup> *The Sun* (Sydney), 16 March 1916, 3.

VAs on the *Kanowna* made no impact on DGMS Fetherston's opinion, remaining steadfast that untrained women should not be engaged to support the medical services.

The decision to terminate the appointments of the VAs was made by government in attempt to reinstate the previous policy position. But additionally, as reported in the Australian press, the dismissal was led by the 'jealousy' of the civil nursing associations 'whose members did not like to see a bevy of pretty, but inexperienced young girls dressed in uniform'.<sup>32</sup> The nursing uniform, as one anonymous correspondent to *The Daily Telegraph* stated, had become 'universally respected and regarded as the hall-mark of proficiency'.<sup>33</sup> This status that had been gained by the nursing profession was here defended by its associations who did not want confusion in the public's mind as to who was a proficient nurse. In addition to the debate regarding their dress, the RVTNA and the Australian Trained Nurses Association (ATNA) were outraged that these untrained women received pay almost equal to that of trained nurses in the AANS. Furthermore, in protest to government and military authorities, the RVTNA and ATNA stated that the most concerning issue was that untrained women had been chosen for service ahead of trained nurses. Published in the journal of the RVTNA, *UNA*, the situation was described as, 'naturally very annoying' to the many fully trained nurses that had already indicated their desire to be called upon and were waiting to be accepted by the military.<sup>34</sup> The nursing associations also claimed that there was an objectionable selection processes that favoured friends and relatives of the *Kanowna* medical officers. This included Elsie Cook, the daughter-in-law of the former Prime Minister, Joseph Cook, whom, although she was a trained nurse, was engaged as a VA probationer. Consequently, Fetherston rose to support the profession's complaints. In April 1916, when the *Kanowna* had returned to Australia and the female orderlies had been dismissed, the RVTNA thanked DGMS

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<sup>32</sup> *The Newsletter* (Sydney), 1 April 1916, 8.

<sup>33</sup> *The Daily Telegraph* (Sydney), 16 February 1916, 10.

<sup>34</sup> 'The *Kanowna* Affair', *UNA* 13, 29 January 1916, 341-2.

Fetherston for supporting the nursing profession and committing to reinstate and uphold the policy that only trained nurses may serve overseas with the AIF.<sup>35</sup>

Despite the decision prohibiting Australian VAs from serving with the AIF, some Australian women travelled at their own expense to join the British VAD. Here they had the chance to serve in military hospitals in both Britain and France.<sup>36</sup> Noted by AG Butler in Australia's official history of the war, the staff at No.1 Australian Auxiliary Hospital, Harefield in England was supported by 120 British VAs that were 'chiefly Australians in the British service'.<sup>37</sup> A contingent of 30 Australian VAs were also supported by the Australian Red Cross to serve with their British counterparts following a request from the British Red Cross to the dominions in July 1916. These 30 Australians arrived in London in November 1916 and served in various military hospitals. One of the VAs was posted to a camp hospital in Rugby, working alongside 14 trained nurses and 26 other VAs. As a VA in Britain, her exposure to nursing practices and medical organisation was much greater than that afforded to VAs in Australia, stating:

I have to go the rounds with the doctors, and when new cases come in do everything for them. Do dressings, poultices, foment, give medicines, take temperatures and pulses, as well as all the ward work.<sup>38</sup>

Many of the issues that emerged during the First World War concerning the VAD re-emerged in the next war. The ambiguous relationship with the military, the gendered nature of their work and its label as unskilled, as well as the tensions with the professional nursing associations including the employment, preference, pay, and uniform of aids all resurfaced as contentious issues. The interwar period did continue to fracture the relationship between the VAD and the nursing profession, but at once it also strengthened their connection in other ways.

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<sup>35</sup> 'Council Intelligence', *UNA* 14, 29 April 1916, 35.

<sup>36</sup> Ian Martin, "When Needs Must: The Acceptance of Volunteer Aids in British and Australian Military Hospitals in World War I," *Health and History* 4, no.1 (2002), 90-91.

<sup>37</sup> Butler, *Special Problems and Services*, 652.

<sup>38</sup> *NSW Red Cross Record* 3, no.2 (February 1917), 34, quoted in Oppenheimer, *Red Cross VAs*, 41.

## Post-War Changes

### *Reorganisation of the VAD in Australia*

Having established itself as an auxiliary to military hospitals, convalescent homes, and medical transports during the war, the VAD gained official recognition from the Australian military in 1926. This recognition was in the form of Australian Army Orders that pronounced the VAD as a technical reserve of the AAMC. Leading to this decision, the Department of Defence had recognised that the staffing establishment of the AAMC was ‘sufficient to meet ordinary peace requirements, but...lack[ed] certain reserves’ adequate to meet wartime requirements for mobilisation.<sup>39</sup> As a technical reserve, the VAD could be called upon by the military to form part of its establishment during war or a national emergency to support the mobilisation of the medical services. According to its handbook, the VAD was ‘designed’ to assist military medical personnel and to ‘render assistance generally to such services’.<sup>40</sup> Designating the VAD as a technical reserve through Army Orders, the government credited members of the VAD as suitable personnel and legitimised their role as a supplement to the military medical services and, as such, established the VAD as a paramilitary body.

Administration of the VAD was reorganised at this time in line with the new orders and brought the organisation closer to the military sphere. Responsibility and oversight of the VAD was vested in a national Joint Central Council that comprised of a representative from each of the three branches of the military, three members of the Australian Red Cross, and three personnel from the Order of St John. In its administration of the VAD, the Central Council was accountable through the Director-General of Medical Services to the Minister for Defence. During peacetime, all VAD activities were controlled by the Red Cross and Order of St John, but during war, control of detachments was assigned ‘absolutely’ to the Joint Central Council and members were at the

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<sup>39</sup> University of Melbourne Archives, Australian Red Cross Society, National Office Collection, 2016.55.222, *Handbook for Voluntary Aid Detachments in Australia*, 1926.

<sup>40</sup> University of Melbourne Archives, Australian Red Cross Society, National Office Collection, 2016.55.222, *Handbook for Voluntary Aid Detachments in Australia*, 1936.

‘disposal of’ the Minister for Defence. Interestingly, the Minister for Defence in 1926 when the VAD became a technical reserve was Major-General Neville Howse, who had excluded VAs from serving with the AIF during the First World War. Under its new administrative model as a technical reserve, the VAD movement in Australia was brought directly into the nation’s defence scheme and gave authority to the government and military.

The organisational changes at this time also formalised the structure for individual detachments. This structure included a Commandant as the group’s leader, who was to be supported by an Assistant Commandant, a Quartermaster and, if available, the detachment would have attached to it a Medical Officer and a Trained Nurse. These positions formed the leadership of a detachment which would consist of between two and four sections, with each section to comprise of 12 members. To signify their capability and acceptance to serve in a greater or lesser capacity, members were divided into two categories: ‘active’ and ‘reserve’. All VAs had to be medically fit and over the age of 18 and, to register as active, a member had to be no older than 45 years and prepared to undertake service with the military upon mobilisation. Alternatively, a reserve member must only have been prepared to serve ‘within daily reach of their own home’.<sup>41</sup> Most importantly, all members were expected to be trained in home nursing and first aid before they joined a detachment or considered a ‘probationer’ while they obtain their certificates.

Training formed part of the routine activity of a detachment and was often conducted by its commandant, with technical assistance from its medical officer or nurse. The expectation was that detachments were trained to a level adequate to prepare members to support the AAMC when and if required. The training and efficiency of VADs and the knowledge of individual members was tested during an annual inspection conducted by an officer of the AAMC. During this annual inspection, the AAMC officer would examine the whole detachment, as well as individual members

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<sup>41</sup> University of Melbourne Archives, Australian Red Cross Society, National Office Collection, 2016.55.222, *Handbook for Voluntary Aid Detachments in Australia*, 1942.

and their understanding of first aid, home nursing, stretcher-bearer duties, invalid cooking, the elementary principles of sanitation, the transportation of wounded, protection against chemical warfare, and the preparation of temporary hospitals. Members of the detachment were also held against a set of expectations that classified them as 'efficient'. For example, a commandant was assessed for her ability to lead the detachment and enforce its discipline, training, and efficiency. She was also expected to demonstrate the qualities of 'force of character, organising ability, tact, resource, and enthusiasm'.<sup>42</sup> Such training and examination, however, did not preclude VAs during the Second World War from being labelled as 'unskilled' and 'untrained'.

### *Advancing the Nursing Profession*

As discussed by historian Janet Watson, trained nurses initially welcomed the VAD scheme in Britain in 1909 as they saw it as an 'opportunity to demonstrate their own professional capacity'.<sup>43</sup> Nurses were to be engaged in the training of detachments and if mobilised, they would continue to oversee the work of VAs helping in the running of military medical services. There was little concern as VAs were not thought to take the place of trainee nurses. However, when British VAs were called upon during the First World War, they entered military hospitals and were treated as first year probationer nurses.<sup>44</sup> Tasked primarily with domestic duties, Major Scot Skirving did recognise that the presence of British VAs in military hospitals alleviated trained nurses of the 'unskilled and less technical part of their duties' and the potential that this afforded the profession.<sup>45</sup> Released from routine tasks, trained nurses could increase the technical proportion of their work and advance their professional knowledge. However, as the British First World War VA, Vera Brittain noted in her memoir, once VAs were introduced into hospital wards during the

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Janet SK Watson, 'Wars in the Wards: The Social Construction of Medical Work in First World War Britain,' *Journal of British Studies* 41, no.4 (2002), 499.

<sup>44</sup> Hallett, *Veiled Warriors*, 5.

<sup>45</sup> Butler, *Special Problems and Services*, 556.

war, the nursing profession ‘visualised a post-war professional chaos’.<sup>46</sup> Assessed by Brittain, the nursing profession in Britain anticipated that the experienced but untrained VA would ‘undercut and supplant the fully qualified nurse’.<sup>47</sup> After the war, British trained nurses were ‘rewarded’ by their government with the creation of a nurse register in 1919 that validated their professional status and protected their three-year training program, thus working to exclude the so-called untrained VAD nurse from the workforce. This was despite only 129 women, out of the more than 120,000 British VAD members that served during the war, embracing a post-war scholarship offered to them as encouragement to pursue formal nurse training.<sup>48</sup>

Throughout the 1920s, Australian states passed similar legislation that introduced nurse registration and oversaw the accreditation of and educational standards for nurse training schools. To Australian trained nurses this was a significant step that acknowledged their professional status and would help safeguard their professional standards that they had worked hard to establish. Although a reward for trained nurses’ exhibition of fortitude during the war, this achievement was not without its trials and nurses still had to fight for it. For instance, in Victoria a Bill to introduce nurse registration was brought before Parliament in 1919 but did not pass. Nurses were again required to call for the Bill’s reintroduction, but now found an ally in Parliament; RHJ Fetherston had entered state politics in 1921 after serving as the Army’s DGMS during the war. Nevertheless, ‘a stormy passage’ was accurately predicted for the Bill and the *Nurses’ Registration Act* was not passed by the Victorian Parliament until 1924.<sup>49</sup> The eventual enactment of the legislations was an advancement for the professional status of nursing. However, the nursing associations had not been able to fully safeguard their professional status through this Act. The use of the title ‘nurse’, and the wearing of their distinguishable uniform by anyone other than a registered nurse had not been protected in the new legislation. Nevertheless, the enactment of similar legislation in all

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<sup>46</sup> Vera Brittain, *Testament of Youth*, 7th imp. (Glasgow: Virago, 1980), 309.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> Watson, ‘Wars in the Wards’, 509-510.

<sup>49</sup> *The Weekly Times* (Melbourne), 3 June 1922, 56.



Australian states by 1928 created nurse registration boards that oversaw the profession and formalised the definition between the professional and the unregistered nurse. Consequently, greater division between the nursing profession and the voluntary aid was embedded in legislation.

Yet, where the profession had thought VAs would work in private nursing, by the 1930s the overall demand for this service had diminished. As Judith and Bob Bessant suggested, during the Depression people could no longer afford private nurses and so turned to the intermediate wards of public hospitals.<sup>50</sup> Coincidentally, as Hannah Forsyth found, the percentage of trained nurses working in Australian hospitals increased from 27 per cent in 1891 to 98 per cent by 1947.<sup>51</sup> Private nursing had largely become obsolete, and so VAs who were drawn towards the profession by their exposure to it during the war were required to undertake formal training to gain employment as a nurse. This was the path for Isabel Macmillan, Catherine Ryan, and sisters Alicia and Eileen Wright who were all VAs in Victoria during the war and that then took up nursing as a career in the 1920s.<sup>52</sup> Isabel Macmillan completed her nurse training in 1927 and worked at St Vincent's Hospital, Melbourne.<sup>53</sup> Alicia and Eileen Wright ran a private hospital in East Brunswick, and after completing her nurse training at Daylesford Hospital in 1923, Catherine Ryan also later ran a private hospital in Ultima in the state's north.<sup>54</sup>

Muriel Knox Doherty is another who served as a VA in Australia during the First World War and later pursued a career in nursing. Owing to her lifelong career as a nurse after the war, Doherty was recognised as an 'outstanding clinical nurse, a respected nurse teacher, and a skilled nurse administrator'.<sup>55</sup> From a notable family, Doherty joined the No.6 VAD at North Sydney in 1915 having obtained her first aid and home nursing certificates. Initially volunteering in a

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<sup>50</sup> Judith Bessant and Bob Bessant, *The Growth of a Profession: Nursing in Victoria 1930s-1980s* (Bundoora: La Trobe University Press, 1991), 2-3.

<sup>51</sup> Hannah Forsyth, 'Reconsidering Women's Role in the Professionalisation of the Economy: Evidence from the Australian Census 1881-1947,' *Australian Economic History Review* 59, no.1 (2019), 70.

<sup>52</sup> Oppenheimer, 'The Professionalisation of Nursing,' 103.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> R Lynette Russell, 'Muriel Knox Doherty – Her Story,' *Collegian* 6, no.3 (1999), 35.

part-time capacity, Doherty enjoyed her work as a VA and soon left her paid job in Wahroonga, Sydney to become a full-time VA at the age of 21. She then joined the staff at the Red Cross convalescent home, Graythwaite and continued her work as a VA at Prince Henry's Hospital, Sydney in 1919 during the influenza epidemic. Having been invited to begin her nurse training by the Matron of the Royal Prince Alfred Hospital, who noticed her regard for nursing, Doherty became a nurse trainee in November 1921.<sup>56</sup> Doherty stated that it was during her time as a VA that she 'became aware of the satisfaction that nursing gives and learnt how really dependent human beings can become'.<sup>57</sup> Doherty passed her final examination in November 1925 and was awarded the Sir Alfred Roberts Medal for general proficiency at graduation. She was registered as a trained nurse on 10 February 1926. During her nursing career, Muriel Knox Doherty had many achievements including introducing the first Preliminary Training School in NSW for nurse trainees at the Royal Prince Alfred Hospital, establishing the first nursing service for the Royal Australian Air Force and serving as its Principal Matron in the Second World War, and working with the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration as Chief Nurse and Principal Matron as part of the liberation of the Bergen-Belsen Concentration Camp in 1945. Although her service as a VA did not contribute formally to her nurse education, receiving no credit for her years worked, Doherty recognised that her initial training and involvement in the medical sphere as a VA impacted and fundamentally inspired her professional career as a trained nurse.

### *Reimagining the VAD*

After the surge of patriotic voluntarism during the First World War and the public health activities in response to the influenza pandemic came peacetime. The Red Cross VAs were put to task during the influenza epidemic in 1919, but as the 1920s progressed, membership of VADs began to fall.

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid, 36; Oppenheimer, 'The Professionalisation of Nursing,' 104.

<sup>57</sup> Muriel Knox Doherty, *Off the Record: The Life and Times of Muriel Knox Doherty 1896-1988*, ed., R Lynette Russell (Glebe: New South Wales College of Nursing, 1996), 5-10.

The VAD scheme and its organising body, the Red Cross had both been established in Australia in response to the war. With the war over and the influenza outbreak having passed, the Red Cross and the VAD had to work to find themselves an identity in peacetime. With membership diminishing, many detachments registered themselves as ‘reserve’ rather than ‘active’, while some folded completely. Assessing the VADs in NSW, Melanie Oppenheimer suggests that it was primarily through the commitment and leadership of a detachment’s commandant that determined if the group survived.<sup>58</sup> If the commandant remained enthusiastic, the VAD often remained on the active list, but if she resigned because of marriage, illness, or relocation, the detachment usually folded and the remaining members either ended their voluntary work or joined a neighbouring detachment if one existed.

Alice Appleford was one such enthusiastic leader for the VAD movement. After returning from the Western Front where she served with the AANS, Appleford established numerous VA detachments in Gippsland, a regional area of Victoria’s east, and her passion later saw her become the state leader for the organisation in Victoria during the Second World War. Similarly, Helen Oberlin Harris, also veteran nurse of the First World War, served as the VAD State Controller for Tasmania in 1941. Like Appleford, Oberlin Harris had left nursing profession upon her marriage and had turned to the VAD to continue to express her passion for nursing and humanitarianism. In 1936, Oberlin Harris helped to revive the VAD in Hobart and became Commandant of the city’s first detachment to exist since the war. Alongside her as the detachment’s officers were Mrs G Freeman and Sister G Coleman who had also both been nurses during the First World War.<sup>59</sup>

By 1933, out of the 22,107 nurses recorded in the national census, only 595 or just 3 per cent had been nurses in the military during the First World War.<sup>60</sup> Yet, of the former Army

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<sup>58</sup> Oppenheimer, *Red Cross VAs*, 59.

<sup>59</sup> *The Mercury* (Hobart), 16 September 1936, 11.

<sup>60</sup> Hannah Forsyth, ‘Census Data on Professions, War Service and the Universities, 1911-1933,’ in *The First World War, the Universities and the Professions*, eds. Darian-Smith and Waghorne, 19.

nurses that remained, many entered the profession's leadership with First World War veterans holding the position of matron in many of the nation's major hospitals.<sup>61</sup> Such devotion to leadership and the humanitarian principles of the profession was not, however, unique to those who remained working in hospitals. Required to leave their occupation on account of marriage, illness, age or other reasons, many former Army nurses turned to the VAD. Across Australia former Army nurses established and coordinated local VA detachments and rallied local women to become members. Here, these professional servicewomen could, in some ways, continue to practice their training and remain involved in the communities' development of the health network. To former servicewomen, including Alice Appleford and Helen Oberlin Harris, the VAD offered an opportunity to remain active within an element of their chosen profession. As a result, their dedication to nursing that was funnelled into the voluntary movement helped the VAD to reimagine itself after the war and at once strengthened the connection between the nursing profession and the VAD.

Another significant example of ties binding the VAD and former servicepersons of the First World War being strengthened is that of the Remembrance Detachment. Formed during the interwar period in Hobart as part of Tasmania's VAD revival, detachment No.605 was known as 'Remembrance'. Unlike other detachments who accepted any local residents, Remembrance had additional membership requirements whereby only daughters of returned or deceased veterans of the First World War could join. Furthermore, the detachment's officer positions were composed entirely of returned Army nurses. Mrs Elliott, whose maiden name was Alice Gordon King, was Commandant of Remembrance Detachment. Elliott had been one of the first nurses to enlist

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<sup>61</sup> This included in Victoria: Jane Bell, Melbourne Hospital; Grace Wilson, The Alfred, Gertrude Davis, The Jessie McPherson Community Hospital; Ethel Gray, Epworth; Jessie McIntosh, Austin Hospital; Ethel Simons, Queen Victoria Hospital and later at Perth Hospital; and in New South Wales: Clarice Dickson (who served with the Red Cross), Prince Henry's Hospital; Adelaide Maud Kellett, Sydney Hospital; Phyllis Boissier, Royal Prince Alfred Hospital; Rosa Kirkcaldie, The Royal Alexandra; Alice Pritchard, St George's; and across other states, Kathleen Nowland was Matron at the Edward Millen Repatriation Sanatorium in Perth, Mary Mitchell at the Tasmanian Sanatorium and then Rockhampton General Hospital, and Lucy Daw at the Adelaide Hospital.

during the First World War, joining the AIF on 26 September 1914.<sup>62</sup> Arriving in Egypt with the AIF in December 1914, Elliott (known then as Sister King) nursed patients of the Gallipoli Campaign aboard the hospital ships that transported wounded troops from the Turkish peninsula back to Egypt and Malta.<sup>63</sup> In December 1917, she was discharged from the Army on account of her marriage to Colonel CH Elliott. Having had to leave her profession upon her marriage, Elliott volunteered her expertise as a VAD commandant. As Commandant, she was supported in her VAD duties with Remembrance by former AANS sisters, Mrs Rhoda Holden (nee McKendrick) as Assistant Commandant, and Mrs Edith Polley (nee Moore) as Lady Superintendent, who had served on Lemnos with the AANS during the Gallipoli campaign. The investment of these former nurses and servicewomen in the VAD movement certainly contributed to the proficiency of members as well as being the basis for the passion and dedication that many members showed during the Second World War as discussed in the coming chapters.

### *Growth in Preparation for War*

During the peacetime period of the 1920s and 1930s, the activities of VADs focussed on their training, support in civil hospitals and convalescent homes, and assistance with the general efforts of the Red Cross, including fundraising. But in the years leading up to the outbreak of the Second World War, the VAD movement experienced a resurgence in public interest and activity. Although they did not know war was approaching, the international situation was deteriorating and VAD membership figures increased with 'new Detachments...constantly being formed'.<sup>64</sup> In October 1938, Helen Oberlin Harris led a drive for more people to join the VAD in Tasmania 'with the object of increasing the state of preparedness'.<sup>65</sup> Her call, based on her wartime service experience

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<sup>62</sup> NAA: B2455, KING A G.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> University of Melbourne Archives, Australian Red Cross Society, National Office Collection, 2016.55.6, *The Australian Red Cross Quarterly*, no.23 (December 1938).

<sup>65</sup> *The Mercury* (Hobart), 26 October 1938, 13.

and nursing expertise, was that, ‘every girl and women should be trained for national service or distress in the case of emergency’.<sup>66</sup> After the declaration of war in September 1939, the rise in members and the formation of new detachments only continued.

In April 1939, the Red Cross published a directory of VADs in Australia, which stated there were 150 registered detachments.<sup>67</sup> The total registered enrolments exceeded 4500, which included 3170 women. When an updated VAD register was published in December 1942, the number of detachments had more than doubled to 337, and the average strength of a detachment, that being the number of its members, had increased from 31 to 36 members (see Figure 1). As Figure 1 shows, the movement was most popular in New South Wales, but active detachments were raised across all Australian states, and two in the Australian Capital Territory. Although there was a broad geographical spread of detachments, the greatest concentration was in Australia’s two major cities – Melbourne and Sydney (see Figure 2). As noted by Melanie Oppenheimer, by the Second World War there was an increasing number of VAs who were in full-time paid employment, for example as clerical or office workers, and carried out their VA work at night and on weekends.<sup>68</sup> Oppenheimer has suggested that this rise in so-called ‘business girls’ enlisting as VAs is one reason for the increased number of detachments being formed in metropolitan areas during the Second World War. With enrolments and formations of new detachments increasing during the war, a strength of 11,156 members was recorded in December 1942, along with a further 2847 women who had been VAs then enlisted in the new military auxiliary, the AAMWS.<sup>69</sup> This expansion of the VAD at the beginning of the Second World War was, yet again, led by former Army nurses of the previous war.

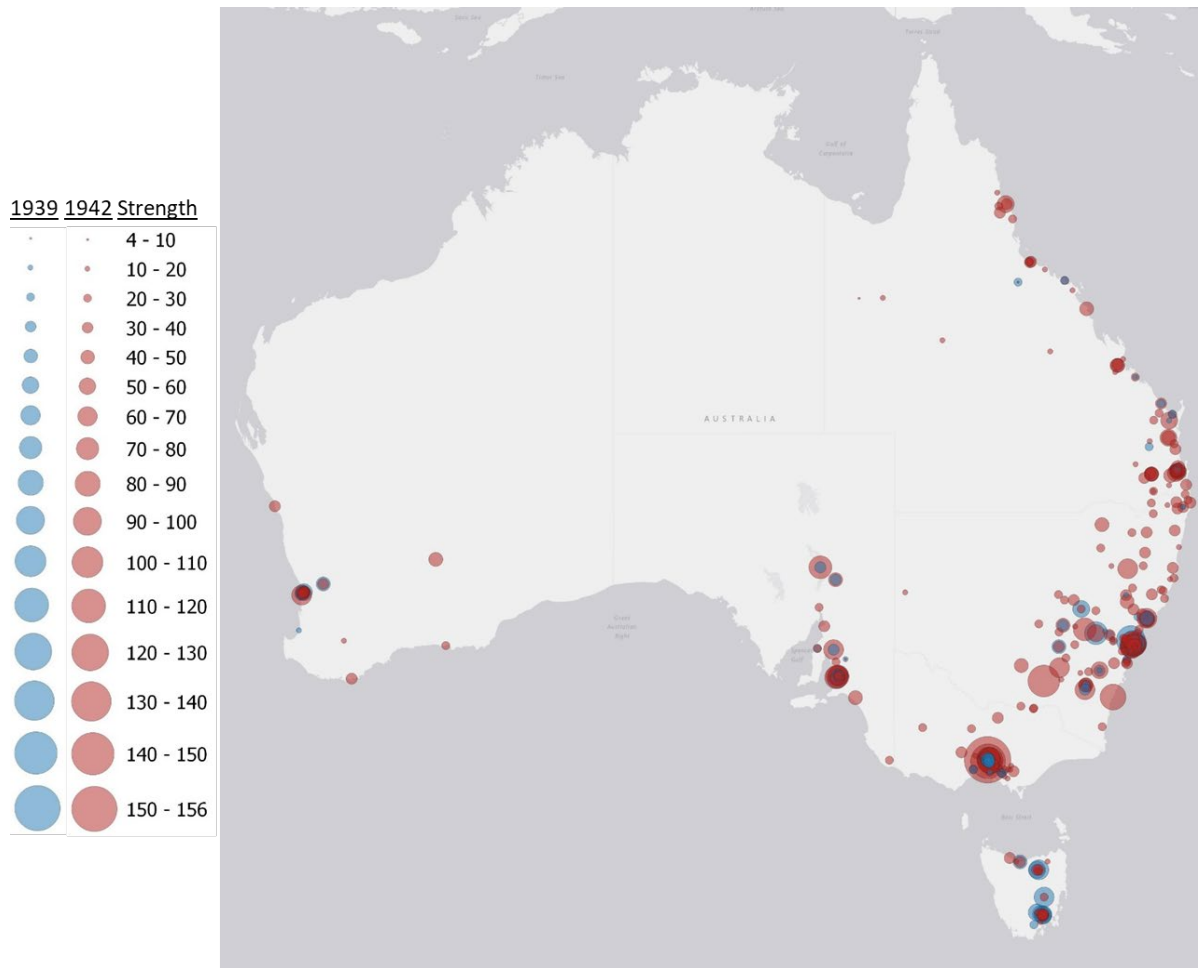
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<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

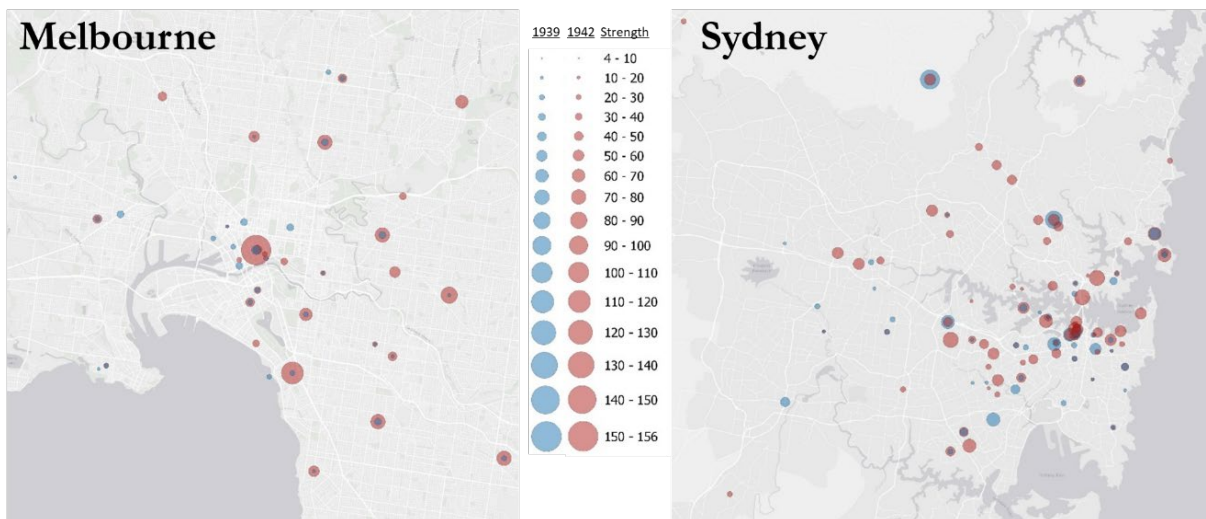
<sup>67</sup> University of Melbourne Archives, Australian Red Cross Society, National Office Collection, 2016.55.6, ‘Commonwealth Directory of Voluntary Aid Detachments’, *The Australian Red Cross Quarterly*, no.24 (April 1939).

<sup>68</sup> Oppenheimer, *Red Cross VAs*, 72.

<sup>69</sup> University of Melbourne Archives, Australian Red Cross Society, National Office Collection, 2016.55.184, ‘Commonwealth Directory of Voluntary Aid Detachments,’ 1943.



**Figure 1:** Geographic Location of Voluntary Aid Detachments by Strength, 1939 and 1942.



**Figure 2:** Geographic Location of Voluntary Aid Detachments by Strength, 1939 and 1942: Melbourne and Sydney.

At Maryborough in Queensland, Ida Grace Francis was one former servicewoman that employed her professional nurse training and the First World War experience to training a detachment of VAs. Formed in June 1939, Francis led the detachment as its Commandant throughout the Second World War. Recorded in the 'Victory issue' of the *VAD News Sheet*, the Maryborough detachment led by Francis was, 'conducted along strict military lines'.<sup>70</sup> Commencing with a membership of 37 'local girls' training to become VAs, by the end of 1939 the detachment had 29 fully trained members and 12 partly trained. The following year the detachment recorded a membership of 52 fully trained VAs, and at the war's end had 67 women serving in the detachment. Under the guidance and tutorship of Ida Francis, the detachment was able to boast of its members who had gone onto enlist in the services; two in the WRANS, four with the WAAAF, and 21 in the AAMWS, as well as 16 who had joined the nursing profession. The training offered by former military nurses not only qualified women in the VAD with first aid and home nursing certificates, but it also prepared them for the work and rigour of the military and helped to guide them into wartime service.

While some former Army nurses coordinated the influx of women and girls joining the VAD following the outbreak of war, others were part of the cohort who turned to the VAD only after war was declared. Recalled by Joyce Fuller, Dorothy Brown 'decided that she would form a detachment in Cairns when war broke out', not having previously been a part of the movement.<sup>71</sup> 'She was a friend of my mother's, so I joined, as a lot of other girls did in my age group', stated Fuller.<sup>72</sup> Dorothy Brown (nee Raff) was a trained nurse who had attempted to enlist with the AIF in August 1914, but was rejected after her medical examination. However, when the British War Office called for a contingent of nurses from the dominions in 1915, Dorothy was volunteered by Australia and joined the British nursing service, the Queen Alexandra's Imperial Military Nursing

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<sup>70</sup> 'War Service of VADs Queensland Detachments', *VAD News Sheet*, no.11 (15 November 1945), 7.

<sup>71</sup> Transcript of interview with Joyce Fuller, 18 March 2004, Australians at War Film Archive, no.1713.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*



Service, in Egypt in June 1915.<sup>73</sup> As Commandant of the Cairns VAD in the Second World War, within three months of war breaking out, Dorothy Brown had assembled and fully trained one detachment with a second being formed. By November 1941, Dorothy Brown and the Cairns VAD were celebrating ‘the honour’ of having had two of the detachment’s members be enlisted in the Army.<sup>74</sup> Of this, Dorothy Brown said, ‘I am confident this is only the beginning, and that other members of both detachments will be given the privilege of helping nurse our splendid AIF’.<sup>75</sup> Indeed, this was the case and Dorothy’s daughter, Marjorie Brown served in the war as a member of the AAMWS.

## Conclusion

The arrival of the VAD in Australia during the First World War caused tension with the nursing profession, namely civilian nurses, as well as amongst some of the military’s leadership. The place of the female orderly and the tasks assigned to them was contested. But that was despite those who worked with VAs generally not identifying similar fears. Nevertheless, the disruption caused by the nursing aid did help to bring political issues concerning the nursing profession into debate. This worked in some way towards achieving legislation in the 1920s that aimed to protect the professional status of nurses and sought to address some the concerns that the presence of VAs had evoked. Within the military sphere, VAs had also brought into question issues of gender and skill. The interwar period of reorganisation aimed to address some of these ambiguities that surrounded the organisation of the VAD and its relationship with the military. However, many of these issues resurfaced in the Second World War as the coming chapters explore, including Chapter 2 where the Government’s understanding of VAs foremost as women and only secondly as workers is shown to delay their mobilisation in 1940.

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<sup>73</sup> NAA: MT1487/1, RAFF D.

<sup>74</sup> *The Cairns Post*, 18 November 1941, 7.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*

The resurgence of animosity towards VAs and the ambiguity of their role during the Second World War as explored in the coming chapters, was despite the interwar involvement in the VAD movement of many former First World War Army nurses. Leaders such as Alice Appleford, Helen Oberlin Harris, Alice Elliott, and Ida Francis helped to revive and reshape the VAD in the interwar period. They brought to the VAD their professional nursing and military experience, and they trained and guided women to become skilled VAs prepared for nursing and the military. These leaders with military experience operated within the new administrative model of the VAD instituted by the military and yet, this did not protect the VAD from scrutiny and suspicion by the nursing profession. Nevertheless, their involvement did emphasise the links between the VAD and the nursing service. Illustrating that these tensions continued throughout the war, but at once reaffirming the interconnectedness of the services, in April 1945, almost six years into the war, Colonel Annie Sage, Matron-in-Chief of the Army wrote:

It will be necessary for Principal Matrons and Matrons in units to work in close co-operation with AAMWS administrative officers, as it is obvious that, to ensure the efficient nursing care of the sick and wounded, it is essential that AANS and AAMWS work in complete unity.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> NAA: MP742/1, 21/4/353, Memorandum, Matron-in-Chief to all Lines of Communication Area Principal Matrons, 6 April 1945.

## Chapter 2

### Voluntary Aids Develop New Skills in the Middle East

Beginning on a wage of £1 per week in 1934, Lesley Long became the first woman on staff at the Commercial Union Insurance Company in Hobart, Tasmania. Long's pay gradually increased to £2/10 per week and after five years saving, she was able to fulfil her dream of sailing to England in May 1939. Having found a job and a place to rent in London, Long spent one night each week and her Saturdays volunteering at Guy's Hospital. Having been a member of a VA detachment in Hobart since 1934, Long was eager to continue as a VA in London. When war was declared in Europe only a few months after she had arrived, Long's voluntary work became more important to her. However, the war also brought an end to her chance of experiencing life in Europe. As the situation worsened and restrictions in London began to take effect, Long said to herself, 'What am I doing here? I might as well get home'.<sup>1</sup>

In August 1940, Lesley Long left London and sailed back to Tasmania, narrowly escaping the Blitz. But the voyage to Australia was not without its own exposure to wartime hostilities. Part way through the journey, the engines of the ship were stopped, which Long and the passengers knew was unusual. Long then watched as stranded Greek merchant sailors climbed a rope ladder to board the safety of their ship, their own vessel having been torpedoed. After ferrying the rescued merchant sailors to Cape Town, Long's return journey was detoured again, this time heading south into rough, cold seas to try to flee a German raider. Eventually, Long arrived home in Tasmania, unperturbed by her encounters with war. Having briefly experienced living under war conditions in London and seeing the effects of hostilities at sea, Long felt encouraged to contribute to the war effort. Back in Hobart, she re-joined her VA detachment and as soon as volunteers were

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<sup>1</sup> Transcript of interview with Lesley Johnstone, 22 August 2003, Australians at War Film Archive, no.740.

sought for the first draft of Australian VAs to go overseas, Long said to herself, 'If I'm not accepted, I'm going to cause some trouble'.<sup>2</sup>

On the declaration of war in Australia, the VAD movement was swift to offer their assistance to the military medical services. Civilian VAs entered existing military hospitals and repatriation centres, volunteering first in a part-time capacity. As the forces expanded and more medical establishments were constructed, more VAs were called upon, including for full-time duty. Used primarily as domestic orderlies, the tasks assigned to these volunteers—which included cleaning wards, preparing meals, and undertaking any other chores the sisters assigned to them—were fundamental to the efficient running of a hospital, albeit largely unskilled work. Starting at the bottom of the hierarchy, the goal for many VAs was the opportunity to nurse the troops with an overseas posting to support Australian soldiers regarded as the highest honour. Although Australian VAs had not previously served abroad, many hoped that it might become a possibility.

In October 1941, a small contingent of twenty VAs from New South Wales disembarked for duty with the 2/12 AGH at Colombo, Ceylon.<sup>3</sup> However, in that same month 200 women from across Australia gained a nationwide reputation, selected as the first to be sent to a theatre of war.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, future drafts of VAs were to follow the first contingent sent to the Middle East and so these 200 women provided a model for other VAs. This chapter discusses the ways that the Middle East VAs came to exemplify the service. But firstly, it explores the tensions and ambiguities that manifested in response to the call for VAs to serve overseas at the beginning of the Second World War. It is my contention that it was not the Army, but rather the Australian Government that was hesitant to consider employing VAs in the military owing to their gender. The eventual government decision to enlist VAs remained unsteady and at times ambiguous. This hesitant decision raised debate about the use of untrained women and appropriate remuneration,

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Now known as Sri Lanka. Walker, *Medical Services of the RAN and RAAF*, 478.

<sup>4</sup> Herring, *They Wanted to be Nightingales*, 48-9.

which then caused public protest. Yet, it was not VAs that protested but other women, some claiming the proposed remuneration was encouraging but did not go far enough, and others claiming it went too far. Although VAs themselves largely did not enter this debate, divisions and points of contention did arise, or did not as it may have been, between the members of the VAD. Specifically, this chapter unpacks the history of the formation of a joint VAD service for the Middle East, allocation of responsibilities to the new servicewomen abroad, as well as establishing their place within the military medical service more broadly. As this chapter argues, the women who served in the Middle East with the VAD were the subject of debate and protest, but they largely did not contribute to the discussion. It was through this professional approach to their service and the controversies that they emerged with a positive reputation and were rewarded by the military with the space to develop new skills as paramedical women.

## **VAs for Overseas Service**

By the time the Minister for the Army, Percy Spender, announced on 27 July 1941 that a draft of 801 VAs would be selected from across Australia for service overseas, the interest of many women had already been noted in anticipation by the VAD. Assistant State Controller of VADs in NSW, Mabel McElhone, stated on the day of the Minister's announcement that 900 VAs had already expressed their interest in being called upon, enough to fill the state's quota four times over.<sup>5</sup> Consideration had been given by the government regarding the process for selecting VAs and determined that women should be drawn from all states in proportions equal to their populations, thus giving New South Wales and Victoria the greatest representation, and Tasmania and the Australian Capital Territory the least.<sup>6</sup> The process would also be undertaken in multiple drafts with the selection of the first of 200 to commence immediately. Unmarried women without

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<sup>5</sup> *The Sun* (Sydney), 27 July 1941, 17.

<sup>6</sup> The quotas were: New South Wales 213; Victoria 212; Queensland 107; South Australia 98; Western Australia 94; Tasmania 67; and Australian Capital Territory 10.

dependents who were aged between 21 and 35 years, were members of a VAD and had completed their first aid and home nursing training were eligible to enrol. Many women rushed to see the commandant of their local detachment to ensure that their name was to be put forward. Alice Burns had given her name for service abroad with the VAD in 1939 and recalled that when the first draft was being completed:

Everyone was wanting to apply for active service...and I think there was a lot of bravado in it because we weren't at all sure where we'd end up.<sup>7</sup>

Burns was selected for overseas service but stated that the destination was not as important as being granted the honour to participate.<sup>8</sup>

The women of the VAD movement had spent much of their spare time over many years training in first aid and learning how to support the medical and nursing work in military hospitals, all without pay. VA Ethel Brown wrote that there was, 'tense excitement and keen rivalry for preferment' when the opportunity was offered to VAs to take their voluntary training and demonstrate their capabilities alongside the best professional nurses in the Army.<sup>9</sup> This eagerness felt by many VAs to join the AIF overseas was not, though, for a sense of adventure; it was to practise their training in the most meaningful setting. Rita Knight, a VA selected from Western Australia, expressed her hope to be able to nurse the troops and 'help them', concluding that, 'caring is the main thing'.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, military service in a foreign location naturally contained an element of adventure and was seen as the ultimate opportunity.

After the Minister's call for VAs to serve overseas, the destination remaining confidential, applications were assessed by the VAD State Controllers and nominations forwarded to the military authorities to formalise the selection. After presenting for a medical examination to assess

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<sup>7</sup> Transcript of interview with (NX76505) Penman née Burns, Alice Maud (Corporal), 16 February 1990, The Keith Murdoch Sound Archive of Australia in the War of 1939-45, AWM: S00774.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> AWM: PR00884, EM Brown, 'VAD Att. 6AGH'.

<sup>10</sup> Transcript of interview with Rita Kneebone, 25 September 2003, Australians at War Film Archive, no.847.

their fitness as 'A1', in October 1941 the first draft of 200 VAs were informed they had been selected. 'Phenomenal activity for the chosen few' ensued as the women had to 'leave our civil jobs, be enlisted, outfitted, inoculated, feted, photographed, interviewed – everything – within less than three weeks!' exclaimed Ethel Brown.<sup>11</sup> Once the military had enrolled the VAs, they acted swiftly to deploy the women's labour efforts. Almost immediately, the new cohort of VAs, except those from Western Australia, were combined in Sydney. Sailing first to Fremantle to collect the West Australian contingent, the VAs arrived in the Middle East on 22 November 1941 ready to join the Australian forces. The rush experienced by the VAs during October 1941 reflects the desire expressed by the Army leadership in the Middle East to employ VAs, while the necessity for the urgency was brought by the lag caused by the Government's indecision.

### *The Army Calls for VAs as Government Decision Lags*

As the Second AIF was formed, military base hospitals increased their capacity and more camp hospitals were established throughout Australia. As an ancillary to the military medical services, members of VADs worked throughout Australia on a part-time basis in military establishments without pay. However, the demands on their voluntary services increased throughout 1940 as the number of troops grew. The Army DGMS, Major-General Rupert Downes, recognised the efforts of VAs in military hospitals and encouraged the Minister for the Army, Percy Spender, to consider enrolling VAs in paid full-time service. The matter went before War Cabinet on 2 August 1940, and it was deemed that, 'nothing should be done to prejudice the large amount of voluntary service at present being rendered by VAD personnel'.<sup>12</sup> The Minister for the Army was instead directed to use male orderlies to fill any vacancies existing in paid work, reinforcing a preconceived notion that women's contribution to war should remain within the charitable sphere.

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<sup>11</sup> Brown, 'VAD Att. 6AGH'.

<sup>12</sup> NAA: A2673, War Cabinet Minutes, vol.3, 2 August 1940, Minute no.439.

Nevertheless, by December the Government's position had shifted and women's labour was awarded a monetary value with War Cabinet approving the paid employment of VAs in full-time positions in military hospitals within Australia.<sup>13</sup> The approval of War Cabinet was, however, given with conditions. Communicating the decision with direction for its implementation, it was instructed that, 'In no case are women to be employed where doing so would result in the displacement of men from employment', the objective being only to free men for other duties.<sup>14</sup> Rank was also not afforded to women in the Army, emphasising the historically masculine nature of the military. But progress was made with VAD personnel being granted remuneration for their labour. Pay for a general grade VA was 4/- per day, a hospital cook was deemed a specialist and received 2/- more, and VAD 'officers' could receive up to 10/- per day depending on their position.<sup>15</sup> As a senior clerk VA on 6/- per day, this was less pay than the £2/10 per week Lesley Long had received in 1939 as a stenographer in Hobart, which was just below the average weekly wage of £2/14/3 for female adult workers in December 1940.<sup>16</sup> But with the additional benefits of paid for food and lodging, plus an allowance for uniforms and attractive extra rates for overseas service from October 1940, the VAD was an enticing career option for many women.

In contrast to the Government's acceptance of VAs, there was no such hesitation in recognising the potential and necessity of female labour by the Australian forces abroad. Only a month after War Cabinet decided to pay VAs for duty in military hospitals within Australia, the Director of Medical Services overseeing the AAMC in the Middle East, Brigadier Roy Burston, called for the preparation and despatch of VAs for overseas service. Inspecting the medical establishments in the Middle East, Burston had found that it was 'impossible to get male personnel

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<sup>13</sup> NAA: A5954, War Cabinet Minutes, vol.4, 12 December 1940, Minute no.674.

<sup>14</sup> NAA: AWM54, 1007/3/2, Memorandum regarding employment of VAD personnel on full-time duty, 4 March 1941.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> *Official Year Book of the Commonwealth of Australia*, no.34 (Canberra, Commonwealth Bureau of Census and Statistics, 1941), 712.



to work satisfactorily as batmen to Sisters' and within a nurses' mess.<sup>17</sup> The employment of male personnel, Burston found, was at the expense of the efficiency of military hospitals and suggested that, 'Work would be done more satisfactorily and efficiently by female personnel'.<sup>18</sup> On 16 January 1941, the General Officer Commanding the AIF, Lieutenant-General Thomas Blamey, forwarded Burston's recommendation to Australia for consideration and approval with his support, stating:

The employment of men in various capacities in hospitals has proved unsatisfactory. Provided the women sent forward are carefully selected, I am of the opinion that the change will be of considerable benefit.<sup>19</sup>

Consideration of the matter was then delayed, only reaching War Cabinet on 23 July 1941. Nevertheless, Burston's recommendation to call upon VAs for overseas service was supported. But this was not without War Cabinet noting the dual benefit that the employment of female personnel would release male personnel for other duties, thus reinforcing the gendered hierarchy.<sup>20</sup> Although men had caused issues reducing the efficiency of military organisation, the Government was determined to uphold the gendered principle that women must not be offered a place in the military that could jeopardise the enlistment or service of a man. As such, for the most part, the exclusion of VAs from service in the military was not the position of the Army, rather it was driven by the Government and was based on gender and not merit.

### *Debating Fair and Reasonable Pay*

The acceptance of women for duty with the AIF in non-specialist roles represented a turning point in the consciousness of the Australian military. Although VADs were to be used to support the medical service in the historically feminine space of nursing, they would become a generalist labour

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<sup>17</sup> NAA: AWM54, 88A/1/1, History of AAWMS.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> NAA: A5954, 806/2, War Cabinet Minutes, vol.8, 23 July 1941, Minute no.1261.

force of servicewomen. The duties they would come to undertake varied and would lead to the establishment of the women's auxiliary services. The decision to pay to VAD personnel was the first step in this change to women's work in the military. President of the feminist organisation, the United Associations, Jessie Street welcomed the announcement regarding the use of paid VAs abroad, saying in July 1941, 'We are glad to know that women are going to have the chance to go overseas, and they are sure to prove themselves capable'.<sup>21</sup>

However, the plan was not without its criticisms. Jessie Street and Muriel Heagney, Secretary of the Council of Action for Equal Pay, both called upon Minister Spender to grant the same pay to women who would be replacing men in the services abroad. At a rate of 6/- per day for the lowest ranking VA with a field allowance of 1/6d, the women's pay was two-thirds of their male counterparts. But the debate surrounding the rates of pay for VAs did not concern the VAs themselves – a matter that Heagney took issue with. Ignoring that the VAD was a technical reserve to the military with an existing cohort of women to call upon, Muriel Heagney criticised the plan to enrol VAs. Heagney urged open recruitment by public advertisement, claiming that the majority of VAs were 'well-to-do socialites' who were not concerned by the rate of pay and thus, 'only those with private means can go'.<sup>22</sup> There was some truth to Heagney's claims as there were several social figures within the VA ranks as discussed below. However, not all women in the VAD represented the elite of Australian society with nearly half of those posted to the Middle East having had a paid civil occupation before the war. As one VA responded to Street and Heagney's claims, 'Our girls are more anxious to go and do their bit than worry about what pay they get'.<sup>23</sup>

Juxtaposed with Street and Heagney's position, objections were mounted by nursing associations that claimed the rates of pay for VAs abroad were too high. Protests began in Adelaide at a meeting of representatives from the Royal British Nurses' Association, the ATNA, and the

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<sup>21</sup> *The Sun* (Sydney), 28 July 1941, 7.

<sup>22</sup> *The Daily Telegraph* (Sydney), 03 August 1941, 5.

<sup>23</sup> *The Sun* (Sydney), 27 July 1941, 8.

Returned Army Sisters. It was argued that when compared to the pay received by members of the AANS, the rates of pay for VAs on overseas service was 'excessive'.<sup>24</sup> In defence of the position of trained nurses in the Army, the South Australian nursing organisations wrote to their interstate counterparts to launch a nation-wide protest. Support was received by nursing associations in New South Wales, Victoria, Queensland, and Tasmania. President of the NSW Ex-Army Trained Nurses and Masseuses' War Auxiliary, Miss Garrett stated that it was 'ridiculous' that 'partly-trained girls...should receive pay only slightly less than that for highly-trained women'.<sup>25</sup>

However, comparing the pay and allowances for the lowest ranking members of each service shows that the base rate for a Staff Nurse in the AANS was double the pay of an orderly in the VAD.<sup>26</sup> And both of their benefits for service abroad, such as deferred pay and a field allowance, were equal.<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, making a comparison between the pay of the AANS and VAD requires an understanding of comparable ranks in the services, which was less transparent to civilian Australians at the time of Minister Spender's announcement in July 1941 (see Table 1). Quoted in Hobart's *Mercury*, a nurse had proclaimed that, 'If a...matron is worth only 17/6 a day, then a voluntary aid is not worth 19/- a day'.<sup>28</sup> However, as shown in Table 1, the rate of 19/- per day for a VA abroad was to be paid to an Assistant Controller, whose position overseeing all VAs in the area was comparable with that of the Matron-in-Chief, whose pay was 22/6d per day. A matron, who might manage the nursing staff in a 600-bed hospital, received 3/5d more per day than her VAD equivalent. In aggregate, officers in the VAD who served abroad were paid around 80 per cent of the rate received by their equivalent rank in the AANS, perhaps still more than civilian nurses thought appropriate.

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<sup>24</sup> *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 08 August 1941, 4.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> NAA: A5954, 803/1, War Cabinet Minutes, vol.1, 22 December 1939, Minute no.107; NAA: A5954, 806/2, War Cabinet Minutes, vol.8, 23 July 1941, Minute no.1261.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> *The Mercury* (Hobart), 13 August 1941, 4.

**Table 1: Overseas Service Rates of Pay for the AANS and VAD.**

	AANS	Abroad			VAD	Abroad			
		Daily Rate	Deferred Pay	Total		Daily Rate	Exchange	Deferred Pay	Total
Equivalent levels of rank	Matron-in-Chief	19/6	3/-	1/2/6	Assistant Controller	15/-	1/6	2/6	19/-
	Principal Matron	17/6	2/6	20/-	Commandant	12/6	1/3	2/6	16/3
	Matron	15/-	2/6	17/6	Assistant Commandant	10/6	1/1	2/6	14/1
	Sister	10/6	2/6	13/-	Senior Clerk / Senior Cook	6/-	7d	1/6	8/1
	Staff Nurse	8/6	2/-	10/6	Junior Clerk / Junior Cook	5/-	6d	1/6	7/-
					Orderly	4/-	6d	1/6	6/-

Significantly, the protest by nurses was criticised by Jessie Street and other feminists advocating for equal pay, including President of the Victorian Women Citizens' Movement, Mrs JD Johnston. As Johnston stated, 'as equality of pay between the sexes does not arise' in this case, she and her network could not support the protest.<sup>29</sup> But additionally, Johnston also expressed her bafflement by the position taken by the nurses which she saw as problematic. 'I cannot understand the protest made by the Nurses' Association of NSW and other States', wrote Johnston to Jessie Street.<sup>30</sup> Not only did Johnston take issue with the logic of the argument made by the nurses, but she also saw it as a retrograde step for her cause, writing:

It seems to me that the whole affair reflects little credit on the Nurses' organisations, and the soon it is forgotten the better. If the VAD rates were actually higher one could forgive them for using that as a lever to have their own raised...but to advocate the lowering of VAD rates is unthinkable.<sup>31</sup>

However, it is my contention that taking issue with rates of pay was only a means for nursing associations to launch an attack on VAs that was based in a greater fear. That fear being that VAs would take opportunities away from trained nurses, echoing the tensions that existed in

<sup>29</sup> 'Letter from Mrs JD Johnston, President of the Victorian Women Citizens' Movement to Mrs Jessie Street, 17 August 1941, *Papers of Jessie Street*, National Library of Australia, MS 2683/3/3.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

the First World War. At a meeting of the Queensland branch of the ATNA on 12 August 1941, it was argued that:

Men who were offering their lives for their country were entitled to the very best nursing service available, and there was still no shortage of trained nurses offering for service with the AIF; therefore, it should not be necessary to send unqualified women abroad.<sup>32</sup>

The question of the role of the VA with the military overseas was put to the Minister for the Army, Percy Spender in Parliament by Labor member, Bert Lazzarini. In Opposition, Lazzarini was critical of the Labor Government's plan and asked Spender if VAs, 'which are to be sent abroad after a meagre training', were to replace nurses in military hospitals.<sup>33</sup> Spender unequivocally answered that VAs would not take the place of the trained nurse but would undertake various duties similar to what they were already performing within establishments across Australia. 'The duties will be important', assured Spender, 'but they will not be such as are usually discharged by trained nurses'.<sup>34</sup> The role of the VA was to support the AANS sisters in the general duties and routine work of hospital organisation. Their role was supplemented by their previous training with the civilian VAD movement, and their place in the medical services was in addition to the establishment requirements of trained nurses. As such, the recently appointed Department of the Army Secretary, Frank Sinclair, insisted on 2 September 1941 that, 'having regard to the duties to be carried out', the rates of pay for VAs was both 'fair and reasonable'.<sup>35</sup>

The trepidation and debate that surrounded both the mobilisation of and the associated remuneration for VAs represented the broader misconceptions and fears associated with gender and skill in a military setting. But those working within the space being debated and those that were the subject of the anxieties largely did not express concern or opposition. In fact, as seen in the example above of Brigadier Burston and Lt-Gen Blamey, they worked to advocate for the

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<sup>32</sup> *The Advertiser* (Adelaide), 13 August 1941, 8.

<sup>33</sup> Bert Lazzarini, *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates*, 21 August 1941, no.34, House of Representatives, 75.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> NAA: AWM54, 88A/1/1, History of AAWMS.

employment of female VAs in the military. This was owing to key figures such as Burston recognising the potential benefit VAs and their labour could bring to the development of military medical establishments and the war effort more broadly. It was this realisation that the presence of VAs might offer the chance for progress to be achieved that was also identified by feminists including Street and Johnston. However, a division was forged between civilian nurses and nursing associations against the VAD and the military.

## **Forming a VAD for the Middle East**

### *Support for the Selected 200*

Learning the basic principles of first aid and home nursing, joining a local VA detachment in the interwar period gave young women skills and experiences that at once reinforced conventional attitudes of femininity at the time. For most women during this period, the expectation was that they would become wives and mothers. The notion being that women were carers, and this was learnt in a practical setting in the VAD during peacetime with the added benefit seen as encouraging a woman's role in the home. Many fathers also supported their daughters' voluntary work with their local detachment during the war. Alice Burns and her sister were encouraged by their parents in their work with the VAD. That was until the Army began calling up women for full-time work across Australia and overseas.<sup>36</sup> The notion of one's young daughter being sent into a theatre of war was difficult for some parents to accept, an attitude perhaps heightened by their own experiences during the First World War. Jean Robertson had wanted to become a nurse before the war but as she was under the age of 21, she had needed her father's permission to commence training, which he would not give.<sup>37</sup> To gain some nursing experience, Robertson joined a VAD in Perth. By the time she turned 21 and no longer needed her father's permission,

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<sup>36</sup> Transcript of AWM interview with Alice Penman.

<sup>37</sup> Transcript of interview with Jean Oddie, 24 November 2003, Australians at War Film Archive, no.922.

the Army was calling for women in the VAD to serve overseas. Robertson's mother had been a VA in Britain during the First World War and so understood her motivations for putting her name forward. But Robertson's father, who had been in the British Army was furious. 'I was just 21 so I could do it on my own, and he was absolutely livid', recalled Robertson, 'he wouldn't speak to me for the first fortnight after I had said I had been accepted'.<sup>38</sup>

The experience for many VAs called up for service was, however, encouraging as the event of being selected to join the AIF was widely seen as a success and cause for celebration. Overseas service was held in great esteem with the opportunity to support the troops abroad deemed the epitome of service. As such, the 200 women chosen in the first draft for the Middle East were not only called 'lucky' but seen as the elite VAs. It gave many of their families, communities, and local detachments a sense of great pride that 'one of their own' had been chosen. Tasmanian, Lesley Long recalled the 'kerfuffle before we went', attending the many social events where she received gifts from service associations such as the War Widows Guild, Legacy, and the Returned Sailors', Soldiers' and Airmen's Imperial League.<sup>39</sup> The Commandant of her detachment also gifted Long the practical item of a tin billy with some tea, which she recalled became 'quite useful on various occasions'.<sup>40</sup>

On the final Saturday before they embarked, farewell parties were held across Sydney for various VAs, including Lois Foxall, Joan Shierlaw, and Rona Faville, who were on their final leave and about begin their military careers abroad. The largest party, it was reported, was given by the proprietors of Bushell's Tea for their daughters, Pamela and Amber Bushell who were also selected.<sup>41</sup> Rita Hind's parents opened their Manly home from 3pm until after midnight, their daughter's friends and associates calling to wish her the best.<sup>42</sup> Members of the Balgowlah VAD

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Transcript of AWFA interview with Lesley Johnstone.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> *The Sun* (Sydney), 26 October 1941, 9.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

gifted Hind with a watch as a farewell present. 'You don't know how useful I have found the watch. It has been very much admired by Sisters and patients alike, and keeps perfect time', Hind wrote once working abroad.<sup>43</sup> Rita Hind had been the Commandant of the Balgowlah VAD, relinquishing her position to join the AIF. Writing from the *Queen Mary* to one of her friends from the detachment, Hind said:

Do thank the girls for me for all their good wishes, and especially the watch...I am not much good at expressing my feelings, but one thing is certain, I will always feel proud to have been associated with them all and can never thank them enough for all the help they gave me.<sup>44</sup>

Nevertheless, even family members who showed excitement and support to their loved ones embarking for war experienced concern for what might prevail. In a letter written the day before she set sail from Sydney, Gladys Crawford's sister wrote, 'I heard a rumour that they are stopping the VADs going overseas...I confess I felt relieved to think you might not have to go after all'.<sup>45</sup> But in a turn of events just five months later, Crawford was more worried about her sister, Beryl's proximity to danger in Townsville upon hearing a rumour that the town had been bombed. 'Here am I who 'came to the war' quite safe and nowhere near anything', remarked Crawford, 'while Beryl who 'wasn't medically fit' and had to stay at home is so close to the danger area'.<sup>46</sup>

In return for the support they received, the VAs sent to the Middle East became role models for civilian detachments. Although it had initially been planned to send 801 VAs to the Middle East, the changing priorities for the Australian Government, which saw a focus on the homefront and Pacific area from late 1942, meant that only the first draft of 200 women were afforded the experience. However, prior to this decision, the VAs of the first draft had become an

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<sup>43</sup> AWM: PR03574, Letter from Rita Hind to Gwenda Caldecott, 3 January 1941.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid, c.November 1941.

<sup>45</sup> AWM: PR03002, Letter to Gladys Crawford from her sister, Beryl, 31 October 1941.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid, Letter from Gladys Crawford to her mother, 26 March 1942.



ideal for VAs in Australia to aspire to, hoping themselves to be selected in a future draft. Throughout her time in the Middle East, Rita Hind maintained interest in ‘the girls’ of the Balgowlah VAD and regularly corresponded with her friend, Gwenda Caldecott, who had replaced her as the detachment’s Commandant. ‘Tell all the girls who are keen to come over and join us to work hard’, encouraged Hind, ‘because I am sure it is going to be a marvellous experience’.<sup>47</sup> By April, Hind was sure of her prediction and stated that working hard as a civilian VA was time ‘not wasted but well spent’.<sup>48</sup> Detailing the contribution VAs were making to the hospitals in the Middle East to demonstrate what they could aspire to, Hind wrote to her former detachment, ‘Our girls are helping in all departments of the hospital, dental, outpatients, x-ray, theatre, plaster room, pathology, office as well as all the wards’.<sup>49</sup> Being drafted for overseas duty with the AIF gave Rita Hind a sense of accomplishment that she aimed to impart to her former detachment. Conveying a sense of the support VAs were offering to the war effort in the Middle East, Hind stated:

Everybody is working flat out, each day new tent wards are being erected. Naturally when we are busy it means there are casualties and we don’t like that, but at least we are pleased that we are here, and able to be of some real use.<sup>50</sup>

However, realising VAs were needed in various roles on the homefront too, Hind reassured the Balgowlah VAs, ‘I know you will prove yourselves in whatever you are called upon to do’.<sup>51</sup>

### *Creating a Combined Cohort*

As soon as the VAs selected from across Australia were aboard the *Queen Mary*, interstate rivalries and attitudes regarding social status and merit were evoked. Muriel Heagney had been critical of the civilian VAD and accused the Army’s decision to engage women from this movement as being

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<sup>47</sup> AWM: PR03574, Letter from Rita Hind to Gwenda Caldecott, c.November 1942.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid, 21 April 1942.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid, 5 August 1942.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid, 21 April 1942.

biased towards the upper-middle class, that being those who were not concerned with a feminist labour agenda. Indeed, amongst the cohort drawn from New South Wales were ‘well-to-do socialites’ such as the Bushell’s ‘Tea heiresses, two granddaughters of Australia’s first Prime Minister, and girls who had been presented at court in England. Yet, despite the contingent fundamentally consisting of white middle-class women, the varied social statuses and contrasting upbringings of the women was a point of initial tension. Jean Robertson was aware that her life in Perth had been ‘less socially circumscribed’ in comparison to some of the eastern state VAs that had greater public attention.<sup>52</sup> And like Robertson, Lesley Long from Tasmania noted that some of the girls, particularly from Sydney, were ‘more sophisticated than the rest of us’.<sup>53</sup> Furthermore, state rivalries also manifested regarding the efficiency of the VAD movements in each state. Alice Burns was from New South Wales and initially regarded their Red Cross training superior to the St John’s and thought, ‘We’re the best trained, and we are the best dressed, David Jones has done a marvellous job’.<sup>54</sup>

But taking the journey to the Middle East and after spending time together once disembarked, the 200 VAs who served with the AIF in the Middle East developed a strong *esprit de corps*. This was not achieved by any intervention from officers, but solely through the mindsets of the women themselves. As they entered the wards aboard the ship and then in the Middle East, they were able to gain an appreciation for each other’s work and their duty took precedence. ‘It didn’t take very long before we didn’t care two hoots... We were all there and we were all there to work’, recalled Alice Burns.<sup>55</sup> Realising that they had all been trained well, that they were all there to do the same duties, and were now all living under the same conditions, any consideration of a VA’s home state or social status fell by the way.

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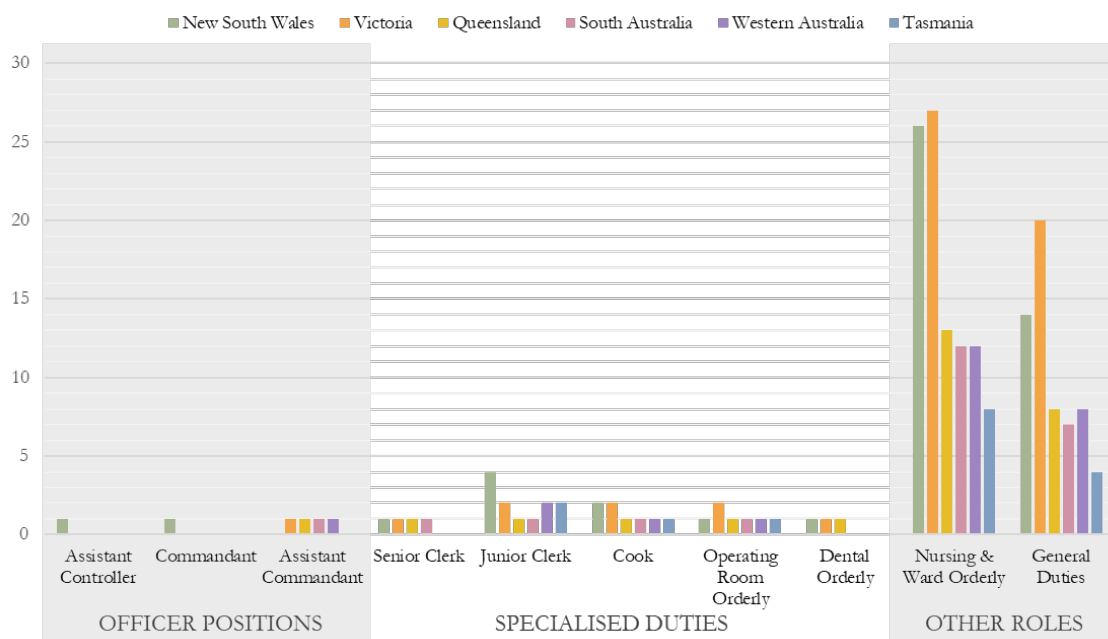
<sup>52</sup> Transcript of AWFA interview with Jean Oddie.

<sup>53</sup> Transcript of AWFA interview with Lesley Johnstone.

<sup>54</sup> Transcript of interview with Alice Penman, 27 May 2003, Australians at War Film Archive, no.346.

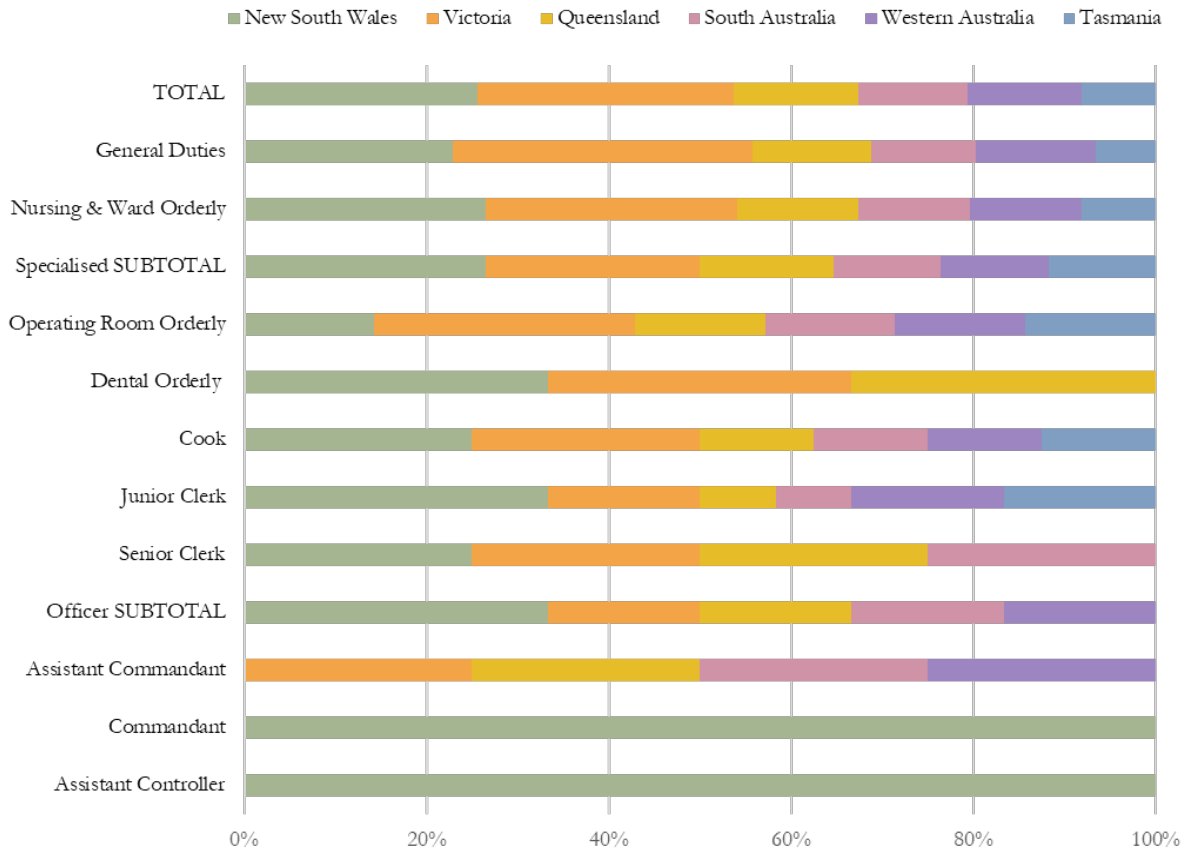
<sup>55</sup> Transcript of AWM interview with Alice Penman.

Yet, providing a framework that could have encouraged jurisdictional division, Figures 3 and 4 show the disparities in role allocations between the states. As discussed, the number of VAs selected from each state was designed to be an equal representation based on state populations. As such, together NSW and Victoria represented more than 50 per cent of the VAs, and Tasmania only 8 per cent. Yet, despite the proportionate share in numbers, the allocation of duties was not entirely egalitarian. As Figure 3 shows, the two most senior positions—Assistant Controller and Commandant—were both filled by women from NSW, whereas no Tasmanians were appointed to any officer role. In contrast, Figure 4 shows that only 23 per cent of the lowest ranking VA positions, that is those assigned to ‘general duties’ were filled by NSW women, despite representing more than a quarter of the entire cohort. Furthermore, it is only when specialised roles are grouped together as per Figures 3 and 4 that equal representation is achieved amongst the non-officer positions that were paid higher than the VA base wage. Nevertheless, the majority of VAs were assigned to work as nursing and ward orderlies as seen in Figure 3. And although NSW and Victoria together contributed more than half of this cohort, most VAs saw their training as appropriate to work in the wards and were content with their opportunity to serve abroad.



**Figure 3:** Number of VAs Assigned to Roles in the Middle East by Home State.<sup>56</sup>

<sup>56</sup> Data source: AWM: PR0884.



**Figure 4:** Percentage of VAs Assigned to Roles in the Middle East by Home State.<sup>57</sup>

After nine months in the Middle East, Rita Hind wrote, ‘It is hard to imagine that so many girls could get along so well together’.<sup>58</sup> Although initially from metropolitan and regional areas spanning the nation, once the women were together as just 200 VAs in a foreign location, they were all Australians. Conscious that they may have joined for different reasons, they had all been members of local VADs and shared a desire to serve during the war, thus immediately giving them a common bond. It must also be noted that issues of race or culture were also limited as the servicewomen were predominantly white Australian or English born. But where personal differences may have disrupted harmony, VAs bonded through the sharing of letters and news from home and learnt to depend on one another for support and morale as a pseudo family. ‘There is not one tent that you couldn’t walk into uninvited and not be made very welcome’, wrote Hind,

<sup>57</sup> Data source: AWM: PR0884.

<sup>58</sup> AWM: PR03574, Letter from Rita Hind to Gwenda Caldecott, 5 August 1942.

‘and that means a lot and makes up for all our friends at home that we naturally miss so much’.<sup>59</sup> Their exposure to medical and surgical cases arriving direct from the frontline offered a new challenge for these women, both practically in the wards and emotionally when out of them. Unable to describe any detail of their experiences in letters home due to censorship, the VAs’ shared experience bonded them as their work consumed their days. As Alice Burns found, ‘everyone was so busy, there was an awful lot to do’ and so they learnt to share the burden and rely on each other as a cohesive military unit.<sup>60</sup>

### *Joining the Other Services*

On their anniversary marking one year in the Middle East, VAD Commandant Lily Irwin penned a letter to the VAs in the Middle East reflecting on their twelve months of service abroad. Recalling the day they arrived, Irwin wrote, ‘How dark and desolate we all felt, not knowing what was before us’.<sup>61</sup> Yet more sorrowful, Irwin admitted, ‘No one appeared to want us; certainly, no one knew anything very much about us or even of our coming over here’.<sup>62</sup> To the professional nurses of the AANS that they had come to support, the VAD was largely an enigma. Wary of their presence and unsure of their capabilities, nurses’ suspicion of the VAs was excited by the troops who would say, ‘Now you will have to watch your step with all these gorgeous young ones coming out in blue uniforms’.<sup>63</sup> The AANS did not object to the VAD joining them in the Middle East, but without any knowledge of who they were, some nurses were sceptical of their arrival. Nevertheless, the nurses greeted them as they disembarked with Rita Hind remarking, ‘The Sisters who are looking after us are very good and are doing all they can to help us settle in’.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid, 21 April 1942.

<sup>60</sup> Transcript of AWFA interview with Alice Penman.

<sup>61</sup> AWM: PR86/049, Letter from Lily Irwin to all Australian VAs in the Middle East, 23 November 1942.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Transcript of AWFA interview with Jean Oddie.

<sup>64</sup> AWM: PR05507, Diary of Rita Hind, 23 November 1941.

The VAs' first weeks in the Middle East were spent in quarantine on account of a meningitis scare, which had claimed the life of one VA on their journey. Vexed by the 'inactivity' and 'anxious to get on with the job we had come over to do', in January 1942 they were sent to work.<sup>65</sup> A small group of officers and VAs working as clerks went to the AIF headquarters in Cairo, while the rest of group were split in two and joined the 2/1 AGH at Gaza Ridge and the 2/7 AGH at Rehovot, south of Tel Aviv. As soon as the VAs entered the wards and began to undertake their duties without fuss, most AANS sisters realised the value of these new servicewomen. Alice Burns attributed their efficient training as VAs in Australia, as well as their keen interest in the work as helping them to prove themselves. Burns stated that the nurses soon saw that VAs were disciplined and there 'ready to work and that's the only thing we [VAs] had in our minds', which allayed concerns.<sup>66</sup> 'Gradually as time went on and we started work, things began to take shape', Lily Irwin wrote, 'until now, twelve months later, we can safely say that the Voluntary Aid Detachment has 'arrived' in the Middle East'.<sup>67</sup>

The VAs who joined hospitals in the Middle East quickly formed loyal connections to the medical units they supported. After less than one month with the 2/1 AGH, the VAs at Gaza Ridge were upset by the hospital's closure. On 13 January 1942, Rita Hind penned in her diary, 'We were all very happy here and grew very attached to the place'.<sup>68</sup> Just two months later, the 2/6 AGH, under the command of Colonel Rex Money and Matron Judy Abbott, moved into the establishment at Gaza Ridge, absorbing the VAs that the 2/1 AGH had left behind. Not knowing the staff of the 2/6 AGH, the VAs held their own concerns about joining the new unit. The 2/6 AGH had never had VAs attached to it, 'but everything is working out very well', Rita Hind remarked on 29 March 1942.<sup>69</sup> Gladys Crawford was also a VA with the 2/6 AGH and she

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<sup>65</sup> Brown, 'VAD Att. 6AGH'.

<sup>66</sup> Transcript of AWM interview with Alice Penman.

<sup>67</sup> AWM: PR86/049, Letter from Lily Irwin to all Australian VAs in the Middle East, 23 November 1942.

<sup>68</sup> AWM: PR05507, Diary of Rita Hind, 13 January 1942.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid*, 29 March 1942.

regarded that it was 'only a matter of doing one's work properly' that ensured good relationships with the sisters and orderlies.<sup>70</sup> With their VAD certificates and experience in Australia, the VAs showed confidence in their work in the Middle East and in turn the medical and nursing staffs recognised their capabilities.

Illustrating the extent to which hospital units in the Middle East came to accept VAs, on Christmas Day in 1942, Colonel Money awarded the VAs of the 2/6 AGH with colour patches of their own. The 200 VAs in the Middle East had previously all worn a VAD colour patch, which was felt did not accurately represent their place in the Army or where they served. By presenting the VAs with the colour patch of the 2/6 AGH, Colonel Money acknowledged that VAs had demonstrated their worth and accepted that their place in the Army was within his medial unit. 'There was great excitement', Rita Hind wrote, 'and there has been great activity in the sewing line with all the girls putting them on' as soon as the patches were issued.<sup>71</sup> The strong relationship between Colonel Money, the staff of the 2/6 AGH, and the VAs of the unit continued throughout the war with many of the VAs passing up other opportunities, choosing instead to stay connected with their 2/6 AGH family.

By first creating a strong cohort amongst themselves, the positive attitude of the VAs helped to develop their regard amongst members of the other services in the military, namely the AANS and AAMC. Their ability to create a strong service, however, was reinforced by their skill and work ethic exemplified in the wards.

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<sup>70</sup> AWM: PR03002, Letter from Gladys Crawford to her mother, 22 September 1942.

<sup>71</sup> AWM: PR03574, Letter from Rita Hind to Gwenda Caldecott, 3 January 1943.

## Capability, Opportunity, and Skill

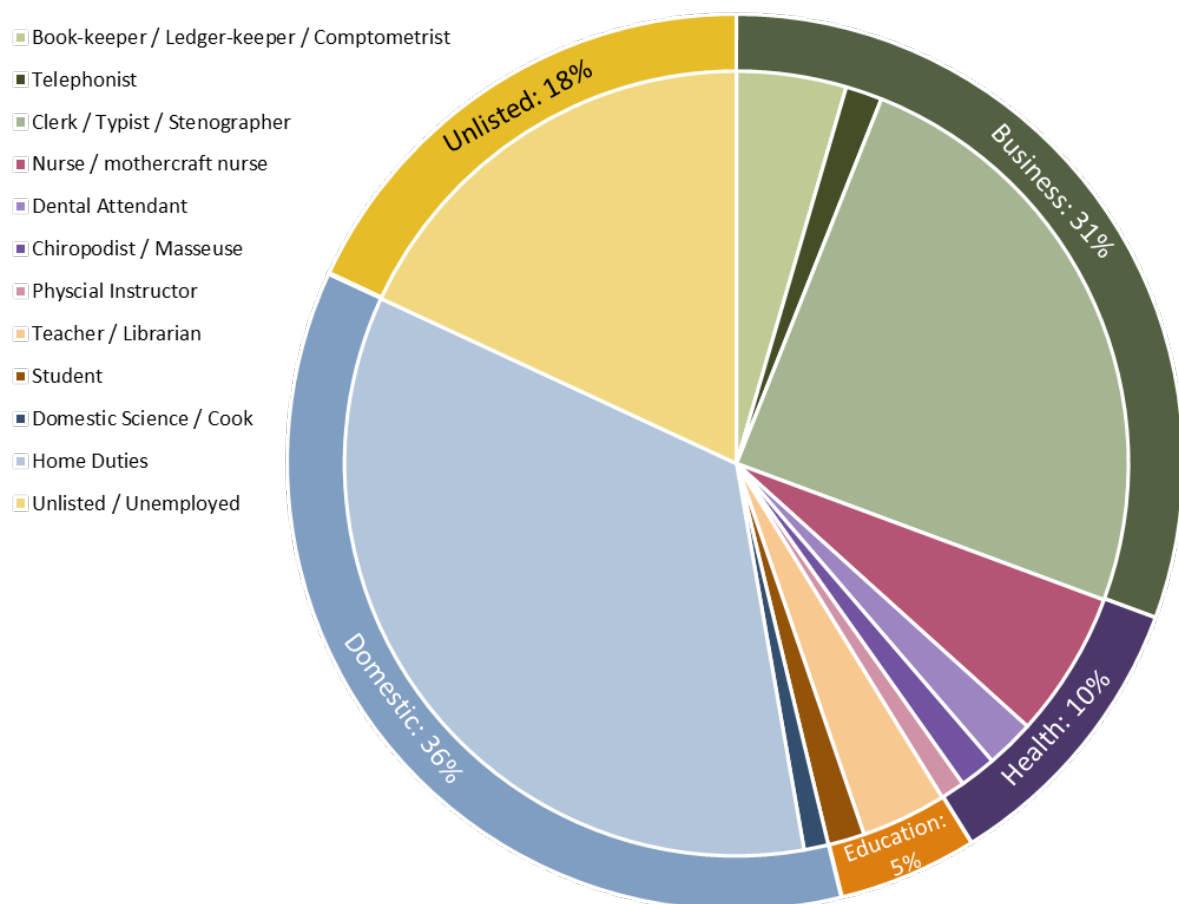
### *Experience Brought by the VAs*

The expectations set by the military regarding a VA's training were well exceeded by the 200 women selected from across Australia in the first draft for the Middle East. As a minimum requirement to be considered for overseas service, a VA had to be a current member of an active VA detachment, be in possession of her first aid and home nursing certificates, as well as have at least one month's continuous experience working in a hospital. Initially trained by either the Red Cross or Order of St John and sent to volunteer at a civil hospital, the majority of VAs also gained experience within military establishments in the early years of the war. Before being sent to the Middle East, the contingent of 25 'other rank' VAs from Western Australia all completed a minimum of six weeks continuous work at 110 Military Hospital, Perth. Similarly, of the VAs selected from Queensland, 19 had worked in a military camp hospital before being sent to the Middle East and five had passed through 112 AGH, Greenslopes, averaging four months' service. Examining the positions that the VAs from Queensland were assigned to in the Middle East, those with the most experience in a military hospital were tasked with the most demanding duties, such as Dawn Jackson who became an operating room orderly, having worked for 12 months in a military camp hospital. Correspondingly, most general duties positions were filled by the women who had spent the least amount of time working in a military establishment. Yet, many of the VAs offered a range of other skills they had gained from their civilian lives, which offered opportunities for the Army to utilise.

The VAs selected for overseas service were criticised by some, including Muriel Heagney as discussed above, for being socialites without concern for money. Yet, more than 47 per cent of the 200 women who were posted to the Middle East had paid employment or were pursuing a career before joining the AIF. Illustrated in Figure 5, the number of women employed in office-based work was almost equal to the number who listed home duties as their primary



occupation. While full-time work as a VA in the military did provide an opportunity for women to gain paid employment, many were already part of the female labour market with their work experience making them more desirable to the military. Ten per cent of the women selected for the Middle East had backgrounds in the health services, encouragingly matched to the expected role of the VA in the Army. Recorded by the administration of the VAD in the Middle East, the civilian occupations of the VAs were, on some occasions, used to assign their duties with the medical services. For example, the role of cook was a specialist position that required experience not only in a kitchen, but in the catering of large quantities. Two VAs assigned to the role of cook, which brought with it more pay, were Ruth Sachs who was an experienced domestic science teacher, and Grace Mills who had been a café cook.<sup>72</sup>



**Figure 5:** Pre-War Civilian Occupations of VAs Sent to the Middle East.<sup>73</sup>

<sup>72</sup> AWM: PR0884.

<sup>73</sup> Data source: AWM: PR0884.

However, civilian occupations of the VAs were not always taken into consideration as the officers were assigning duties. Three dental orderly positions were held by VAs in the Middle East, and within the contingent sent abroad were three women who had been dental attendants and one other who was a dental mechanic in their civilian employment. However, only one of these women was assigned as a dental orderly in the Middle East. Another defined position held by VAs in the Middle East was as operating room orderly. Of the seven VAs assigned to this duty preparing the theatre and supporting surgery, one had been a district nurse for four years, while two others had extensive VA experience in Australia. However, Western Australian Elva MacMillan had worked as a surgery attendant and Beatrice Petts had been a surgery nurse for four years and spent over 500 hours as a VA staffing the Royal Adelaide Hospital casualty room, and yet both women were assigned to general duties in the Middle East. It seems apparent that this was owing to the nature of assignments being based on state selection or preference. This becomes more evident when it is noted that the VA from NSW who was selected as an operating room orderly had just four weeks voluntary experience at a hospital as a VA.<sup>74</sup> The rationale for some VA assignments is unclear based on the data recorded, however the rich calibre of women undertaking the various tasks for and alongside the professional nurses of the AANS certainly contributed to the increased faith the sisters and medical officers developed in the VAs' abilities.

### *Work in the Middle East Wards*

Attached to the 2/1, 2/7 and later the 2/6 AGH units in the Middle East, 80 per cent of the VAs in the Middle East worked in and around the wards as nursing orderlies or on general duties. As these VAs were taken on strength by the units and formed part of their establishment, they were absorbed into the routine of the wards and very little separated the work of the two positions. As their original assignments lost definition, Gladys Crawford who was initially allocated to general

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<sup>74</sup> AWM: PR0884.

duties, worked her first shift in August 1942 in a surgical ward. Writing to her mother of the opportunity, Crawford stated, 'It is very interesting, and I do so like the work in the ward'.<sup>75</sup> Having spent their spare hours volunteering in Australia to prepare as an ancillary service to the AAMC, the majority of VAs relished in the opportunity to care for battle casualties abroad. Staffing the wards of the 2/6 AGH, Jean Robertson said of the experience, 'I was doing what I always wanted to do, and I was in the medical sphere'.<sup>76</sup>

Afforded a place within the military and medical domain, VAs in the Middle East were exposed to new types of medical and surgical cases and the methods to nurse them. On night duty in a small surgical ward but 'the busiest I have been in', Gladys Crawford helped nurse the sickest surgical patients and gained 'quite a lot of experience in handling some types of cases which I hadn't handled before'.<sup>77</sup> Passionate about her work in the medical sphere, Crawford absorbed all she could obtain from the experience, finding it 'all very interesting' as well as realising that, 'not very pleasant sights don't upset me a great benefit'.<sup>78</sup>

Hospital units were generally separated into medical and surgical wards and VAs were rostered to work in all wards, both on day and night duty. Commencing at seven o'clock in the morning, the day shift would be scheduled to end at one o'clock. However, fourteen-hour days were not uncommon during busy periods for the hospitals, 'which seemed to be a lot of the time', recalled Alice Burns.<sup>79</sup> Within the wards it was intended that the VAs would relieve the trained nurses and male orderlies of the routine tasks. Their duties included making the beds, sponging the patients, taking temperatures, and ensuring the patients ate their meal, which included feeding those who could not do it themselves. Servicing bandages also seemed an endless task. Used constantly in surgical wards, bandages—like most resources—were scarce and so 'all bandages had

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<sup>75</sup> AWM: PR03002, Letter from Gladys Crawford to her mother, 24 August 1942.

<sup>76</sup> Transcript of AWFA interview with Jean Oddie.

<sup>77</sup> AWM: PR03002, Letter from Gladys Crawford to her mother, 25 November 1942.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Transcript of AWM interview with Alice Penman.

to be saved, regardless of how revolting they were'.<sup>80</sup> Taken from dressings, the used bandages would be put into a kerosene tin for the VA on duty to wash thoroughly before putting them into a separate tin over a small fire to be boiled. Alice Burns recalled then having to dry the 'yards and yards' of bandages before enlisting the help of the patients, 'as long as they had some fingers free', to roll them back up.<sup>81</sup> The rolled bandages would then be autoclaved and once sterilised, reused for clean dressings and so the process began again.

Affirming their abilities in the routine work of the wards, some VAs were not only asked to prepare the bandages, but to dress patients' wounds themselves. As the professional staff of the hospitals became accustomed to the VAs, they increased their reliance upon these women and VAs gained greater responsibilities. 'The Sister with whom I worked on night duty was so nice and always explained anything about the cases that I didn't understand', explained Gladys Crawford.<sup>82</sup> Dressings for battle casualties was often extensive and some could take several hours to complete, slowing the pace of the ward's operations. Once experienced in the method for taking a dressing off, cleaning the wound, and re-dressing it, some VAs became great assistants to the nurses. Yet, as VAD Commandant Lily Irwin noted, 'a lot depends on the Charge Sister' and the increased accountabilities asked of VAs was dependent on the nature of the professional nurse overseeing the ward she was in.<sup>83</sup>

Nevertheless, periods of great activity and intensity at the hospitals, particularly the arrival of battle casualties, required the dedication of all staff, including the VAs. Experience in admitting new patients in a casualty setting was not something many VAs had been exposed to before the Middle East. As such, it tested their mettle. For Gladys Crawford, it confirmed her enthusiasm for medical work, describing the experience to her mother:

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> AWM: PR03002, Letter from Gladys Crawford to her mother, 27 July 1942.

<sup>83</sup> AWM: PR86/049, EM Brown, Draft version 'VAD Att. 6AGH'.

There is always a quiet part of the night after midnight then we hear the ambulances, everything is activity then. We give the patients tea when they arrive, and they have to have a wash. They are marvellously cheerful... As a rule, I am glad to come off night duty, but I feel now as though I will be missing so much.<sup>84</sup>

In such situations, the routine work of making beds, preparing drinks, and washing patients—these being men who had come straight from the front and were covered in mud and dirt—was intensified and remained the primary role for VAs. As Jean Robertson stated, VAs were content in these duties and they felt that they were being of use and were ‘grateful we could do it’.<sup>85</sup> Additionally, however, VAs offered more support and did ‘what we could’ to assist the nurses and medical officers in the treatment of the casualties.<sup>86</sup> Once a VA had cleaned the patient, one of the sisters or medical officers would then assess the wound before instructing the VA of the treatment required. Alice Burns recalls that if a wound was serious the VA would assist a nurse to complete the dressing, but if it the wound was more manageable, a VA ‘knew how to do it [the dressing], and we could do that ourselves’.<sup>87</sup> Having taken the time to teach the semi-trained VAs more about nursing when the situation was less pressing, the sisters—and patients, too—benefited from the work of the VAs when casualties arrived.

### *Embedded in the Medical Establishment*

Working in surgical wards 8 and 9 of the 2/1 AGH at Gaza Ridge, Rita Knight had hardly realised that she was using her skill and knowledge to save lives until her father pointed it out to her. Going about her task of sponge bathing her patients, as Knight withdrew the blanket of one patient, he readjusted his position in preparation for his wash. However, as he moved, a piece of shrapnel

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<sup>84</sup> AWM: PR03002, Letter from Gladys Crawford to her mother, 27 July 1942.

<sup>85</sup> Transcript of AWFA interview with Jean Oddie.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Transcript of AWFA interview with Alice Penman.

that was lodged inside his leg cut the femoral artery. Knight got a shock as blood started spurting out, but she acted quickly to apply pressure to stop the bleeding, relying on her training without thought. Assistance soon arrived and the patient was taken immediately to surgery. Beyond the normal practice for a VA, Knight's swift action to stop the bleeding demonstrated her aptitude for nursing and led to the patient's survival. Writing home of the incident without any notion of her own heroism, Rita Knight's father replied asking, 'Do you realise, Rita, that you saved a man's life?'<sup>88</sup> Developing upon their initial training in first aid and home nursing, VAs employed their skills and furthered their medical knowledge as they worked to care for the sick and injured AIF troops alongside the professional AANS nurses.

Adding to the staff establishment of the medical units in the Middle East, VAs were more than just labour personnel to undertake the physical tasks. Eventually recognised by the sisters as a skilled workforce, VAs were required to actively monitor patients, including watching for signs of haemorrhage after surgery, and contribute to their care and recovery. With intellect and keen interest, the professional nurses utilised VAs for their skills and furthered the knowledge that they had gained in the civilian VAD. Exposing them to new aspects of hospital organisation, the professional staff had VAs contribute to the efficiency of the medical unit. Checking patient temperatures was one of the routine tasks assigned to a VA. However, it was also necessary for a VA to identify any abnormalities in patients and maintain charts and shift reports for the sisters and medical officers. While the most technical duties remained the remit of those who were fully trained, and the sisters were always available if needed, VAs were given greater responsibilities that not only required skill but the trust of the professionals.

In the quiet periods of night duty while most patients slept, limited nursing staff were rostered on to monitor patients and tend to their needs. Stationed in one ward on night duty, a sister would also oversee two other wards which would be staffed by one VA each. But as VA Rita

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<sup>88</sup> Transcript of AWFA interview with Rita Kneebone.

Knight remarked, the VA would only see the sister if she had time or if the VA called for her assistance. Placed in charge of a 64-bed surgical ward on night duty, Knight was accountable for all patients, including her six men on the 'danger list' who were all receiving blood transfusions.<sup>89</sup> Although most patients slept during the night when a VA was the only staff on duty in the ward, the VA was solely responsible. Patients' temperatures still needed to be taken throughout the night, and the VA needed to administer medications too. Knight recalled that having to manage all ward tasks, she would start bed sponges at midnight 'so that I could have them done by seven in the morning and then write the [shift] report'.<sup>90</sup>

Given charge of a ward and expected to undertake responsible tasks in the care of patients, VAs entered the space that was filled by nurse trainees within civil hospitals. Like a trainee nurse, which was a position not in the military structure at the time, VAs began with the routine tasks and as they gained experience in the wards, they were given more responsibility. Furthermore, encouragement was given by the nursing and medical staff for VAs to learn, placing them in a similar position to trainees. For example, when Alice Burns made a decision that was contrary to the direction that had been given, she was not reprimanded but instead the situation used as a learning experience.<sup>91</sup> Burns was the only VA on night duty in a ward and one of her patients was extremely restless. He had suffered a shrapnel wound to the buttocks and given his serious condition the instruction was to not move him. However, unable to sleep one night, Burns identified that the patient was being bitten by bed bugs. Methodically changing the sheets according to the nursing protocol for such, the patient was thrilled by Burns' actions. However, when she told the medical and nursing staff the next day what she had done, Burns was spoken to. But recognising that she was trying to follow direction, but that the patient was suffering, Burns was not scolded by the matron.

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> Transcript of AWFA interview with Alice Penman.

Furthering their medical knowledge amongst the variety of medical and surgical cases being treated in the Middle East, some VAs were trained in specialised fields of nursing. Embracing the opportunity to learn from the sisters and medical officers, Yvonne Antoine was chosen to work in a burns ward. Under the direction of Lieutenant-Colonel Fred Clarke, a surgeon from her hometown of Perth, Antoine joined a small team alongside Sister Kathleen ‘Molly’ Campbell-Smith and a male orderly known as ‘Snow’.<sup>92</sup> Learning from Lt-Col Clarke and Sister Campbell-Smith in the discrete role, Antoine was trained in the specific methods for treating burns cases. Having wanted to become a trained nurse before the war, Antoine found the experience interesting, despite it requiring both physical and emotional resolve. The process for preparing burns patients for treatment involved firstly lifting the patient into a saline bath to soak and then stripping the loose dead skin from the wounds with tweezers. This was ‘horrible for him, and awful for us, too’ recalled Antoine.<sup>93</sup> The patients were then lifted back onto their bed and fans used to dry them thoroughly before putting sulphanilamide powder on the dry wound. Prepared tulle gras, a mesh material that had been soaked in Vaseline and whale oil and then sterilised, was then applied skilfully to the burn areas as an early version of a skin graft. The wounds would heal from the inside and ‘they were beautifully done’, said Antoine who was proud of their innovative methods and its success. ‘A lot of the girls [VAs] don’t know a thing about that’, recalled Antoine 60 years later, ‘they never worked in that area, but I did, I was lucky’.<sup>94</sup>

Alongside the technical nursing practices Yvonne Antoine learnt, it was also necessary for her to develop a strong bedside manner which acknowledged the pain of the patient. Caused by plane crashes, shrapnel, and explosions, patients suffered severe burns to their legs, arms, and torsos. While their injury caused them pain, Antoine appreciated that the patients’ treatment was also excruciating. ‘You had to just be nice with them’, stated Antoine recognising that the best she

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<sup>92</sup> Transcript of interview with Yvonne Day, 4 September 2003, Australians at War Film Archive, no.833.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.



could do was try to be as gentle as possible.<sup>95</sup> Showing maturity in the care of her patients and an aptitude for the fundamentals of nursing, Antoine would attempt to redirect their thoughts and distract them from the pain of their treatment. Striking conversation was her technique, 'It's easy to get them going about their mother or their father or where they lived and whether you had ever been there'.<sup>96</sup> But mindful of the situation that had brought them to hospital, conversation rarely turned to the war.

## Conclusion

Recalled to Australia when the threat of war intensified in the Pacific, the 200 VAs that were deployed to the Middle East had in their 16 months of service earned recognition as a capable and reliable auxiliary. After returning to Australia in February 1943 to defend the nation in the Pacific Campaign, AANS Sister Irene Forrester who had worked with the VAs in the Middle East stated that the VAs, 'did a marvellous job and I don't know what we would have done without them'.<sup>97</sup> Having initially been celebrated by their families and peers, the Middle East VAs also gained the respect of the Army nursing and medical services. Taking their basic medical training learnt in the civilian VAD, they proved their worth and demonstrated their capabilities with a determination to support the AIF. Undertaking general nursing tasks, VAs also developed their skills and affirmed their place within the military medical organisation. In turn, the professional staff of the 2/1, 2/7 and 2/6 AGHs increased their reliance on and trust in the support of VAs and, consequently, the responsibilities of VAs also increased.

Seen as the epitome of service, duty overseas in a theatre of war was a new opportunity granted to VAs and exposed them to a raft of new experiences that only strengthened their status as the model VAs. Waiting on the platform to entrain ahead of her deployment to New Guinea

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> Quoted in *The Australian Women's Weekly*, 3 April 1943, 14.

in 1943, AAMWS Lila McKenzie, who had not been a Middle East VA, dared not to approach her fellow AAMWS and Middle East VA veteran. Likely identified by the two blue chevrons on her sleeve indicating VA service in the Middle East, McKenzie thought, 'No, I won't go up to her because I'm not sure what sort of a reception I might get'.<sup>98</sup> But as Middle East VA veteran, Jean Robertson noted, 'We weren't asking for any special respect' and in some cases it was not given.<sup>99</sup> Posted to 110 AGH, Perth on her return, Robertson recalled the jealousy of some servicewomen who had not been selected for overseas service who would say, 'You have had your fun. You have been to the Middle East, so you can stay in the kitchen now'.<sup>100</sup> Despite the new place gained by VAs within the Army and their 16 months 'on-the-job' experience, upon their return Australia the Middle East VAs were not given any special consideration by the Army and were instead sent to a 'rookies' school. As discussed in the next chapter, this caused confusion and resentment amongst the returned Middle East VAs. Unfortunately, the Army lacked a cohesive plan to absorb these experienced servicewomen into medical establishments in Australia. As such, tension manifested between both new and old members of the service.

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<sup>98</sup> Transcript of interview with (NX148142/N443790) Stocks (née McKenzie), Lila (Private), 17 March 1989, The Keith Murdoch Sound Archive of Australia in the War of 1939-45, AWM: S05522.

<sup>99</sup> Transcript of AWFA interview with Jean Oddie.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

## **PART II**

### **Disruptions, Tensions, and Controversies**

## Chapter 3

### VAs become AAMWS: Questions of Identity and Skill

Rita Hind remarked in November 1942, 'One can hardly imagine that the VAD movement could have grown so quickly in 12 months'.<sup>1</sup> Hind commenced full-time duty with the Army as a VA on 17 October 1941 and embarked for the Middle East just two weeks later, leaving behind her civilian voluntary work with the Balgowlah VA detachment.<sup>2</sup> During the time that she had been overseas with the Army, the VAD movement in Australia had experienced a rapid growth, both in the civilian and military spheres. Writing home to her friend who remained a civilian VA with the Balgowlah detachment, Hind questioned the position of the 200 Middle East VAs within the changing organisation, 'We seem such a small part of it now, that sometimes we wonder if they still remember we are here'.<sup>3</sup>

The changing wartime priorities for Australia had shifted as tensions in the Pacific increased with Japan and the United States mobilising for war. This had sparked a change in attitude for Australia which caused a rapid growth in service enlistments, including with both the civilian and Army VADs. Yet, Rita Hind soon wrote home again having gained an appreciation of the different perspective that the Middle East VAs had regarding the changes in Australia. But her comments were not about the conditions of the war, and instead her focus was the organisational changes effecting the growth of the VAD. After reinforcements of three Tasmanian VAs arrived in the Middle East in December 1942 with 'first-hand information about things in general', Hind determined, 'There are some compensations for being isolated'.<sup>4</sup> Remarking from the Middle East, Hind stated:

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<sup>1</sup> AWM: PR03574, Letter from Rita Hind to Gwenda Caldecott, 10 November 1942.

<sup>2</sup> NAA: B883, NX76519, HIND Rita May.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> AWM: PR03574, Letter from Rita Hind to Gwenda Caldecott, 3 January 1943.

We are very pleased that we are still wearing our blue uniforms. No talk of us going into khaki at all yet, for which we are thankful...Nothing has been done about stripes either, and we are not grieving about that.<sup>5</sup>

Gladys Crawford, who was also serving as a VA in the Middle East similarly wrote home, 'We have such happy conditions here, not that there is anything lax about the discipline, there is not', concluding that the organisational changes of the VAD in Australia were 'a lot of trifling details [that] seem quite unnecessary'.<sup>6</sup> By December 1942, not only had the VAD movement undergone growth in its membership, but the Army branch of the VAD in Australia had started to don khaki uniforms, allocate military rank to its members, and most significantly, had experienced a change in designation – VAs in the Army were now known as AAMWS, members of the Australian Army Medical Women's Service. The establishment of the AAMWS as a new military auxiliary service was approved by the Adjutant-General on 8 December 1942. It formed part of the Australian Government's 'sweeping reforms of the labour market' that saw a turn towards female labour to address the severe shortage of manpower.<sup>7</sup> Women's auxiliaries to the three branches of the military were formed in 1941. However, the formal establishment of the AAMWS as an auxiliary to the Army medical and nursing services in 1942 took a different path owing to the existing body of VADs. As such, the establishment of the AAMWS is a unique case study.

This chapter charts the shifting control of the VAD and the organisational tensions such developments provoked. Taking this analysis further, I argue that the organisational changes faced by the VAs fundamentally challenged their professional identity and that of their service. Where the VAD had established a culture of proficiency and charitable humanitarianism, the government desired direct access to and control of the large female labour force that existed in the VAD. As

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> AWM: PR03002, Letter from Gladys Crawford to Kitty Burke, 11 December 1942.

<sup>7</sup> Oppenheimer, *Red Cross VAs*, 82.

this chapter shows, this shift from proficiency to plethora of service challenged the notion of who the VA was. With the loosening of prerequisites for enlistments, the demographics of the service's members also shifted. By bringing together original members of the VAD with new AAMWS, differences were accentuated, and this created a disjuncture in the service. Original VAs were confronted with a rapidly expanding cohort of AAMWS who were without previous training or experience working in a hospital as a volunteer and, as such, challenged the principles and ideals that had been engrained by the VAD movement.

### **The Changing Position of VAs in the Army**

From the outbreak of war in 1939, VAs demonstrated to Army leadership their capability and willingness to assist with every opportunity they were afforded to support the medical services. Recognising the level of work individual aids were contributing within military hospitals, the DGMS, Major-General Rupert Downes, recommended to the Minister for the Army that full-time VAs be paid for their labour. Formalising their position in the Army, approval was granted in December 1940 for full-time VAs to be enrolled and paid an equivalent wage to a private. The efficiency shown by VAs that was noticed by the DGMS and secured them paid employment, also saw the Army increasingly draw upon their services. Owing to their proficient training by the Red Cross and Order of St John, civilian VADs remained a large reserve of semi-trained technical personnel for the Army medical services to call upon. By the end of 1941, 200 VAs were serving overseas in the Middle East as discussed in the previous chapter, and many hundred more were staffing military hospitals across Australia. The organisation of these personnel in the Army, and of the expected influx of new members hoped to be gained by the plea for women to join the auxiliary services, saw the Army take greater administrative control of the VAD.

Until the end of 1941, the VAD had largely been controlled according to protocols set out in the inter-war years as described in Chapter 1. This saw the VAD governed by their own

administrative body and their services effectively lent to the DGMS for duties assisting the military medical services as requested. As such, the civilian organisation was responsible for the establishment and ongoing efficiency of VADs, which included the recruitment, training, and selection of aids to be employed in full-time service with the Army. The Army, in essence, borrowed members from the civilian organisation. However, owing to VADs being subject to their own regulations and governance, no provision was made within the Army for their administration. As the only technical reserve trained to support the military medical services, this somewhat unique position of the VAD fostered ambiguity.

Nevertheless, late in 1941 the Army effected change that increased their organisational control of the enrolled VAD service. When the government decided to increase the use of female labour during the war, the need for them to have greater oversight of VAs was realised, and so VAD officers were enlisted in the Army. Taken from existing personnel administering civilian VADs, the Army enlisted a VAD officer from each state to serve as an Assistant Controller or Commandant. Attached to the staff of the Deputy-Director of Medical Services in the headquarters of each military command area and district, their position was a significant step for women in senior leadership roles in the military, expanding upon the few leadership positions afforded to the AANS. The calibre of VAD leaders was upheld by the appointments, which included Alice Appleford who was commissioned in Victoria on 19 November 1941 as Assistant Controller for the Southern Command area. Another was Mary 'Mollie' Calder (later Walker) who became Assistant Controller, Northern Command on 12 December 1941, overseeing the full-time VAs serving with the Army in Queensland.<sup>8</sup> The appointment of VAD officers in the Army was an acknowledgement by the military of the significant service rendered by the VADs and indicated the greater involvement that was to come. But alongside the broader policy change regarding

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<sup>8</sup> NAA: B884, V500148 [Appleford Alice Ross]; NAA: B884, Q123189 [Walker Mary Isabel].

women in the military, the Army identified a need to have greater oversight of VAs to realise their ambitions.

Through the appointment of VAD leaders in the Army, the role of the civilian movement was diminished. The enlisted Assistant Controllers and Commandants now within the ranks of the Army, took on the responsibility for overseeing the full-time VAs working within the military, as well as the selection of new members, their enrolment, and allotment to units. In January 1942, with greater troop movement in Australia to defend the nation's shores, the DGMS called upon VAs to be used by medical units in the eastern Australian states to assist in the transport and care of sick and wounded soldiers. The new VAD officers had received their first directive. As remarked in the official history penned by Gwen Jacobson, this instruction by the DGMS 'was in a sense an unofficial prelude to mobilisation' of VADs in the military for the war effort.<sup>9</sup> It was only two months later, on 20 March 1942 that the Military Board approved the recommendation for VADs to replace men in even more roles within military hospitals. This also instituted that VAs would be counted in their own right as part of the War Establishment figures that determined resourcing for military hospitals. No longer were VAs considered supplementary to the military services, they were part of its medical network.

March 1942 was a turning point for the service. Including VAs in the War Establishment figures marked the moment when the VAD developed from a technical reserve assisting the military to an established Army service. On 2 July 1942, the Minister for the Army, Frank Forde announced that Kathleen Best had been appointed as the first Controller of the VADs in the Army. Best, formerly AANS Matron of the 2/5 AGH, was attached to the Medical Directorate and given the rank of Lieutenant-Colonel to support the DGMS in overseeing the expanding cohort of VADs. Forde expressed that the appointment of Best as Controller 'presaged a

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<sup>9</sup> Walker, *Medical Services*, 479.



large-scale expansion' of VAs' work in military hospitals.<sup>10</sup> Following Best's appointment, full-time VAs serving in the Army transitioned to wearing khaki uniforms and were enlisted with military rank. Coincidentally, in September 1942 the Army gained complete administrative control of VADs on full-time service in the military, with the VAD Central Council retaining responsibility only for civilian aids who had not been called upon for military service.

These significant organisational changes culminated in December 1942 with the establishment of the AAMWS. Occurring in a relatively short sequence, such shifts in the administration and purpose of the service provoked tensions both between institutions and within them. The place of the Red Cross and the role of the voluntary movement as an organising body were altered, and with it the identity of both the civilian and military VAD and its members was challenged. The following sections of this chapter analyse in detail these changes and the pursuit of organisational control and identity.

## **Shifts for the Red Cross and the Civilian VAD**

### *The New Red Cross Aid*

The Red Cross and Order of St John played a significant role in shaping the VAD movement throughout Australia. As the bodies initially responsible for training and establishing detachments, it was the traditions of these humanitarian organisations that was instilled in VA recruits. It was this that also saw the need to produce character references waived when enrolling in the Army. As VA Patsy Adam-Smith noted, all members had been invited to join a detachment whose Commandant likely knew her clergyman, employer, teacher, and parents and as such her 'character was already vouched for by their community'.<sup>11</sup> However, the support given by the Red Cross to

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<sup>10</sup> *The Age* (Melbourne), 3 July 1942, 3.

<sup>11</sup> Adam-Smith, *Women at War*, 189.

the military was tested as the capacity of VADs to assist the charitable work of the Red Cross was lessened as the military's reliance on them increased.

Both the Red Cross and Order of St John not only provided lectures of instruction to VAD members to ensure their efficiency, but also engaged their voluntary labour in charitable and humanitarian work for their organisations. Throughout the war VAs staffed Red Cross canteens, met returning hospital ships at the docks, and welcomed troop trains at the station providing cigarettes and refreshments to soldiers. As noted by historian Melanie Oppenheimer, VADs had the additional task of fundraising with the Red Cross. The provision of comforts and refreshments provided to troop trains by the Albury detachment alone, cost around £12,000 per year.<sup>12</sup> Noted in her pioneering work, *All Work, No Pay*, Oppenheimer argues that the charitable work conducted during the war, particularly by the Red Cross, was significant to the nation's war effort, despite its place in the historiography lacking.<sup>13</sup> Unenlisted aids also staffed the 27 Red Cross convalescent homes across Australia, working as orderlies like those employed in military hospitals, and providing care to the approximately 1370 patients being homed at any one time.<sup>14</sup>

The capacity of civilian VADs to undertake local activities and work with the Red Cross was reduced as more VAs commenced full-time duty in military hospitals. The Red Cross accepted, if not feared, the 'possibility of the whole of the VAD personnel being called up by the military'.<sup>15</sup> Realising that securing new recruits for the VADs would only add to this risk, in March 1942 the Red Cross set out the establishment of its own division of labour volunteers titled, 'Red Cross Aids'. The Red Cross stated, 'these Red Cross Aids [are] quite a distinct body from the VADs'.<sup>16</sup> However, the role of the Red Cross aid was to undertake the work of their organisation which had

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<sup>12</sup> Oppenheimer, *Red Cross VAs*, 93.

<sup>13</sup> Oppenheimer, *All Work, No Pay*.

<sup>14</sup> Figures taken from the ARCS 30th Annual Report, 1943-44, 60-61, University of Melbourne Archives, Australian Red Cross Society, National Office Collection, 2015.27.6.

<sup>15</sup> University of Melbourne Archives, Australian Red Cross Society, National Office Collection, 2016.55.25, *The NSW Red Cross Record* XXVIII, no.3 (March 1942), 12.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

previously been done by VADs, such as ‘helping in civil hospitals, assisting evacuees, cooking and catering’.<sup>17</sup>

To clarify the position of Red Cross aids and VADs, a conference between the Principal Commandant of the Red Cross, Alice Creswick, and the newly appointed DGMS, Major-General Roy Burston was held in April 1942.<sup>18</sup> Determined by Creswick and Burston, the division between the two services was that VADs would continue to be employed in military establishments, including hospital transports, while Red Cross aids would meet halting troop transports to provide comforts and refreshments and would also staff Red Cross convalescent homes. The two types of aids would continue to work closely in their activities to the point that part-time VAs could be seconded to the Red Cross. For example, 1000 VAs from New South Wales were on loan to the Red Cross in April 1942 for civil defence work, such as staffing first aid posts. Their period of secondment was undefined. However, the DGMS stated that he could not promise that they would not be recalled back to military work at any moment.<sup>19</sup> Little separated the work of the local VAD and the Red Cross aids, but establishing their own service meant that the Red Cross held complete administrative control of a much-needed labour force without interference.

### *The Role of the Civilian Organiser: VAD Recruitment*

Despite the organisational tensions that saw the Red Cross establish its own cohort of aids, the Red Cross remained invested in the VAD movement. Continuing to operate per its pre-war regulations, the civilian VAD maintained its establishment and training of detachments as a technical reserve to the military well into 1942. In the initial years of the war the VAD offered a supply of recruits to be called upon to serve alongside the military medical services. As the war

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> University of Melbourne Archives, Australian Red Cross Society, National Office Collection, 2015.28.11, ARCS Central Executive Meeting Minutes, 21 April 1942.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

progressed and the Army enrolled more VAs for full-time duty, the civilian VAD was required to increase its number of new members. By the dedicated leadership of local detachment commandants and the investment made by the Red Cross and Order of St John, the ongoing efficiency of VADs was upheld. Significantly, under this arrangement the civilian VAD movement burdened the responsibility of recruiting and training members, thus alleviating the military of this time-consuming process.

Much of the recruitment for new VAs was done locally, relying upon word-of-mouth and the regular notices of VAD meetings listed in local papers. Other detachments, such as the one in Muswellbrook in the upper Hunter region of NSW, posted advertisements for new recruits. Appearing in *The Muswellbrook Chronicle*, the local detachment called for new recruits to, 'Make this your war effort'.<sup>20</sup> Similarly, an advertisement in *The Border Morning Mail* called on the 'women of Albury and district!' to phone the Albury VAD Commandant at her home for further information.<sup>21</sup> The advertisement appealed to women to take an active part in the war effort, stating, 'Delay helps the enemy – act now. Join the VADs'.<sup>22</sup> However, the advertisement also stated that because of the 'urgent need for VAs for enlistment', those willing to undertake instruction upon joining the VADs could join the detachment without the previously required certificates.<sup>23</sup> This plea by the Albury VAD signals the change that occurred towards the end of 1942 whereby VADs were no longer required to have completed training in home nursing and first aid prior to joining. The increasing reliance on the labour of VAs, coinciding with Australia's attention turning to the defence of the Pacific, saw the Army relax the proficiency standards previously upheld by the civilian VAD movement. Such standards had been a source of pride for the organisation and its members. However, the availability of resources rather than proficiency, was more pressing for the Army in 1942. Recruitment, though, was ambiguous as women wishing

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<sup>20</sup> *Muswellbrook Chronicle*, 20 November 1942, 2.

<sup>21</sup> *The Border Morning Mail* (Albury), 5 December 1942, 3.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

to join the Army's VAD were still required to submit their application through the civilian organisation, even if they had not previously been a member of a local VA detachment.

The efforts of the VAD movement in recruiting and training a reserve of women had once been a relief for the military. But as VAs demonstrated their capabilities, the Army became eager to engage more women in the services. In September 1942, the Minister for the Army, Frank Forde announced the need for 6000 more VAs to occupy numerous roles.<sup>24</sup> The aim, as announced by Forde, was for VAs to replace men in military establishments releasing them for more active service. VAs were then to be employed in military hospitals to the fullest extent, and so the roles of VAs in the military was broadened. Beyond the duties of nursing and ward orderlies, VAs were increasingly tasked with clerical, kitchen and laundry work at military hospitals, as well as taking on positions such as dispensers, radiographers, and telephonists. Consequently, the requirement for VAs to hold certificates in first aid and home nursing was no longer as applicable as it once was. The transfer of organisational matters relating to enlisted VAs to the military that had occurred in September 1942 enabled this shift in duties to occur. However, responsibility for recruiting women for enlistment in the VAD was still the purview of the civilian movement.

Responsibilities of the respective institutions, particularly around recruitment, were ambiguous as the influence and control over the organisation of VADs was tested. The tension that this created between the leadership of the civilian VAD and the government culminated in November 1942 when the Department of the Army launched a direct recruitment campaign for VAs. Appearing in regional and metropolitan newspapers across Australia, a large advertisement read, 'Important announcement to the women of Australia. Girls and women are required now for full-time duty as VAs with the Australian Army Medical units'.<sup>25</sup> The advertisement placed the VADs alongside the AWAS, branding them as, 'the sister services in khaki', and featured the rising

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<sup>24</sup> *The Age* (Melbourne), 11 September 1942, 3; *The Weekly Times* (Melbourne), 23 September 1942, 20.

<sup>25</sup> *The Argus* (Melbourne), 20 November 1942, 6.

sun badge of the Australian Army.<sup>26</sup> Further illustrating that the VADs were now incorporated into the military, the appeal detailed that women who enlisted for service with the VADs would receive Army rank, pay, and uniform. The advertisement also instructed interested women to enlist directly through the military offices, and not via the civilian VAD office.

Direct recruitment of women into the enlisted VAD cohort by the military indicated a significant break by the Department of the Army away from the established partnership with the civilian movement. Upon seeing the recruitment advertisement in the papers without prior communication from the Department of the Army, the civilian VAD leadership questioned their position. Chief Controller of the civilian VAD, Stanley Addison, wrote to the Secretary of the Department of the Army, Frank Sinclair, seeking that the Department continue to uphold the agreement of their partnership.<sup>27</sup> As identified by Addison, the roles and responsibilities of the two organisations had been defined and approved by the Military Board and, therefore, VAD recruitment was the duty of his organisation. As such, the feeling of the civilian VAD was that the Department of the Army had 'ignored' their position in this instance.<sup>28</sup> Addison's letter to Sinclair illustrated that the responsibility of recruiting VADs for the Army was held as a defining characteristic and important wartime duty for his organisation. Without the continued appreciation of the Department, Addison determined that work of the civilian VAD would be 'rendered ineffective and useless'.<sup>29</sup>

The position of the Department of the Army regarding the bypassing of traditional methods for obtaining VAD recruits was unapologetic. In reply to the concerns raised by Addison, the Department Secretary, Frank Sinclair stated that the need for VAs in the Army was urgent and

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> NAA: MP508/1, 21/728/625, Letter from VAD Joint Central Council Secretary to the Department of the Army Secretary, 24 November 1942.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

the number required was unable to be produced through the existing voluntary organisation.<sup>30</sup> Sinclair explained that the number of women willing to undertake full-time duty had been ‘for some considerable time...far below requirements’.<sup>31</sup> Sinclair advised that the Department, therefore, deemed it necessary to adopt new methods of recruitment for VADs. Consequently, Sinclair stated that he had obtained funds for the purpose of a campaign, the cost of which he concluded would not be fair to burden on the voluntary organisation. However, internal discussion by the Army had already determined the need for further organisational changes for the VADs. On 9 December 1942, just several weeks after launching their recruitment campaign, Minister Forde announced that full-time VADs enlisted in the Army would become part of a new service to be known as the AAMWS. Official notice was only then provided to the VAD organisers the following day by the Department Secretary, Sinclair, who stated, ‘the designation VAD will now apply only to the Voluntary organisation who are not engaged on full time duty with the [military] Medical Services’.<sup>32</sup>

The establishment of a new service perplexed the civilian leaders of the VAD movement who questioned their purpose now that the Army had created the AAMWS. To address the situation and consider the future of the organisation, a conference of VAD leaders was convened in Melbourne on 26 February 1943. Here, reassurance was given and a plan to move ahead was adopted. This encouragement was led by the Army’s DGMS, Major-General Burston, who was also the Chair of the civilian VAD’s executive committee. Burston addressed the conference and stated that the formation of the women’s auxiliaries to the forces in no way affected the civilian VAD movement whose function, he said, remained ‘untouched and unimpaired’.<sup>33</sup> Acknowledging that there were no administrative links between the VADs and the Army, Burston stated there was

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<sup>30</sup> NAA: MP508/1, 21/728/625, Letter from the Department of the Army Secretary to VAD Joint Central Council Secretary, 5 December 1942.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, 10 December 1942.

<sup>33</sup> ‘A Message From General Burston’, *VAD News Sheet*, no.1 (15 May 1943), 1.

also nothing more than a ‘moral obligation for VADs to enlist’ in the AAMWS, but that they would be given preference if they chose to do so.<sup>34</sup> Having been reassured of the purpose of VADs by DGMS Burston, the conference set to reaffirm the ongoing role of the movement to raise and train members. For the civilian movement, this meant they could uphold their principles of supporting the military by training efficient personnel to be called upon as required, which would now include enlistment in the AAMWS. But once the relationship between the voluntary movement and the military auxiliary shifted, the organisational identity of the women in the Army service was challenged.

## **Becoming the AAMWS**

### *From Blue to Khaki*

By December 1942, the only tie for VAs working in military medical units to their original voluntary organisation was their name and uniform. Administratively, their organisation had largely transformed into a military service. But occupied with their day-to-day work in hospitals and not their administration, their name and uniform represented their professional identity. In December 1942, both were stripped away. Addressing new recruits to the service, DGMS Burston said, the needs of ‘total war’ necessitated the establishment of the AAMWS, a change which would bring uniformity to the women’s services.<sup>35</sup> Noted in the official history, the change of designation for Army VAs was to clarify their position in the military and to ‘make for easier distinction’ with members of the voluntary movement.<sup>36</sup> Alongside the change in name, the familiar blue VAD dress ceased to be issued and the service transitioned to the khaki uniform of the Army as worn by the AWAS.

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> *The Age* (Melbourne), 17 December 1942, 3.

<sup>36</sup> Walker, *Medical Services*, 480.



As discussed by Carmel Shute, the Australian Government had been concerned earlier in the war by the adoption of quasi-military uniforms by women's organisations and had accepted the VAD blue dress as it was 'of a more modest 'feminine' variety'.<sup>37</sup> Yet, military uniforms reflecting their male counterparts was introduced with the establishment of the official women's auxiliary services, which influenced the change for the VAD. The formal decision to adopt the khaki uniform was primarily based on being 'economical'.<sup>38</sup> Blue dyes were increasingly difficult to procure, and production efficiency was increased by having fewer different service uniforms to manufacture, with the only difference from the AWAS uniform being a red cross armband on the right sleeve for AAMWS.<sup>39</sup>

On 16 December 1942, 114 women marched out of the Army training camp at Darley, Victoria, having completed an initial three-week military training course set by the Army. These women were passing out as the newest members of the AAMWS. Yet when they enlisted, they had joined the VAD. These recruits would never wear the VAD badge or distinctive blue uniform, instead directly donning khaki. Reporting on the passing-out parade, *The Argus* claimed, 'Most of them are enthusiastic about their new title'.<sup>40</sup> Excitement about their new role in the Army, which was perhaps shaped by propaganda and censorship, was in part inspired by DGMS Burston who took the salute at the parade. Burston addressed the servicewomen at the parade and spoke to the identity and culture of the new service the women were entering. He proclaimed that with becoming the AAMWS they were amalgamating the traditions of two organisations: that of the VADs 'known all over the empire' as well as that of the AAMC.<sup>41</sup> However, many of the VAs already serving with the Medical Corps were slower to adopt the reported enthusiasm for their new organisation.

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<sup>37</sup> Carmel Shute, 'From Balaclavas to Bayonets: Women's Voluntary War Work, 1939-41,' in *Women, Class and History: Feminist Perspectives on Australia, 1788-1978*, ed. Elizabeth Windschuttle (Melbourne: Fontana/Collins, 1980), 373.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> *The Courier-Mail* (Brisbane), 11 December 1942, 5.

<sup>40</sup> *The Argus* (Melbourne), 17 December 1942, 6.

<sup>41</sup> *The Age* (Melbourne), 17 December 1942, 3.

Although the red cross, the symbol of humanitarianism and care that defined the organisation, remained a distinguishing factor for the service when the blue uniform was lost to khaki, many original VAs were sorry to lose the blue – the uniform and colour that had become part of these women’s identity. As Patsy Adam-Smith stated, ‘It was all very well for the official unit history to gloss over the transfer, but the feelings among the rank and file were bitter’.<sup>42</sup> When the blue service uniform of the VAD was introduced in 1940, it was embraced with pride as it was seen to clearly define the identity of the organisation’s members. ‘The pretty Queen’s-blue silk-linen mess dress...has a red cross on the breast pocket, standing out brightly against the blue background’, reported *The Sun* on the introduction of the new attire.<sup>43</sup> As discussed by art historian Catherine Speck, women’s dress in the Second World War symbolised their participation in public, defence-oriented events, or private life.<sup>44</sup> For many members of the VAD, their uniform held greater personal sentiment than those who had enlisted directly into the Army and been issued with a khaki uniform, which had been manufactured en masse. Being an ancillary service attached to the military, when VAs were called up to work in a military establishment they were given an allowance of £20 by the Army to purchase their own service uniform. It therefore became a ritual for VAs embarking on full-time duty to spend a day at one of the city department stores, such as Farmer’s or David Jones, to purchase their own blue VAD regulation outfit. The women would be measured up and kitted out with a Queen’s-blue dress ‘tailored meticulously’, a navy overcoat, and regulation shoes and accessories.<sup>45</sup> As Jill Linton, an original VA observed, ‘It was a nicer uniform...they were made for us, [and] weren’t just handed to you across the counter’.<sup>46</sup> Recalled by Enid Dalton Herring, the feeling of VAs towards the blue was that it defined ‘our particular image as nursing aids rather than ‘soldiers’’.<sup>47</sup> Reflecting positively on the situation, Herring did

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<sup>42</sup> Adam-Smith, *Women at War*, 194.

<sup>43</sup> *The Sun* (Sydney), 28 September 1941, 11.

<sup>44</sup> Catherine Speck, ‘Power Dressing: Women in the Military,’ *Australian Journal of Art* 14, no.2 (1999), 153.

<sup>45</sup> *The Australian Women’s Weekly*, 22 June 1940, 23.

<sup>46</sup> Transcript of interview with (NFX131141/NX131141) Linton (née Oliver), Jill Edith (Private), 20 March 1989, The Keith Murdoch Sound Archive of Australia in the War of 1939-45, AWM: S00553.

<sup>47</sup> Herring, *They Wanted to be Nightingales*, 87.

also state that, 'There was every reason to feel as proud of our khakis as we had been of our blues'.<sup>48</sup>

Disdain was not only felt for the khaki uniform by the VAs who were now AAMWS because of the tradition and identity they attributed to the blue. In simple terms, it was felt that the khaki uniform as worn by the AWAS was unattractive and staid. The blue uniform of the VAD provided a particular construction of femininity which the women enjoyed. As historians Jane Tynan and Lisa Godson suggest of the nurse's uniform, the blue VAD dress created an expression of a service's identity that portrayed their occupational dignity and credibility.<sup>49</sup> Having previously worn the blue uniform designed by the VAD movement, Lila McKenzie, now an AAMWS, described khaki as 'an uninteresting colour', while Gladys Crawford wrote, 'I will look frightfully drab and colourless'.<sup>50</sup> Jill Linton also recalled being issued with 'this ghastly khaki uniform', explaining the loose process whereby the person supplying the uniform would 'quickly run a tape measure over and say, "yes right, you're size so-and-so", and whether you were or not it didn't seem to matter'.<sup>51</sup> As discussed by Tynan and Godson in their study of uniform, the military has used uniform to outwardly construct masculinities and consequently have faced difficulty with uniforming women.<sup>52</sup> Here, this is exemplified both in the design and the practical issue of dispensing uniform. Being a 'far call' from the tailored uniforms worn by members of the VAD, some of the women resented the loss of their attractive nursing aid appearance. Gladys Crawford soon lamented, 'I have drawn my issue of khaki uniform...I am afraid I don't look very smart in mine'.<sup>53</sup> Yet, she did accept that the khaki uniform was 'more serviceable than the blue' and the practicality and economy of the change proved logical.<sup>54</sup> As argued by Catherine Speck, the

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Jane Tynan and Lisa Godson, eds., *Uniform: Clothing and Discipline in the Modern World* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019), 9.

<sup>50</sup> Transcript of AWM interview with Lila Stocks; AWM: PR03002, Letter from Gladys Crawford to her mother, 6 October 1943.

<sup>51</sup> Transcript of AWM interview with Jill Linton.

<sup>52</sup> Tynan and Godson, *Uniform*, 9.

<sup>53</sup> AWM: PR03002, Letter from Gladys Crawford to her mother, 6 October 1943.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

masculine derivation of women's khaki instilled in servicewomen a sense that it was 'a dress code of significance which they themselves had sought' and reinforced their place in the military.<sup>55</sup>

The shift from blue to khaki, however, was not immediate. Mindful of economy and the need for rationing, the Army approved the gradual transition to khaki uniform for existing VAs. Members of the service who joined after October 1942 were required to wear the khaki uniform immediately, but VAs who were already serving with the military were permitted to continue wearing their blue VAD uniform until it was unserviceable.<sup>56</sup> However, claspings this direction, Patsy Adam-Smith recalled that, 'many a girl wore her blue ward uniform till it was worn thin rather than don khaki'.<sup>57</sup> Demonstrating that this was a coordinated recalcitrance, Kitty Burke wrote to fellow VA now AAMWS, Gladys Crawford on 16 September 1942 upon hearing the news:

Have you heard that we are going into khaki as our clothes are replaced...I took care of mine so it will [be] quite a while before I change over.<sup>58</sup>

While Adam-Smith acknowledged that in retrospect the khaki uniform was functionally more appropriate, the desire to maintain their identity as an original VA through the visual appearance of their dress was strong. Consequently, two years after the transition to khaki had commenced, there were still many cases of servicewomen wearing the blue VAD dress. Questioning how workwear could still be serviceable after two years, DGMS Burston wrote to the Adjutant-General, 'It is considered that certain problems of dress peculiar to the AAMWS require clarification'.<sup>59</sup> Burston requested that the Adjutant-General amend the routine order to inhibit the original members of the service from wearing their previous blue VAD uniform in order to, as much as possible, create uniformity within the service after two years.

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<sup>55</sup> Speck, 'Power Dressing,' 153.

<sup>56</sup> NAA: AWM54, 88A/1/1, issued in GRO 499/42, 23 October 1942.

<sup>57</sup> Adam-Smith, *Women at War*, 195.

<sup>58</sup> AWM: PR03002, Letter from Kitty Burke to Gladys Crawford, 16 September 1942.

<sup>59</sup> NAA: MP742/1, 87/1/102, Correspondence from DGMS to Adjutant-General, November 1944.

### *Learning to Salute, Drill, and Adapt to Army Discipline*

Women had proudly served in military hospitals as VAs from the beginning of the war, but from December 1942 they were soldiers. Although VADs had been raised as a technical reserve to the military, the establishment of the AAMWS officially incorporated them into the Army and brought them under military regulation and procedure. The transition into a formal Army auxiliary service also meant that women were enlisted in the Army as AAMWS and were no longer simply ‘attached’ to military units. As such, members of the AAMWS were formally given Army rank, the majority as privates. Although the VAs who had been sent overseas were considered equivalent to privates, or ‘other ranks’ (ORs), as women they had been afforded certain privileges reserved for officers, which were also enjoyed by members of the AANS. However, on their return to Australia as members of the expanding AAMWS, stricter Army discipline was enforced and the distinction between ranks was increasingly imposed. It was hard for the VAs who were now privates in the AAMWS to adjust. Re-joining the unit she had served with in the Middle East, now stationed in north Queensland, Private Rita Hind remarked that the AAMWS who were now ORs were welcomed back to the unit by the Commanding Officer, the medical officers, and AANS nurses, stating:

They all seem more upset than any of us are, that we are to be treated as ORs, and are doing all they can to make us as comfortable as possible.<sup>60</sup>

Another change brought by becoming the AAMWS was an expectation that VAs, despite knowing how to parade and route march, learn how to salute and drill to the disciplined standard of the Army. Original members of the service were sent to a military training camp alongside new recruits to undertake a ‘rookies’ course. There was no exception given to VAs who had served in the Middle East and felt that they had truly experienced military life and discipline. After returning to Australia, all VAs from the Middle East who had transferred to the AAMWS were sent to a

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<sup>60</sup> AWM: PR03574, Letter from Rita Hind to Gwenda Caldecott, 25 May 1943.

rookies camp in 1943 ‘to make sure we knew how to drill and clean grease traps, which seemed a bit – well, in my opinion – a waste of time’, stated Alice Burns.<sup>61</sup> The requirement for those who had been VAs in the Middle East to be taught ‘how to belong in the Army’ was a source of confusion and tension.<sup>62</sup> As expressed in a poem penned by a Middle East VA, the educational opportunity was not welcomingly embraced:

We left old Gaza Ridge, to see our Harbour Bridge,  
And as we stepped ashore, it wasn’t as we knew before;  
To a Rookie’s school they sent us  
To be drilled by khaki stripes,  
They changed our name from the VAD, to AAMWS, Oh, by cripes!<sup>63</sup>

Having laboured to establish honour and identity for the VAD, the 200 VAs who served overseas with the military returned from the Middle East to find that members of the AWAS, which had only existed since August 1941, were to teach them how to be ‘soldiers’. As noted by Patsy Adam-Smith, when it came to accepting the AWAS instruction and transformation to soldiers, the VA veterans of the Middle East, as well as those who had served in Australia, were a ‘recalcitrant bunch’.<sup>64</sup>

These personal reflections by members of the service are contrasted by press reports of the first rookies camp held in Victoria during November 1942. *The Argus* reported that the course was being undertaken by ‘girls who have been in the VADs for some time doing hospital work’ as well as new recruits, going on to say that they were ‘all tremendously enthusiastic about their training’.<sup>65</sup> The article also stated that the ‘recruits’, which included those who had been serving for some time as VAs, were ‘fully aware of the responsibility that [had] been placed upon their shoulders’, despite many of them already having military hospital experience.<sup>66</sup> The overt positivity

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<sup>61</sup> Transcript of AWM interview with Alice Penman.

<sup>62</sup> Adam-Smith, *Women at War*, 194.

<sup>63</sup> AWM: PR86/049, Unknown author, ‘The Tattooed Lady’, 23 November 1943.

<sup>64</sup> Adam-Smith, *Women at War*, 194.

<sup>65</sup> *The Argus* (Melbourne), 2 November 1942, 6.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

of these reports was surely a product of the state's intervention of the press. Under the National Security Regulations, the government controlled news coverage and censored reports, both to ensure the omission of criticism and to influence the publication of that which stimulated morale.<sup>67</sup>

The AAMWS rookies training was widespread with camps established across the eastern states in Darley (Victoria), Ingleburn (NSW), and Yeronga (Queensland). The programme consisted of a three-week course that covered military discipline, drill, and procedure of the Medical Corps. The syllabus also included lectures on Army abbreviations, medical words, and 'personal hygiene & appearance – uniform and how to wear it'.<sup>68</sup> The first rookies course for AAMWS held in Yeronga as a trial began in November 1942 with just 27 students. By the third course, commencing on 1 February 1943, the intake of AAMWS at Yeronga had grown to 105 so-called 'rookies'.<sup>69</sup> Their training included a series of lectures by Sister Patricia Chomley, who had returned from serving with the AANS in the Middle East. Sister Chomley's lectures included hospital cleanliness, preparation of hospital trays, and the preparation, feeding and care of patients' food.<sup>70</sup> The rookies course aimed to provide a common foundation for members of the AAMWS. However, it is questionable how beneficial the course was to those who already had experience working in military hospitals as a VA, or to the establishment of an esprit de corps among the original VAs and the new AAMWS recruits.

## **Recruiting the AAMWS**

### *VAs Nucleus of the AAMWS*

Although many VAs were hesitant about their new name, the majority of those already undertaking full-time duty in military establishments transferred to the new service. Transferring in the first

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<sup>67</sup> Josie Vine, *Larrikins, Rebels and Journalistic Freedom in Australia* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 76.

<sup>68</sup> NAA: AWM52, 35/12/2, Unit diary, 1 Voluntary Aid Detachment Training Company, November 1942-March 1943.

<sup>69</sup> NAA: AWM52, 35/1/4/2, Unit diary, 8 Army Women's Service Training Company, 1943.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*

month of the service's existence, 2847 VAs immediately enlisted in the AAMWS to continue to carry out their role with the Army.<sup>71</sup> As described by the Hobart *Mercury*, 'these women and girls will provide the trained nucleus for this new service'.<sup>72</sup> Additionally, civilian VADs maintained their position as an ideal source for military recruitment into the AAMWS and expanded this nucleus. Although the relationship between the Army and the civilian VAD was tested, as discussed above, the Army continued to target the cohort of civilian VAs for enlistment in the AAMWS. Pleading for more recruits, the Minister for the Army, Frank Forde said that the existing voluntary organisation 'will be the first source' for new AAMWS recruits and that its members would be given 'first preference' above other women seeking to join.<sup>73</sup> The prior training provided by the Red Cross and Order of St John in first aid and home nursing, as well as a proven efficiency and quality of character continued to make VAs desirable for service in the Army. Although the service had evolved and its responsibilities changed when it became the AAMWS, and the former partnership with the volunteer movement had shifted, the Army still respected and relied upon the organisation of civilian VADs.

Maintaining at least some of the military's confidence, the civilian VAD organisation continued in turn to support the Army. That is, despite the change in designation for enlisted VADs and the official responsibility of recruitment being lost by them. Nevertheless, the civilian VAD state organiser in NSW rallied to the call of Minister Forde in December 1942 for 4000 new recruits for the AAMWS. Dorothy Wilby had only recently been appointed to the leadership role in the NSW VAD and yet began a rigorous recruitment drive for the AAMWS. By personally touring the state and speaking to women volunteering as VAs with local detachments, Wilby encouraged those eligible to join the AAMWS. Beginning on 5 January 1943, and lasting the entire year, Wilby travelled more than 35,000 kilometres across NSW visiting approximately

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<sup>71</sup> 'Summary of VAD Enrolments, Enlistments and Transfers to Retired List, 31/12/42', *VAD News Sheet*, no.1 (15 May 1943), 3.

<sup>72</sup> *The Mercury* (Hobart), 3 March 1943, 4.

<sup>73</sup> *The Telegraph* (Brisbane), 9 December 1942, 2; *The West Australian* (Perth), 7 January 1943, 4.



150 detachments. In the first week of her campaign, Wilby visited Camden, Campbelltown, Bowral, Wollongong, Port Kembla, and Corrimal and expressed that she had been, 'inundated with inquiries'.<sup>74</sup> Interviewed by *The Sun*, who keenly followed her tour throughout the year, Wilby claimed that she had been able to secure 'many enlistments' in her first week. 'I found keenest enthusiasm when I explained the work being done by the AAMWS', Wilby explained, as many of the women she spoke to previously knew little of the service.<sup>75</sup> Some of the most interested women, Wilby suggested, had wanted to be nurses but had not pursued the career and so they felt that by enlisting as AAMWS that 'they will have achieved something of their heart's desire'.<sup>76</sup> Yet, Wilby also explained that she found 'the greatest interest in small towns where there [were] no factories or munitions works'.<sup>77</sup> This indicates that for many women in country areas, becoming a nurse was not necessarily a motivating factor, but that women in regional areas were underutilised and looking to contribute to the war effort in any way they could.

Dorothy Wilby's enthusiastic approach to the task saw her adopt the slogan for her tour, 'Stop me', calling for anyone to, 'stop me anywhere, any time!' so that she may answer any question from potential recruits.<sup>78</sup> While welcoming inquiries at any time, Wilby also made scheduled addresses throughout her state tour. Meeting foremost with women of local VA detachments, Wilby provided civilian VAs with information regarding life as an AAMWS and encouraged their enlistment. Additionally, Wilby spoke to women who were not trained as VAs, addressing public meetings and 'many other women's organisations in the towns where I stayed'.<sup>79</sup> And if the town also had a radio station, then Wilby would broadcast an appeal for recruits too. Handing out enlistment forms to any woman who might be slightly intrigued, Wilby described her tactic:

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<sup>74</sup> *The Sun* (Sydney), 10 January 1943, 8.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>76</sup> Dorothy Wilby, 'Recruiting in New South Wales,' *VAD News Sheet*, no.2 (14 August 1943), 1.

<sup>77</sup> *The Sun* (Sydney), 19 September 1943, 8.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>79</sup> Wilby, 'Recruiting'.

I find it wise to distribute as many forms as possible, as some cannot enlist immediately, but, having digested the information I am able to give, an enlistment eventually comes to hand.<sup>80</sup>

Dorothy Wilby reportedly gained more than 500 recruits for the AAMWS in the first six months of her tour of NSW.<sup>81</sup> Between October and November, Wilby directed her travels north to the Queensland border, visiting towns such as Murwillumbah, Moree, and Tenterfield, continuing to target country women.

The rural newspaper, *The Weekly Times*, published an article in September 1942, detailing the process for ‘country girls’ to enlist for full-time military duty.<sup>82</sup> Owing to the added challenge of distance from military establishments not experienced by their city counterparts, country women first made an appointment with their area medical officer for preliminary examination. It was then that potential recruits, ‘excited and living in high hopes’ would be issued with their first railway warrant to get them into ‘town’ for a medical board assessment.<sup>83</sup> While ‘in town’ for her medical, the potential recruit would be required to billet overnight so that she could present for a dental board and an x-ray, where she would ‘wrap [her] arms round a sinister looking though quite harmless machine, the magic eye of which discerns the inner workings of the lungs’.<sup>84</sup> Once complete, the potential recruit would make the return rail journey home from the city. The experience being described by *The Weekly Times* as ‘an endurance test’, but determining that, ‘if the young recruit can’t stand up to it, she won’t stand up to army life’.<sup>85</sup> Contrastingly, women in the city had less of an ‘endurance test’. Located outside Brisbane’s General Post Office, ‘for the convenience of girls thinking of joining’, an AAMWS enquiry bureau was established to provide potential recruits with the necessary information. Private Thea Bryant (nee Proctor) who enlisted

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> *The Sun* (Sydney), 2 July 1943, 5.

<sup>82</sup> *The Weekly Times* (Melbourne), 23 September 1942, 20.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

in the AAMWS after completing her civilian VA training staffed the bureau between 9am and 5pm, Mondays to Saturdays. With her VA training and 14-months experience of full-time duty, Bryant was well-equipped to answer any questions for potential recruits. Nevertheless, the multifaceted approach to entice more enlistments in the AAMWS was effective and saw the service grow far beyond its initial VA nucleus.

### *The New Recruits*

Enlistments in the VADs and the AAMWS, naturally, followed the events of the war. In 1940, once the so-called 'Phoney War' that was the apparent lull in hostilities in Europe following the invasion of Poland was broken, the war again captured the attention of the Australian public. 'The moment the war situation was intensified', explained Gertrude Jude in June 1940, 'my telephone began to ring'.<sup>86</sup> Jude was Assistant State Controller of the civilian VAD in South Australia during the Second World War and had the task of rallying women to help in the war effort. But despite the increased interest in the VAD movement by women, many were turned away in the earlier years of the war. To enlist as a VA, women were required to complete the necessary Red Cross or St John's lectures to obtain their certificates in first aid and home nursing. 'Our organisation must be 100 per cent efficient', Jude stated in 1940.<sup>87</sup> The proper training of its members and their ongoing efficiency was fundamental to the VAD movement in their objective to be valuable assistants to the military medical service. However, when the war truly intensified for Australia in 1942 and the Army implemented the administrative changes that led to the formation of the AAMWS, the prerequisite of holding home nursing and first aid certificates to enter the service was challenged and subsequently lost.

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<sup>86</sup> *The Australian Women's Weekly*, 29 June 1940, 19.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*

At the first conference of AAMWS officers held in Melbourne on 30 December 1942, the main topic of discussion was the recruitment of new members. The conference reiterated that owing to their training and qualifications, members of civilian VADs were ideal candidates and should be given preference for enlistment. However, as the number of new recruits being sought was set to double the size of the service and expand beyond roles in hospital wards, prior training and hospital experience for members was no longer required. Controller of the AAMWS, Lt-Col Kathleen Best stated in January 1943, that 5000 new members were needed 'in about 30 different capacities, each one...essential to the efficiency of the hospitals they help to staff'.<sup>88</sup> Women who were aged between 18 and 45 and physically fit, 'even though untrained in VA work', were called upon by Minister Forde to join the AAMWS, stating that the Army will 'give her the necessary training'.<sup>89</sup>

In place of the prerequisite qualifications in first aid and home nursing that civilian VAs carried along with previous hospital experience, the training offered by the Army for new recruits was the so-called 'rookies' course. As discussed above, the course was undertaken by VAs already serving with the military upon their transfer to the AAMWS and had irked those returning from the Middle East. Yet, its primary function was to provide an initial basic training for new recruits who had no experience of hospital work. Under the instruction of a medical officer and tutor sister, the 'rookies' underwent elementary training over a period of three weeks as a foundation to their service alongside the original VAs. Described by 'raw recruit' Sheila Sibley, lectures were given on Army discipline and how to wear a uniform, as well as on 'what an Army medical woman does and does not do'.<sup>90</sup> The training also covered hospital routine and ward work of the AAMWS, with Sibley stating, 'as each subject is dealt with, we begin to form a picture of the life ahead of us', having no previous experience or conception of the work.<sup>91</sup> Before her first posting to a

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<sup>88</sup> *The Age* (Melbourne), 22 January 1943, 3.

<sup>89</sup> *The West Australian* (Perth), 7 January 1943, 4.

<sup>90</sup> *The Argus* (Melbourne), 20 February 1943, 2.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*

military hospital, Sibley admitted that she had imagined herself as the dutiful nurse. But despite completing the rookies school, Sibley found that she had ‘but the haziest idea’ because in the AAMWS:

The floating down the wards is done by the girls who have studied and got themselves home nursing certificates, and who know their first aid from a surface cut to a fractured collarbone. And it’s no floating, but a systematic, efficient inventory of the needs of each bed.<sup>92</sup>

Sibley had identified that the AANS trained nurses and those AAMWS who were previously experienced VAs that she would work with in the Army were excellent role models for her. Describing her tutor sisters at the rookies school, Sibley proclaimed that it would be an honour to work with them, ‘for there is a quality of saintliness about them that comes only from a glorious blending of compassion and courage’.<sup>93</sup> However, in other situations a formal hierarchy between new and experienced members of the AAMWS had to be enforced owing to their relevant experience, including that beyond the ward. Having trained as a VA, Kitty Burke had enlisted for full-time duty but had been nervous about applying for a senior role, and so determined that she would only put herself forward for a junior cook position. ‘Well, I had not of worried’, wrote Burke upon being promoted to senior cook and put in charge of her section at the rank of corporal after just three weeks.<sup>94</sup> ‘The other girls had hardly boiled water’, Burke explained to her friend and fellow AAMWS, Gladys Crawford, ‘but [they] have come on very well’.<sup>95</sup> To achieve efficiency, the inexperienced AAMWS needed an authoritative leader in Kitty Burke to give orders. Being with a unit who had served together in the Middle East, Gladys Crawford wrote to her mother of the contrast between her and Burke’s experiences:

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<sup>92</sup> *The Argus* (Melbourne), 20 March 1943, 3.

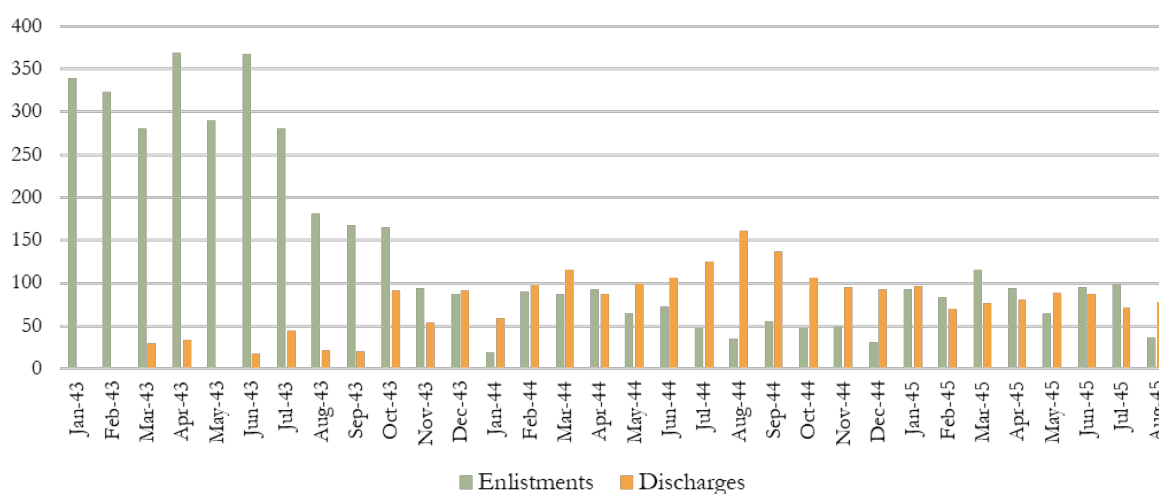
<sup>93</sup> *The Argus* (Melbourne), 20 February 1943, 2.

<sup>94</sup> AWM: PR03002, Letter from Kitty Burke to Gladys Crawford, 16 September 1942.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*

We have always been used to one girl being about as reliable as another, whereas I think with the units that have had lots of new recruits recently, there is not perhaps the same standard, and someone had to be definitely ‘boss’.<sup>96</sup>

In December 1942, 2847 VAs serving with the Army transferred to the new service while recruitment drives, such as those conducted by Dorothy Wilby, continued to draw upon civilian VAs for full-time enlistment. However, after the prerequisites for enlistment were dropped, the membership of the AAMWS grew rapidly as illustrated in Figure 6. In the first six months of 1943, almost 2000 new recruits enlisted in the AAMWS as privates. Enlistments remained high until the end of 1943 before falling below 100 per month. Between November 1943 and August 1945, on average 70 women joined the AAMWS each month with the total membership or strength of the service remaining around 5000 throughout the war.



**Figure 6:** Enlistments and Discharges of AAMWS Other Ranks, January 1943 - August 1945.<sup>97</sup>

The extensive recruitment drive for the AAMWS in 1943 was spurred by the decision to expand the replacement of male personnel in military medical establishments by women. Reported in the press, the work of the VAs in the military had set a standard for the AAMWS and ‘proved

<sup>96</sup> Ibid, Letter from Gladys Crawford to her mother, 23 April 1944.

<sup>97</sup> Data source: NAA: AWM54, 88A/1/1.

conclusively that women can, with courage, intelligence and endurance, take over much of the work done by men'.<sup>98</sup> Acknowledging that women had shown that their labour efforts were equal to their male counterparts, Minister Forde announced that the ratio for replacement was one man by one woman.<sup>99</sup> The policy for replacing male personnel by women adopted by the Army also included that, 'women who replace men in duties which carry warrant or non-commissioned ranks will be promoted to these ranks', further emphasising the recognition gained for female labour in military hospitals.<sup>100</sup> To the military medical services, the value of women's labour had been noted as early as 1940 when Major-General Rupert Downes called for VAs to join the AIF in the Middle East. Yet, it was only as resourcing pressures intensified in 1943 that the government conceded their previously held stance and began to recognise servicewomen's capabilities to contribute equally to men in the war effort in comparable roles.

However, the changeover proved to be logistically challenging in some situations. On 5 June 1943, the Army Assistant Adjutant-General in Victoria advised the Deputy-Director of Medical Services that, 'action is to be taken at once to implement this policy' to replace men with women in military establishments.<sup>101</sup> In response, however, it was stated that there were insufficient provisions to accommodate women at the majority of military general and camp hospitals in Victoria where AAMWS were to replace male personnel.<sup>102</sup> New female quarters had to be built at 115 AGH in Heidelberg, where 'arrangements' were being made to accommodate the additional 79 women. Of the 19 camp hospitals where AAMWS were to take over from men, only Geelong acted swiftly to take on strength a further 11 women. Appropriate female accommodation for AAMWS was not available at 16 of the 19 camp hospitals, while two did not deem the replacement desirable. As of 30 June 1943, only 85 AAMWS were working at military

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<sup>98</sup> *The Tweed Daily* (Murwillumbah), 12 December 1942, 3.

<sup>99</sup> *The Argus* (Melbourne), 17 March 1943, 6.

<sup>100</sup> NAA: MP70/1, 48/103/27, Memorandum from the Assistant Adjutant-General (AAG), 5 June 1943.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, Reply from GOC to AAG, 13/07/43.

camp hospitals in Victoria, although the authorised target was for 309. Recognition for their work and capability had been achieved by the women of the AAMWS. However, issues of gender remained as the Army necessitated that special provisions be made for female personnel, such as living quarters that included a separate female mess and ablutions block.

## **Conclusion**

Given the initial space by encouraging Army officers to contribute to the war effort as seen in this and the previous chapter, the high standard of the work performed by VAs led to an increased interest of the Army in female labour. Demonstrating their capability and capacity, VAs endured to achieve this recognition from the Army. In turn, the opinion of military leaders and the rank and file helped to question the position of the government. However, the hesitation of the government to mobilise women was only broken when the nation's manpower became so depleted, and its security was at immediate risk. By way of the developing administrative changes effecting the VAD that occurred from mid-1941 and throughout 1942, government gained control of a ready technical reserve and absorbed them into the military as enlisted members of the AAMWS. Nevertheless, gaining an official position in the male-dominated sphere of the military, whereby female AAMWS replaced male personnel one-for-one in military establishments, provided women with a new reason to feel a sense of pride in their work.

However, some of the changes that transformed the VAs into AAMWS were met with opposition and confusion and challenged the women's understanding of the value of their work and their professional identity. For example, little consideration was given by authorities to the feelings of the aids already serving with the military towards their organisation and, consequently, implementing their transition to the AAMWS was mocked. As the Army aimed to form a singular service of existing VAs and new AAMWS recruits, those that had prior experience held onto their VAD identity by continuing to wear their former blue uniform.



Similarly, sending servicewomen who had been with the military, including in the Middle East, to a 'rookies' school to learn how to 'belong' in the Army was derided. Despite the new requirement for them to salute and drill, regarding women already serving in military hospitals as rookies alongside inexperienced new recruits caused disdain. Along with their blue and khaki uniforms being a visible reminder of their differences, the disjuncture between the skill levels of some of the existing workforce of trained aids and the new AAMWS recruits who were not required to have previous experience saw elements of a disjointed service. Where this chapter has explored the changing organisational structures and their effect on the identity of members, the following chapter turns to an analysis of the characterisation and misidentification of the VAs/AAMWS as influenced by public portrayals.

## Chapter 4

### Portrayals of the VA and AAMWS

On service at ‘a hospital somewhere in New Guinea’, AAMWS Private Joan Hitchcock penned the poem she titled, *The Lamp*. In this poem Hitchcock speaks to the gruelling work experienced by an AAMWS and her commitment to ‘soldier along, ‘coz you must’. Hitchcock’s use of the term ‘soldier’ to describe her efforts becomes more expressive as she explains that her motivation for persisting in her tasks is derived from her patients – men who were soldiers but owing to illness or wounds were unable to soldier on:

There are times when your Nightingale lamp burns low,  
In the weary mud and heat; [...]  
With work for more than two hands to do.  
And when you’re tired of the whole mad game. [...]  
But then your staunch little lamp flares up,  
When the look in a sick man’s eye  
Tells more than his lips could express in years,  
And the flame in your lamp burns high.<sup>1</sup>

As a member of the AAMWS, Hitchcock positions her role with the Army auxiliary service alongside or, arguably, as a part of the nursing service. By framing her poem metaphorically around ‘the lamp’, Hitchcock draws a comparison between her work and the experience of Florence Nightingale during the Crimean War where Nightingale became known as the ‘lady with the lamp’.

It was a common assumption during the war that VAs and AAMWS wanted to be nurses and it was this desire that motivated them to join this service, rather than take up one of the other available wartime opportunities. As Sheila Sibley confessed in 1943, before beginning her service as an AAMWS, she was ‘dreaming dreams’ of becoming ‘an angel of mercy, the wounded man’s

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<sup>1</sup> *The Australian Women’s Weekly*, 8 July 1944, 18.

guide...the Rose of No-Man's Land'.<sup>2</sup> Sibley imagined that she would 'float down the wards in my nifty blue uniform, and tender sighs would float right after this war's Florence Nightingale'.<sup>3</sup> Both Hitchcock and Sibley suggest there was some truth in the assumption that VAs/AAMWS saw themselves as akin to, or aspired to be, nurses. Like Hitchcock, Sibley's references show a clear association with the nurse in her understanding of the VA/AAMWS. But Sibley admits that once she joined her first military hospital, she learned the reality of the AAMWS' work and conceded, 'better leave that noble figure in my imagination'.<sup>4</sup>

This chapter analyses public perceptions of VAs and AAMWS that characterised them as nurses through their portrayals in official materials, including recruitment posters and official war art, as well as in cultural materials such as commercial advertisements, illustrations, and short stories. These public depictions of the VA/AAMWS characterised the women of this service through a feminine lens – one which had been applied historically to form a stereotype of the nurse. Given the gendered perception applied to VAs/AAMWS as nursing orderlies, this chapter explores how public interpretations of this service challenged and emphasised societal expectations of women's role and space. Furthermore, this stereotype perpetuated the myth that VAs/AAMWS identified as nurses, rather than as members of the VAD/AAMWS with a distinct identity. However, for the most part, members of this cohort did not contribute to this notion. This chapter shows how official publicity and public characterisations of VAs and AAMWS were imposed on the identity of the servicewomen during the war and added to the ambiguity between nurse and nursing orderly.

Bringing together both official and public materials, including visual, fictional, and commercial sources, I demonstrate that it was through the combination of all such representations that a public perception of the VA/AAMWS was formed. An audience would be exposed to more

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<sup>2</sup> *The Argus* (Melbourne), 20 March 1943, 3.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

than one of these depictions, thus building a layered understanding. Therefore, the context in which materials were created and the circumstances that contributed to the process of cultural production explain as much as the media itself. Additionally, government and commercial sources should not be analysed separately as wartime measures worked to control the content of cultural outputs. For example, the economic influence of centralised government advertising and media censorship influenced commercial media to echo the desired narrative of the government, thus effectively rendering commercial content extensions of government propaganda.

### **Patriotism and Glorification – Official War Artists**

Australian artists were engaged throughout the war, tasked with capturing and preserving the activities and associated emotions of Australians during wartime. This was part of the Australian War Memorial's official war art scheme. The specific mission to collect a record of Australians at war emerged during the First World War and was led by John Treloar, who continued this assignment in the Second World War.<sup>5</sup> Artworks were only one part of this record collection and in his administration of the scheme, Treloar was supported by the Memorial's art committee. The three members of this committee included the renowned official war historian, Charles Bean; commander of the AIF in Egypt in Palestine during the First World War, General Sir Harry Chauvel; and Director of the Art Gallery of South Australia and the only artist on the committee, Louis McCubbin.<sup>6</sup> As argued by historian Margaret Hutchison in her study of First World War art schemes, the individuals who oversaw war art programs by deciding which artists received

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<sup>5</sup> Treloar led this first as Head of the new Department of Information, then as Officer-in-Charge of the Military History Section.

<sup>6</sup> Membership of the committee was expanded but only late in the war.

commissions and determining where artists were posted and what subjects they should capture, ‘significantly influenced how the war was represented’.<sup>7</sup>

It has been suggested that artists were largely given the necessary freedoms in their commissions and enabled by Treloar to portray their chosen subjects in whatever way the artist desired.<sup>8</sup> In response to war artists receiving military rank, Treloar affirmed that they should not be ordered like soldiers saying, ‘The management of war artists requires a diplomat, not a martinet’.<sup>9</sup> Still, historian Laura Brandon argues that the Australian art scheme during the Second World War, like Britain’s and Canada’s, aimed to contribute to the growing militarist national identity emerging from the previous war.<sup>10</sup> Examining the appointments of official artists that were and were not made, art academics Ryan Johnston and Lola Wilkins have both concluded that the traditionalism of the Australian War Memorial’s art committee ruled the scheme with its fundamental concern for realism and ‘historical and factual fidelity’.<sup>11</sup> Some of the commissioned artists had weaker ties to realism and did not prescribe fully to the conventional nature of the Memorial’s art committee. But all of the commissioned war artists, even Nora Heysen whose relationship with John Treloar was notably rocky, understood the expectations of their commissions and contributed to a heroic national understanding of Australians during the Second World War. Exploring paintings, drawings, and sketches of AAMWS that were produced by official war artists, a characterisation emerges of these servicewomen that can be understood as hinting to the state-expected depiction. That being a white, middle-class heterosexual feminine understanding of an Australian woman.

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<sup>7</sup> Margaret Hutchison, *Painting War: A History of Australia’s First World War Art Scheme* (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 5; Margaret Hutchison, ‘Dominion Imaginings: Commemorating WWI in Australian, Canadian and New Zealand Official Painting,’ *Journal of Australian Studies* 44, no.4 (2020), 518.

<sup>8</sup> Anne-Marie Conde, ‘John Treloar, Official War Art and the Australian War Memorial,’ *Australian Journal of Politics and History* 53, no.3 (2007), 461-4.

<sup>9</sup> AWM: 206/2/7, 3.

<sup>10</sup> Laura Brandon, *Art and War* (London: IB Tauris, 2007), 59.

<sup>11</sup> Ryan Johnston, ‘Recalling History to Duty: 100 Years of Australian War Art,’ *Artlink* 35, no.1 (2015), 14-17; Lola Wilkins, ‘Official War Art at the Australian War Memorial,’ *Agora* 45, no.2 (2010), 23.

*I Can't Sit in a Melbourne Studio and Paint War*<sup>12</sup>

William Dargie was a well-known artist when he was commissioned in October 1941, being described at the time by Louis McCubbin as, 'a very capable painter of figure compositions, [whom] should be able to tackle war subjects convincingly'.<sup>13</sup> Dargie's artistic style followed 'traditional academic realism' which characterised Australia's First World War official war art program.<sup>14</sup> This appealed to Treloar and the two became friends, which historian Anne-Marie Conde suggests was owing to their shared conventionality.<sup>15</sup> Returning in May 1942 from his first posting as an official war artist in the Middle East, Dargie was tasked by Treloar with capturing the war effort in Melbourne. This was a short assignment that Dargie resented even 60 years later, disclosing in an interview with historian Scott Bevan that he wanted to continue with the troops who were being sent to New Guinea.<sup>16</sup> Such sentiment may be attributed to the masculine, militarist narrative of the battlefield that was prioritised over the homefront experience of war.



**Figure 7:** *Group of VADs*, William Dargie, Melbourne, 1942 (AWM: ART22349).

<sup>12</sup> Nora Heysen, quoted in Scott Bevan, *Battle Lines: Australian Artists at War* (Milsons Point: Random House, 2004), 101.

<sup>13</sup> AWM: 50/4/1/1, Part 1, File 93.

<sup>14</sup> Hutchison, 'Dominion Imaginings,' 526.

<sup>15</sup> Michael McKernan, *Here is Their Spirit: A History of the Australian War Memorial 1917-1990* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1991), 199; Conde, 'John Treloar,' 452.

<sup>16</sup> Bevan, *Battle Lines*, 23.

Nevertheless, during his period in Melbourne, Dargie painted a group portrait of four VAs who were attached to the 115 AGH in Heidelberg (Figure 7). The portrait captures the VAs in the different uniforms of the service: the working garb of the mess orderly, the navy winter dress uniform, attire of the nursing orderly, and the light blue summer parade outfit. It is surely no coincidence that John Treloar's daughter, Joan, who served during the war as a VA then as an AAMWS modelled for Dargie's portrait.<sup>17</sup> Despite his disdain for the homefront assignment, Dargie's *Group of VADs* portrays four proud, yet gentle women employed in the auxiliary service tasked with caring for the sick and wounded soldiers. Captured at the fore, the nursing orderly rests her hands upwardly with sense of devotion like that of the First World War Anzac nurse portrayed in the Australian War Memorial's Hall of Memory.<sup>18</sup> Drawing upon the light blue and navy colour of the VAD uniform, Dargie relies upon this palette to create a sky-like blue background. This works to accentuate the red cross emblazoned on the navy winter uniform jacket that is the only other colour captured in the artwork. Although the model is standing side-on, the red cross is practically set completely square and is positioned in the centre of the painting. The medical origins and humanitarian duty of the VAs and AAMWS was not overlooked by official war artists, in fact it was used by them to highlight a sense of patriotism in their artworks of non-combatant servicewomen.

### *Gender, War, and Art*

A friend to the Heysen family, Louis McCubbin recommended Nora Heysen as the first female official war artist in January 1943 stating, 'She could be used in a variety of ways, painting portraits, and covering women's activities'.<sup>19</sup> Such a statement loaded with gendered presumptions was

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<sup>17</sup> NAA: B883, VFX127987 [Treloar Joan].

<sup>18</sup> See Susan Kellett, 'Australia's Army Nurse: Locating a Woman as the Heart of Sacrifice in the Hall of Memory,' *Journal of Australian Studies* 42, no.3 (2018), 374-393.

<sup>19</sup> AWM: 50/4/1/1, Part 1, File 93.

perhaps reflective of a broader difficulty to understand women in the military and suggests a gendered divide. Could women not paint men and men not paint women? Some of the 32 male commissioned artists, like William Dargie, did capture female subjects. But the appointments of female artists—Nora Heysen in 1943 and Sybil Craig in 1945—was specifically in response to the growing participation of women in the military and war industries.<sup>20</sup> Craig's commission focussed on the homefront, painting women's war effort in industry and the munitions factories, while Heysen was asked to capture the women's services.

In 1938, Heysen became the first female artist to win the Archibald Prize for portraiture. Fittingly, Heysen's first assignment as an official war artist was to paint studio portraits of the heads of the women's services, including Colonel Annie Sage, Matron-in-Chief of the AANS (Figure 8), and Lieutenant-Colonel May Douglas, Controller of the AAMWS from July 1943 (Figure 9). Art historian Catherine Speck noted that Heysen's depiction of Sage shows the ambiguity of her as a figure of experience and authority, and at the same time as a nurse subject to



**Figure 8:** *Matron Annie Sage*, Nora Heysen, Melbourne, 1944 (AWM: ART22218).



**Figure 9:** *Lt-Col May Douglas*, Nora Heysen, Melbourne, 1944 (AWM: ART22217).

<sup>20</sup> Stella Bowen was the only other female artist but, living in England, she was commissioned to capture members of the Royal Australian Air Force stationed in Britain.



the subordination of the masculine hierarchy of the military.<sup>21</sup> In her portrait of Douglas, Heysen captures the compassion of the subject as is also seen in the portrait of Sage, but the historically masculine khaki military jacket and tie dominates the characterisation of Douglas. Speck suggests that the khaki uniform was a 'dress code of significance' for the women's services and Heysen focussed on this as a representational device to 'convey the confidence with which the women appropriated symbols of male authority and forms of male display in their dress'.<sup>22</sup>

Argued by historian Kay Saunders, images from the war of enduring and determined soldiers unshaven and dishevelled have reached iconic status, arguably from the 1980s, and have continued to be used as historic representations of Australian servicemen.<sup>23</sup> Many of Dargie's and fellow official war artist, Ivor Hele's paintings show the fatigue, fear, and frailty of soldiers in the Middle East and New Guinea whilst still portraying their heroism. Heysen, too, offers stoic depictions of soldiers battling illness. However, the servicewomen who endured the trying conditions of tending to the trauma in field hospitals are never depicted as having lost the 'crispness' of their symbolic white starched veil. But even Heysen noted the impossibility of remaining neat in the tropics recalling, 'We were told we had to starch our uniforms to keep the morale of the men up...[but] really, ironing in that climate!'.<sup>24</sup> After six months in New Guinea alongside the medical services, Treloar criticised Heysen for portraying too many men and capturing the same subject matter as the male artists. Evidently, female artists were restricted in their commission and were not to capture male subjects. Heysen was then sent to observe the war effort at the 2nd Australian Blood and Serum Preparation Unit in Sydney and then the Land Headquarters Medical Research Unit in Cairns. Here, Heysen was witness to the varied work of the AAMWS, creating several artworks depicting crisp and untiring women.

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<sup>21</sup> Speck, 'Power Dressing,' 154.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 153-6.

<sup>23</sup> Kay Saunders, 'Not For Them Battle Fatigues: The Australian Women's Land Army in the Second World War,' *Journal of Australian Studies* 21, no.52 (1997), 81.

<sup>24</sup> Nora Heysen interview, quoted in Catherine Speck, *Painting Ghosts: Australian Women Artists in Wartime* (St Leonards: Craftsman House, 2003), 134.

Heysen had initially thought a war artist needed to be at the front, as had Dargie, witnessing the activities of the troops. But during her assignment to capture the women's medical services in Australia, Heysen realised the front was also on Australian soil. To Heysen the Sydney blood bank was 'most interesting' and 'of great importance' to the nation's war effort and she recognised that the servicewomen in Cairns were 'doing a very important job and getting little recognition for it'.<sup>25</sup> Experiencing the masculine nature of the military in New Guinea, Heysen realised that the women of the AANS and AAMWS also had to assert themselves in the male-dominated environment. In an interview with Scott Bevan, Heysen recalled that for this reason, she was sure to capture the women as 'strong characters to be recognised'.<sup>26</sup> Through this we see Heysen portray the women of the AAMWS as alert and efficient, and never tiring.

Three of Heysen's paintings depict privates in the AAMWS, captured in different moments and undertaking various tasks that were a feature of the service. Private Rosalin Mitchell Dallas was painted at a desk astutely sharpening needles at the blood bank in Sydney (Figure 10); Private Hazel Lugge was depicted tenderly sponging a patient of a malaria ward in Cairns (Figure 11); while Private Gwynneth Patterson dressed in her blue orderly's uniform with white veil is the feature of a head portrait (Figure 12). In these three paintings of AAMWS, capturing different moments and in separate locations, Heysen illustrates the diligence and concentration set in each of the subjects. But at once the femininity of the nurse and the nursing orderly is emphasised in their portrayal as quiet, calming, and gentle hands at work. The image of the nurse and the nursing orderly instils reassurance and comfort in the viewer as set in the time-honoured image comprising of her red cross, white veil, and dress. Even where patients are not present in the illustrations, the feminine devotion of the AAMWS as nurse to ill and injured soldiers is captured and enduring. But at the same time as portraying their maternal care and nurturing of the nation's men, Heysen also shows nurses and AAMWS as proficient and unwavering women,

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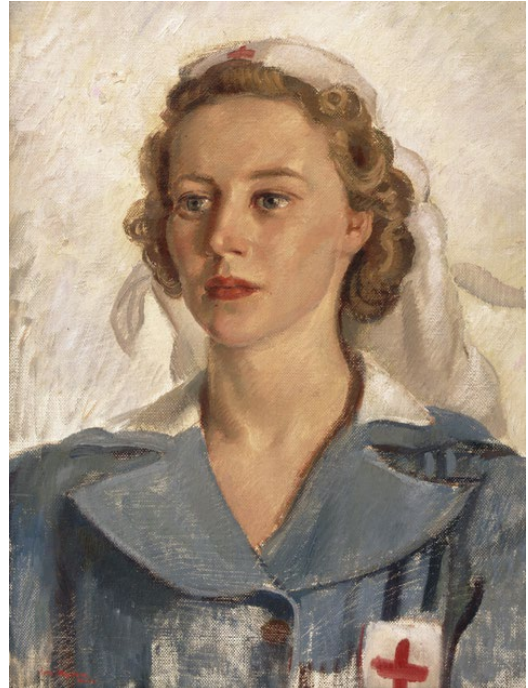
<sup>25</sup> Quoted in Bevan, *Battle Lines*, 109.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, 107.

dedicated to their profession. Arguably the official narrative at the time, the typical interpretation of the nurse as feminine is present in Heysen's work, but at the same time she portrays that which others did not, the AAMWS as a skilled paramedical service – characters to be recognised.



**Figure 10:** *The Needle Sharpener (Private Rosalin Dallas)*, Nora Heysen, Sydney, 1944 (AWM: ART22407).



**Figure 12:** *AAMWS (Private Gwynneth Patterson)*, Nora Heysen, Sydney, 1944 (AWM: ART22822).



**Figure 11:** *Sponging a Malaria Patient*, Nora Heysen, Cairns, 1945 (AWM: ART24373).

Official war artists did not know if or where their work would be viewed during the war, knowing only that it would be added to the War Memorial's collection for prosperity. But some works were exhibited, including three of Nora Heysen's studio portraits of the heads of the women's services, which were entered into the 1943 Archibald Prize. Despite not being produced for a specific morale boosting exhibition, the nature of their commission and the bureaucratic

oversight of their work influenced artists to incite patriotic motives in their artworks. While more specific inferences can be drawn from these paintings, the fundamental narrative running across the depictions of AAMWS by official war artists adheres to a feminine understanding of women at war and the ambiguous stance of the government that surrounded servicewomen.

## **Femininity and Subjectivity – Military Recruitment**

The term ‘propaganda’ was not used by the Australian government during the war due to its negative connotations and association with falsity lingering from the First World War. Instead, the term ‘publicity’ was adopted.<sup>27</sup> Established in 1939 with a specific purpose, the Department of Information (DoI) assumed responsibility for state censorship and publicity. From February 1941, the DoI also gained oversight of all government advertising with the creation of a centralised advertising division. Historian Robert Crawford aptly concluded that the DoI’s advertising division became ‘the nation’s propaganda machine in all but name’.<sup>28</sup>

Prior to the establishment of the advertising division, each government agency was responsible for their own publicity. With enlistments slumping through 1940, the three branches of the military each began their own recruitment campaigns. Consequently, the services were competing against each other for advertising space and drove the cost up.<sup>29</sup> The advertising division then allowed for an organised and efficient approach whereby one government agency would negotiate for a collective contract with publishers. Additionally, centralised government advertising offered greater oversight of material content and encouraged coordinated campaigns. As such, the advertising division retained oversight of campaign materials, although being

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<sup>27</sup> Kay Saunders, ‘An Instrument of Strategy’: Propaganda, Public Policy and the Media in Australia During the Second World War,’ *War & Society* 15, no.2 (1997), 76.

<sup>28</sup> Robert Crawford, ‘Nothing to Sell?—Australia’s Advertising Industry at War, 1939-1945,’ *War & Society* 20, no.1 (2002), 106.

<sup>29</sup> Edward Vickery, ‘Telling Australia’s Story to the World: The Department of Information 1939-1950,’ (PhD thesis, Australian National University, 2003), 81.

produced for the other government entities. For example, while the Department of the Army decided upon the need for recruitment campaigns for the AWAS and AAMWS, engagement with an advertising agency and the creative direction for the campaign was conducted through the DoI.

Through robust industry engagement on behalf of government, the advertising division ensured strong and consistent messaging. Across the various recruitment campaigns, time periods, geographic locations, and publication types, common appeals to patriotism, nationalism, and masculine militarist ideals can all be identified. What is also clear in these sources is that the male-dominated sphere of the military, and advertising industry alike, were negotiating their understanding of women in the military throughout the entire war period. Recruitment advertisements for the Army's women's services appeared in the Australian press from early in 1943 and continued until the end of the war in 1945. Materials were printed in a range of newspapers and women's magazines such as *Woman* and *The Australian Women's Weekly*. These advertisements appealed to the assumed desire of women to join the forces and embrace this as a new opportunity. But they were also overtly feminine in their characterisations of servicewomen. Further complicating understandings of women in the Army, recruitment campaigns featured joint advertisements for both the AWAS and AAMWS. Women, therefore, were a broad primary audience for recruitment into these services with no concern given to the distinction between the role of an AWAS member and an AAMWS.

*'She Works Shoulder to Shoulder with Australia's Smartest, Keenest Girls'*<sup>30</sup>

Nurses had generally been accepted in the military since the period of the First World War, but members of the AANS had remained enrolled with the Army, rather than enlisted, and given honorary rank, emphasising the difference in their status by being women in the military. As such,

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<sup>30</sup> *The Australian Women's Weekly*, 3 March 1945, 18.

it was a contentious issue when it was proposed to enlist women in the Second World War and grant them rank. When the formation of the first of the women's services, the WAAAF, was announced by the Minister for Air, John McEwan in Parliament on 25 March 1941, Labor's defence spokesperson, Norman Makin raised the Opposition's objections. 'We object strongly to women being called into the actual fighting services until the full strength of the country's manhood has been canvassed completely', Makin stated, 'because service directly associated with our fighting forces is primarily the duty of the country's manhood'.<sup>31</sup> The matter also attracted lengthy debate within the Government, War Cabinet, and the Advisory War Council before being debated in Parliament. In his analysis of the War Cabinet, historian David Horner suggests that 'the protracted discussions' that occurred between 1940 and 1941 regarding the proposal of women's service 'indicated how much members had to overcome their own prejudices and the conventions of the time'.<sup>32</sup>

The conventions and prejudices referred to by Horner were still present when the AWAS was formed in August 1941 as the Army's counterpart to the WAAAF. Advertisements for the AWAS and AAMWS illustrate that a requirement to address these prejudices lingered throughout the war. Makin's masculine belief that the military and war was man's domain was not isolated in the Australian community. This dominant view, alongside concerns that the military would diminish women's femininity, was addressed in advertisements appealing to mothers. In two examples from this initiative, the advertisement's narrative places the daughter as willing and eager to join the AWAS or AAMWS, but her mother's hesitation deterred her enlistment.<sup>33</sup> These advertisements attempted to reassure mothers that the AWAS and AAMWS offered suitable work for their daughters and would ensure their welfare. Published in *Woman* on 25 June 1945, a blonde-haired, blue-eyed young woman with rouge and lipstick says, 'Mother took a lot of

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<sup>31</sup> Norman Makin, *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates*, 25 March 1941, no.13, House of Representatives, 149.

<sup>32</sup> Horner, *Inside the War Cabinet*, 45-46.

<sup>33</sup> *The Australian Women's Weekly*, 16 December 1944, 20; *Woman* (Sydney), 25 June 1945, 40.

persuasion, but she has never regretted letting me join'.<sup>34</sup> This respectable woman, now in the Army, is greatly admired by her proud mother who is attributed as saying her daughter now looks fitter and better than before. The young servicewoman speaks to potential recruits, but the advertisement is equally directed to mothers. Demonstrating regard to respectability, class, and social status, the advertisement works to reassure mothers not only that the living quarters are appropriate for young women, but that the other women already serving in the Army are 'the finest girls in the whole of Australia'.<sup>35</sup>

Negotiated understandings and representations of women in the military was an ongoing focus of promotional material throughout the war as anxieties manifested regarding their femininity. Historian Ruth Ford argues that women's entry into the military saw recruitment advertisements reinforce notions of femininity and heterosexual attractiveness in attempt to allay concerns that the historically masculine space of the military might attract or produce 'masculine-type women'.<sup>36</sup> It was thought that the masculine nature of the military would be identifiable to lesbians, of whom the stereotype in 1940s Australia was a strong and masculine woman in both appearance and character. Committed to upholding women's femininity, the Army promoted servicewomen as feminine, patriotic, and heterosexually attractive. Women of the AWAS and AAMWS were illustrated in recruitment materials with fine facial features, lipstick and blush, and a tailored uniform that matched the slimline fashion for white middle-class women that emerged in the 1920s and 1930s.

The Army sought to demonstrate the femininity of the khaki uniform tailored for women and comprising of a skirt rather than practical trousers, attempting to overcome interpretations of military uniform as a definition for masculinity.<sup>37</sup> Becoming a key feature of AWAS and AAMWS

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ruth Ford, 'Lesbians and Loose Women: Female Sexuality and the Women's Services During World War II,' in *Gender and War*.

<sup>37</sup> Saunders, 'Not For Them Battle Fatigues,' 82-3.

recruitment campaigns, a series of advertisements in 1943 called to women, ‘This season’s colour is khaki!’, ‘You’ll look well in khaki too!’, and ‘Why envy them? Put yourself into khaki!’.<sup>38</sup> These pleas mimicked women’s fashion advertisements and created a sense of glamour around the servicewoman’s uniform. They also worked to develop a notion that war work, including labour in the women’s auxiliaries was the fashion statement of the period. In a similar attempt to imitate pre-war fashion advertisements, a campaign in 1944 stated that it was time that women ‘Got a new hat’, not from the department store but by enlisting with the AWAS and AAMWS.<sup>39</sup>

However, as Ruth Ford also noted, in an attempt to dispel concerns of unfeminine women in the military, the construction of servicewomen as glamorous and heterosexually attractive produced a contrasting stereotype of servicewomen as ‘loose, fast, sexually promiscuous females looking for easy access to men’.<sup>40</sup> Promotional material for the women’s services contributed to this new anxiety by emphasising women’s heterosexual attractiveness both by its focus on feminine appearance as well as overt narratives of heterosexual relations. In a full-page advert in *The Australian Women’s Weekly* (Figure 13), a soldier whom we learn is home on convalescent leave stares up at a fictional servicewoman named Marian who proudly wears her fitted Army uniform. Marian, with rouge and lipstick, her mouth partially open, gazes down to the soldier with glistening eyes set against her mascara and eyeshadow. ‘Gosh, Marian, you look swell! I’d never thought of you in uniform’, says the fictional soldier who goes on to think, ‘Wonder if she knows how attractive she looks?’<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> *The Age* (Melbourne), 24 February 1943, 5; *The Australian Women’s Weekly*, 20 March 1943, 2; *The Australian Women’s Weekly*, 6 March 1943, 23.

<sup>39</sup> *The Australian Women’s Weekly*, 9 December 1944, 11; see also *The Age* (Melbourne), 13 November 1944, 4.

<sup>40</sup> Ford, ‘Lesbians and Loose Women,’ 91.

<sup>41</sup> *The Australian Women’s Weekly*, 17 March 1945, 32.



32      The Australian Women's Weekly      March 17, 1945

# "Gosh, Marian, you look swell!"

He was on convalescent leave when he met her.

"Gosh, Marian, you look swell! I'd never thought of you in uniform, but I might have known that's the decent sort of thing you'd do! Good luck to you . . . and to all the others."

And as he went on his way he thought: "Wonder if she knows how attractive she looks? Wish they dressed us as smartly . . . but they're doing a great job, those A.W.A.S. and A.A.M.W.S."

You see . . . the fighting soldier *knows*. He knows that battles aren't won entirely in the front line. He knows that no military operation can succeed without vital co-operation from the home bases and the lines of communication.

And that is where *you* are needed—needed now and needed urgently. A call has come from Australia's Commander-in-Chief to build up the Australian Women's Army Services to full strength . . . to release pressure on the Army . . . to enable our battle lines to move forward.

There are tremendous tasks ahead of our fighting men—tasks in which every fit girl of 18 or over can share. The A.W.A.S. or the A.A.M.W.S. now bring you your supreme opportunity.

You'll like the life. The pay and conditions are attractive. You'll get deferred pay and full repatriation benefits; regular leave; valuable technical training; uniforms, clothing, coupons and travelling concessions; but, most important of all, you'll have the heartfelt satisfaction of serving shoulder-to-shoulder with Australia's finest girls in the hour of Australia's greatest need. Apply for details to the nearest Women's Recruiting Depot or your local Area Office.

The Army will be one man short until you

Join the

**A.W.A.S.**  
AUSTRALIAN WOMEN'S ARMY SERVICE  
OR  
**A.A.M.W.S.**  
AUSTRALIAN ARMY MEDICAL WOMEN'S SERVICE

Figure 13: AWAS/AAMWS advert, *The Australian Women's Weekly*, 17 March 1945, 32.

Concerned then with anxieties that the military would attract or produce 'unfeminine' women, by 1945 recruitment materials shifted focus to greater appeals to patriotic motives. Femininity and glamour, however, remained a feature. In another full-page AWAS and AAMWS recruitment advertisement a servicewoman stands proudly in the centre of the page, again wearing makeup, and seemingly glowing against the grey background of armed troops in a forward attack motion. The narrative states, 'This girl never 'talked patriotism' or waved a flag', and her motivations for enlisting 'wasn't the glamour of uniform or thought of bands and parades'.<sup>42</sup> However, we see at once that the central figure is glamorous and feminine.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid, 3 March 1945, 18.

*Help Soldiers Back to Health, Release Men for the Front*

While women were sought to enter the masculine space of the military, it was at once reinforced that women were needed to free men for what was seen as the more important task: fighting on the frontline. Supporting Higonnet's claim of the double helix discussed in the introduction, widespread recruitment campaigns for the AWAS and AAMWS worked to emphasise the subjectivity of women.<sup>43</sup> A common tagline running across AWAS and AAMWS advertisements was, 'The Army is ONE man short until YOU join'. This overtly claimed soldiers as the most vital resource in the war effort and emphasised the masculine and militaristic interpretation of war.

These understandings of servicewomen are further emphasised in advertisements specifically featuring the AAMWS. Most advertisements were directed at potential recruits for both the AWAS and the AAMWS. Perhaps for this reason, and the fact that the AAMWS absorbed many full-time VAs on its creation, fewer recruitment materials were created specifically for the AAMWS. The advertisements that do focus solely on the AAMWS, however, all contribute to the interpretation of women's work and their role in the Army as being dependent on men. As British historians Mark Harrison and Jane Brooks note, the role of the medical services was first understood during the Second World War as vital to nursing soldiers back to health fundamentally in order for them to return to battle.<sup>44</sup> Acknowledging that sick and wounded men required nursing, the appeal in AAMWS advertisements to women's sense of duty and perceived devotion to men emphasises gendered constructs and women's subjectivity. In campaigns for AAMWS the call is made to women, 'Will you help to nurse our sick and wounded fighting men?', which places the soldier as the central concern and the understanding of women's work as reliant on men.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> See Higonnet et al., *Behind the Lines*, 31-47.

<sup>44</sup> Mark Harrison, *Medicine and Victory: British Military Medicine in the Second World War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 2; Jane Brooks, *Negotiating Nursing: British Army Sisters and Soldiers in the Second World War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2019), 2.

<sup>45</sup> *The Australian Women's Weekly*, 26 May 1945, 14; NAA: C934/77, 1943; AWM: ART01081, c1943.

These materials demonstrate that the identity of the AAMWS is only understood in their ability to 'help the sick & wounded soldiers back to health' as the advertisements proclaim.<sup>46</sup>

Femininity was a central theme evoked in promotional materials for the AAMWS, but it took a different form to that seen in the general campaigns for both the AWAS and AAMWS. By the Army and its advertisers, the AAMWS was depicted as a nursing service where its members were characterised like that of the gendered interpretation of the nurse: devoted, nurturing, and gentle. Societal constructs at the time saw nursing regarded as a female occupation, and the attributes of the nurse were understood in gendered terms. Historian Katie Holmes has argued that popular depictions of the Australian Army nurse emerged from the First World War and reinforced gendered perceptions of nurses in terms such as 'self-sacrificing', 'devoted', and as the 'ministering angel of mercy'.<sup>47</sup> Propaganda during the Second World War returned this notion of the nurturing 'expert at the bedside' and reclaimed the feminine understanding of the Army nurse.

An image replicated across recruitment materials, an AAMWS stands with an enamel basin and clamps ready to tend to the soldiers' wounds. Seen in Figure 14, she is poised with greater gentleness and determination than her non-medical AWAS counterparts. Here, she peers distantly towards wounded soldiers marching into camp and standing ready to tend to their needs.<sup>48</sup> The choice to show the AAMWS as waiting, rather than undertaking a task may also be seen as a conscious decision to imply her position as a woman waiting rather than an active and skilled participant. The recruitment advertisement states her work is 'vital' and 'essential' but again in regard to the 'health, safety and comfort of our troops'.<sup>49</sup> The gendered construct of care and nursing used in AAMWS promotional materials took the place of heterosexual attractiveness as

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Katie Holmes, 'Day Mothers and Night Sisters: World War I Nurses and Sexuality,' in *Gender and War*, 43-44.

<sup>48</sup> *The Australian Women's Weekly*, 26 May 1945, 14.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

used in other campaigns, but for the same purpose; to reinforce the femininity of women in the military.

14 The Australian Women's Weekly May 26, 1945

# Serve your Country IN THE WAR JOB WITH A FUTURE

WILL you help to nurse our sick and wounded fighting men? Will you help in the wards, the laboratories, the dispensaries, in one of the scores of vital activities so essential to health, safety and comfort of our troops?

The Army will give you all necessary training . . . training which will prove invaluable to you *after* the war, as well as now.

You will be provided with attractive quarters and living conditions; indoor and outdoor uniforms for winter and summer; good clothing, with coupons and allowances for replacements. You will receive free medical and dental treatment, travel concessions, regular leave—and many privileges not available to the civilian.

In the Australian Army Medical Women's Service, whether you serve at home or overseas, you will be the comrade of girls of the finest type—many of whom wear the Africa Star, some of whom have been decorated for bravery and devotion to duty. If you are 18 or over, here is YOUR supreme opportunity!

★ The need is urgent! Apply at the nearest Army Women's Recruiting Depot or local Area Office.

★ Join the  
**A.A.M.W.S.**  
AUSTRALIAN ARMY MEDICAL WOMEN'S SERVICE  
or **A.W.A.S.**  
AUSTRALIAN WOMEN'S ARMY SERVICE



Figure 14: AAMWS advert, *The Australian Women's Weekly*, 26 May 1945, 14.

## Aspiration and Idealisation – Commercial Advertising and Magazines

Commercial media played a significant role in shaping and mobilising women's war effort during the Second World War. Noted by Bill Bonney and Helen Wilson, women in 1930s and 1940s had a strong springboard, primarily as wives and mothers, to be opponents of war that would disrupt their lives and consume their husbands and sons.<sup>50</sup> Yet, there was largely no staunch opposition

<sup>50</sup> Bill Bonney and Helen Wilson, *Australia's Commercial Media* (South Melbourne: Macmillan, 1983), 222.

to the war. As Bonney and Wilson suggest, the influence of popular magazines such as *The Australian Women's Weekly* significantly helped to allay women's anxieties.<sup>51</sup> Studied by historian Andree Wright, the success of the *Women's Weekly* in communicating to the female population of Australia during the Second World War was owing to its record of having gained its readers' trust. As Wright concluded, 'the magazine [held] a position of authority'.<sup>52</sup> Such influence and impact can be seen by noting that the average weekly circulation of the *Women's Weekly* increasing during the war from over 400,000 in 1938 to more than 650,000 in 1945.<sup>53</sup> With its large audience and ability to influence public opinion, the *Women's Weekly* adopted the nation's patriotic sentiment and produced materials that 'closed off any questioning' during the war.<sup>54</sup> As such, the *Women's Weekly* helped to secure women's commitment to the war effort. At first, this saw an agenda set for women to contribute through voluntary work and then turned to women's paid work in a war occupation or the women's auxiliaries. Then as the conflict began to subside, encouragement for women to assume the roles of wife and mother reappeared.

By shifting with the government's changing attitudes towards women during the war, the *Women's Weekly* promoted to its female audience the official messaging regarding women's role. By adopting the official position and not challenging it in any way, the magazine demonstrated to Australian women throughout the war how they could, and arguably were expected to contribute to the war effort. However, I argue that this was not only a product of the magazine's editorial content but was also seen in its illustrations and the commercial advertisements printed within its pages. Although the context and purpose of these elements of a magazine are different and created by separate entities, together they worked to mobilise Australian women for the war effort, while at the same time reinforcing dominant values and behaviours of femininity and heterosexual

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Andree Wright, 'The Women's Weekly: Depression and War Years Romance and Reality,' *Refractory Girl*, no.3 (1973), 9.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

attractiveness. This, therefore, was not simply a feature of the *Women's Weekly*, but a construct of the media industry more broadly.

Assessing depictions of VAs/AAMWS within the pages of the *Women's Weekly* and other commercial media and advertising, two narratives emerge. The first is that the VA/AAMWS was a service that retained respectability and femininity and, therefore, was an appropriate role for women. And this was consistent with government messaging at the time. By depicting the VAs/AAMWS as a role for women to aspire to, the magazine not only reinforced government messaging, but it also contributed to official recruitment campaigns. The second notion that emerges is a dominant and consistent narrative across commercial materials. This is the unofficial secondary duty of servicewomen as morale boosters for men. It was this that suggested that servicewomen should pay attention to feminine, heterosexual beauty and show concern for their appearance and use of makeup to appeal to the soldiers' heterosexual desires. How VAs/AAMWS are depicted as potential dance partners, dinner guests, and romantic correspondents for men is explored below.

### *Wartime Advertising*

The Australian government was the most active advertiser in the nation from February 1941 when it created the DoI's advertising division. As Robert Crawford suggests, the government therefore became 'indispensable to the survival of the press'.<sup>55</sup> The partnership between government and the reliant advertising industry evolved through the phases of the war and as public policy changed. Historian Michael McKernan noted that businesses embraced Prime Minister Robert Menzies' 'business as usual' message at the beginning of the war and so did the public, with consumerism rising for a record Christmas in 1939.<sup>56</sup> Commercial media then changed tack as Australia's

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<sup>55</sup> Crawford, 'Nothing to Sell,' 105.

<sup>56</sup> McKernan, *All In*, 25-26.

involvement in the war intensified and the threat to the nation was a perceived real threat, and eventuality, amongst the community. As such, commercial advertising increased its patriotic appeals alongside those made by government and the military. Crawford concluded that this was because ‘commercial interests were best served when combined with patriotic exhortations’.<sup>57</sup> Consequently, the line between state propaganda and commercial interests was indistinguishable in commercial advertisements during the war period.<sup>58</sup>

Head of his own advertising agency and an advisor for government advertising, Frank Goldberg identified in 1943 that there were three predominant forms of wartime appeals in Australian advertising.<sup>59</sup> This, Goldberg said, included concern for the government’s austerity campaign; informing the public of industries’ contributions to the war effort; and entwining a brand name with a morale-boosting story. All three of these appeals were commonly used in advertising throughout the war and the patriotic undertones eroded the distinction between advertising and propaganda as brands aimed to remain relevant in consumers’ minds. However, I suggest that the technique of combining a brand name with a patriotic narrative resulted in ambiguity as advertisers aimed to mask their consumerist message behind an attempt to imitate wartime publicity. For example, a full-page advertisement appearing in the *Women’s Weekly* in June 1942 depicted two women dressed in VAD uniform carrying a legless statue of Captain James Cook.<sup>60</sup> Shown here at Figure 15, the advertisement features two VAs conducting their duty as stretcher-bearers, staunch in their manner and appearance as a stunned crowd watches on. This advertisement, which is evidently set in the daytime in an Australian park, is for Mazda lightbulbs.

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid, 106.

<sup>58</sup> Crawford, ‘Nothing to Sell,’ 109.

<sup>59</sup> Frank Goldberg, editorial, *Art & Industry* 34, no.200 (1943), 45-6.

<sup>60</sup> *The Australian Women’s Weekly*, 6 June 1942, 12.

The only feature tying the brand with the wartime narrative is that both the VAs and the product are ‘dependable’.



**Figure 15:** Mazda Electric advert, *The Australian Women's Weekly*, 6 June 1942, 12.

The widespread presence of advertisements echoing patriotic sentiment reflects that the public largely supported government appeals. Satire and frivolity in publications provided some political commentary, however, this was mostly inoffensive and not in opposition to the war effort, rather simple attempts at light humour. For example, an article regarding the Australian Women's Land Army in the *Smith's Weekly* was accompanied by a sketch of a male farmhand working alongside members of the Land Army.<sup>61</sup> Commenting jocularly on the entrance of women into historically men's work, the male farmhand wears blinkers, typically used for horses, to eliminate any distraction posed by the women's presence. Here the connotation of women's subjectivity as heterosexual desires echoes the advertising industry's dominant characterisation of women, that being overtly feminine. Published in Adelaide's *News* on 26 October 1942, the comic strip *Dora*

<sup>61</sup> *Smith's Weekly* (Sydney), 3 June 1944, 3.



places a similar emphasis on the heterosexual attractiveness of female war workers. Here Dora, a servicewoman, is shown saying to a man in uniform, 'I see Tom wrote a poem entitled 'Ode to a VAD'', going on to say that it would be more aptly titled 'Owed to an infantryman'.<sup>62</sup> Yet, in this effort to suggest that servicewomen took advantage of their position to find suitors, the comic reinforces the notion that women's service was only for the duration of the war and propels the leading opinion at the time that servicewomen should maintain a desire to become wives and mothers.

*I Wanna be a V.A.D. Very B.A.D.*<sup>63</sup>

Being the only avenue for women, other than registered nurses, to be attached to the military services in the initial years of the war, the VADs became an idealised group of women. As an ancillary service to the military medical authorities, VAs were seen as being directly involved in the war effort. The eagerness of young VAD recruits and their enthusiasm for their medical training and service was witnessed by a *Smith's Weekly* reporter when he attended one of their training lectures in Sydney. The journalist subsequently reported such in article in September 1940, concluding, 'I'll be perfectly happy if, should a German bomb fall on me, the Hurstville V.A.D.'s cluster round...and render first aid'.<sup>64</sup>

Taking similar note of the enthusiasm for the service and the prospect of increased recruitment as discussed in Chapter 3, commercial advertising targeting VADs emerged early in the war. Appearing in the *Women's Weekly* in June 1940, Farmer's department store ran an advertisement that offered the new Queen's blue VAD uniforms for officers and members 'tailored meticulously to specifications, trim, neat, and designed for action'.<sup>65</sup> In addition to the

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<sup>62</sup> *The News* (Adelaide), 26 October 1942, 2.

<sup>63</sup> *Smith's Weekly* (Sydney), 21 September 1940, 15.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>65</sup> *The Australian Women's Weekly*, 22 June 1940, 23.

feminine descriptions of the fitted blue dress, the advertisement also featured the uniform hat, cape, and heeled shoes. Such a uniform upheld common ideals of women's clothing, despite being work dress for an organisation whose members undertook long days of gruelling work. Like the uniform that prescribed heels, hats and tailored waists, advertisements mirrored that of the latest women's fashions. Such advertisements appealed to the ideal of the slim, white woman that emerged with the rise of the department store in the 1920s and 1930s. In commercials advertisements VAs were portrayed as fashionable and feminine, but also alluded patriotic sentiment with slogans such as, 'those smiling, efficient women who are serving their country'.<sup>66</sup> Advertisements such as the one for Farmer's aided the developing public awareness of the VAD as a respectable wartime occupation for women embedded in patriotism and a feminine expectation.

As the war progressed and the need to mobilise women's labour increased, the *Women's Weekly* worked to shift women's attitudes and behaviours. The magazine's initial response to the war defined women's spaces as those that were established in the First World War – fundraising and voluntary work. This then gave way to the need for women to work in an official capacity. This transition is evident from Figure 16, the cover of the *Women's Weekly* issue of 7 June 1941. Designed by one of the magazine's artists, John Mills, the cover illustration depicts two women sitting on a bench. The woman on the left is knitting a khaki garment for the men at the front, but she looks thoughtfully towards the activity of the other woman. The woman on the right is dressed in VAD uniform and reading a book on first aid. Knitting, also being for the war effort, was not challenging for the woman and her envious look says she desires a role that is more stimulating and generates a greater sense of worth from her contribution. The VA is identifiable by her uniform and is shown as equally feminine and heterosexually attractive with makeup, a slim figure

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

and legs showing. This depiction helps to reduce anxieties of working women losing their femininity, and further highlights the desirability of joining the service.



**Figure 16:** *The Australian Women's Weekly*, cover by John Mills, 7 June 1941.

*By Day She's a V.A.D. ... Under the Moon She Invites Romance*<sup>67</sup>

Inspiring nationalism and support for the war effort, while further blurring the lines between state propaganda and commercial media, throughout 1945 the *Women's Weekly* printed illustrated features of each of the women's service. The full-page collage of watercolours is the work of the

<sup>67</sup> *The Australian Women's Weekly*, 18 April 1942, 9.

magazine's artist, Virgil Reilly who depicted the various duties and moments in a day of each of the women's services. The illustrations are heroic and idealised interpretations of women's place in the military, but at once reinforces the femininity of the servicewomen and echoes the government's sentiment that their position was only 'for the duration'. The issue featuring the AAMWS (Figure 17) includes representations of the skilled work servicewomen did as orderlies in the blood banks and draws attention to the service's postings overseas.<sup>68</sup> However, the feature's narrative is grounded in an attempt to signify the AAMWS as linked to women's idealised domestic role as a wife and mother. Nursing orderlies are portrayed femininely as doting and empathetic with patients. Other servicewomen are depicted in the mess; one as a cook and another using a dishwashing machine, the caption stating that the post-war return to handwashing will be 'a problem for husbands'. This suggestion that industrial appliances in the military made domestic tasks easier is both misleading and based entirely in gendered attitudes with the assumption being that it is a woman's role to wash dishes in the home. The depiction of the varied work of the servicewomen is positive and encouraging, but the nature of the AAMWS' work as rooted in domestic duties, that historically considered to be women's work, alludes to a dominant, yet regressive understanding of women's role and space.

The concern for the femininity of the AAMWS was not only understood by the work of the service, but also in the character and actions of the women themselves. The illustrated features of the women's auxiliaries, and the *Women's Weekly* more generally worked to build morale among the Australian community regarding the feminine nature of the work and character of the nation's servicewomen. The *Women's Weekly* illustrated feature of the AAMWS (Figure 17) portrays the members as tall, slim, young, white women that further stresses their sex appeal. The off-work moments portrayed include preparing for bed, admiring flowers, applying makeup, and doing one's hair. Even while on duty, one AAMWS is seen being idealised by an ill patient as she responds to

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid, 5 May 1945, 11.

his romantic advances. Commercial advertising also instilled a concern for servicewomen's femininity and emphasised their heterosexual attractiveness. Lyn Finch argues in an exploration of women's consumerism during the Second World War, a concern for appearance, fashion and beauty was deemed necessary in women's role as morale boosters.<sup>69</sup> Pond's cosmetics ran an advertising campaign that revealed how a servicewoman exchanged her uniform which she wore during the day, for a gown, jewellery, and Pond's cosmetics at night, a change which 'invites romance'.<sup>70</sup>



Figure 17: 'With the AAMWS', Virgil Reilly, *The Australian Women's Weekly*, 5 May 1945, 11.

<sup>69</sup> Lyn Finch, 'Consuming Passions: Romance and Consumerism During World War II,' in *Gender and War*, 105.

<sup>70</sup> *The Australian Women's Weekly*, 18 April 1942, 9.

The femininity of the servicewomen and attention to their appearance as portrayed in the *Women's Weekly* demonstrates the magazine's accentuation of the secondary duty of servicewomen as morale boosters for the troops. As seen in commercial advertisements, recruitment materials and illustrations, servicewomen were expected to retain their feminine beauty and appearance even while on duty, encouraging servicemen's heterosexual desires. Such may be inferred from Virgil Reilly's depiction published in 1945 (Figure 17) that included nearly as many AAMWS in the 'glamorous' former blue uniform, which was phased out from 1942, as are seen in the more masculine khaki. In her study of British military nurses in the Second World War, Jane Brooks stated that the military recognised nurses as being indispensable in the recovery of soldiers, not only owing to their medical skill, but also by their ability to boost morale simply by being there.<sup>71</sup> Brooks argues that the presence of nurses, especially from the same nation as the soldiers, was used by the military as a weapon to persuade men to sustain their determination to fight.<sup>72</sup> By being women within the military environment, nurses and nursing orderlies were an evocative reminder for soldiers of the conventional social structures in civilian life. Nurses and VAs/AAMWS alike assumed the feminine roles of mother, sister, and wife to the soldiers – those who they were defending. As seen in Figure 17, Virgil Reilly illustrated that in the hospital wards, the AAMWS became maternal figures caring for soldiers as patients, as well as the subjects of heterosexual desires. Brooks suggests that some nurses embraced this and employed their femininity as an aid to the medical technologies to assist with soldiers' recoveries.<sup>73</sup>

The role of servicewomen as morale boosters extended beyond the hospital ward with all servicewomen, regardless of their daily tasks, becoming potential dance partners, dinner guests and romantic interests for the troops. Wearing 'civvy clothes' rather than her AAMWS uniform, the activity shown to represent one servicewoman's leave in Figure 17, is as a dance partner to an

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<sup>71</sup> Brooks, *Negotiating Nursing*, 98.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid*, 93.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid*, 94.

Army officer. A similar scene is depicted in the magazine's cover of 3 April 1943. The cover art produced by Thora Johnston, one of only two female artists working for the *Women's Weekly* during the war, shows three servicemen enjoying the opportunity to dance with a servicewoman, all of whom wear uniform. As dance partners, the servicewomen portrayed by Johnston, including an AAMWS, are smiling but lack the glistening affection of heterosexual desire that glimmers in the expressions of their male counterparts. As noted by Brooks, regardless of whether a particular serviceman's affection was wanted or not, the constant demand on a servicewoman to be a dance partner or dinner guest could be exhausting.<sup>74</sup> Some servicewomen, though, found the romantic affections of men exciting and capitalised on the opportunity. AAMWS Sheila Sibley turned her romantic experiences with Australian, English, and American servicemen into an experiment, ranking their performance. 'If love is an art, then these are my candid views', writes Sibley in an article that was published in the supplements to Perth's *Sunday Times*, Adelaide's *The News*, and Sydney's *Sunday Sun*.<sup>75</sup> Sibley's conclusion: 'I don't think you need any'.<sup>76</sup>

## **Romance and Not the Nurse – Short Stories**

Weaved in between the patriotic wartime features, illustrations, and advertisements in newspapers and magazines were fictional short stories published and reproduced to provide light entertainment to readers. Despite being written for entertainment, these were also predominantly centred around war. Short stories appearing in newspapers such as *The Sun* and magazines including the *Women's Weekly*, although being fictional light entertainment, were often about the bravery and sacrifice of soldiers.<sup>77</sup> Additionally, these works were also another source that called

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid, 110.

<sup>75</sup> Supplement to *The Sunday Times* (Perth), 7 October 1945, 4; *The News* (Adelaide), 29 September 1945, 2; Supplement to *The Sunday Sun* (Sydney), 16 September 1945, 5.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> For example, Arch Whitehouse, 'Tailing Tactics,' *The Australian Women's Weekly*, 19 June 1943, 6-8; Dorothy Johnson, 'A Date with a Soldier,' *The Australian Women's Weekly*, 5 February 1944, 3-4; Rona Randall, 'Yet Another Moon,' *The Australian Women's Weekly*, 10 July 1943, 6-7.

to women to actively support and participate in the war effort. While featuring the masculine characterisation of war and the soldier, the narrative of these short stories frequently emphasised women's role as a comforter and source of romantic desire for men. For example, readers often found alongside a heroic soldier was a caring nurse or love interest, either a servicewoman or a girl waiting at home. This theme holds true when giving specific attention to short stories written by Australian authors that include a character who is an AAMWS. 'So here I am in hospital convalescing', reads the first-person narrative in *Huff and Puff* by Charles Saint, 'I am glad because here there is an Aamws (sic)...[with] just about the nicest line of smiles that has ever been turned out in the human mould'.<sup>78</sup> Here the only female character in the story becomes both the devoted nurturer and the subject of the soldier's sexual desires.

The inclusion of a romantic storyline that placed emphasis on the feminine beauty and heterosexual desirability of AAMWS was a common tool employed by authors. In a series of short stories about the fictional war photographer, 'Pottsie', author Rett Rouget features an AAMWS as the protagonist's 'amazingly good-looking girl-friend'.<sup>79</sup> Pottsie is portrayed as an overweight 'incorrigible drunkard' who is besotted with his AAMWS girlfriend, Robin.<sup>80</sup> Robin is described as, 'the trim figure of an AAMWS, smart in her summer drill' with brown eyes and hair that is 'lustrous beneath her white veil'.<sup>81</sup> The desirability of Robin is reinforced by Rouget, writing that there are many others who 'sought to brighten her leisure' and questioned constantly, 'What's Pottsie got that we haven't?'<sup>82</sup> As the romantic interest, depictions of AAMWS as attractive to men and actively engaged in sexual activity in fictional short stories helps to allay anxieties about the military diminishing servicewomen's femininity and heterosexual beauty.

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<sup>78</sup> *The Australian Women's Weekly*, 22 September 1945, 10 and 32.

<sup>79</sup> *The World's News* (Sydney), 13 January 1945, 14.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid*, 9 September 1944, 18.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid*, 13; 13 January 1945, 14.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid*, 9 September 1944, 16.



Charles Saint and Rett Rouget's stories centre on male leads with an AAMWS only featuring as part of a romantic substory that is not critical to the plot. But romantic appeals that rely on the heterosexual attractiveness of AAMWS also feature in short stories where an AAMWS is the central character. Published in the *Women's Weekly* on 30 December 1944, *Oh, Somers!* by MJ Holt is the story of the fictitious Marcia Somers, a private in the AAMWS posted to New Guinea.<sup>83</sup> In the opening paragraphs Somers is reprimanded by an AANS sister for being too 'familiar' with the men in the wards. But reassuring the readers of the *Women's Weekly* that members of the AAMWS are respectable women, the author reveals that the nurse's criticism of Somers relates to her conduct towards Sergeant Connors, a patient but who is revealed to also be Somers' fiancé. As the story progresses, Somers is faced with a challenging decision, choosing to volunteer her services to move into a forward area where she would help establish a new hospital and consequently delay her marriage to Connors. Much to his dismay, Connors hopelessly protests the decision made by Somers that placed her own sense of duty over their marriage. In this, Somers adopts a distinctive position seen in the pages of the *Women's Weekly* during the war where women were encouraged to participate in the war effort ahead of marriage. Yet, the *Women's Weekly* and this short story worked to assert that servicewomen should maintain the expected desires of marriage and becoming a housewife after their service in war was no longer required.

### *Just Because They Were Fully Trained*<sup>84</sup>

Granted the liberty that short stories offer to explore deeper characterisations and create dramatic storylines, authors MJ Holt and Sheila Sibley offer an alternative depiction of the AAMWS that distinguishes them from the fully trained nurse. While some cultural materials evoke a sense of skill in the work of the AAMWS and explore the various roles members of the service undertook,

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<sup>83</sup> *The Australian Women's Weekly*, 30 December 1944, 3 and 43.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid*, 3.

the predominant understanding of the VAs and AAMWS follows the stereotypical narrative and interpretation of the nurse. By creating an AAMWS as the protagonist of their story, both Holt and Sibley build upon the characterisation of the AAMWS in order to separate them from the AANS nurse. Both Holt and Sibley do this by drawing upon a tension between the two services. Historian Christine Hallett argues that the existence of friction between British Army nurses and VAD nursing orderlies is one of the great myths that emerged from the First World War.<sup>85</sup> However, the existence of hostility between some fully trained Army nurses and AAMWS during the Second World War must be examined given that Sibley served as an AAMWS and likely wrote from personal experience.

Reproduced in Australian newspapers after the war, *Weep No More, My Lady* was a short story written by Sheila Sibley featuring Sherry Martin, a fictional AAMWS working as a ward orderly in a convalescent hospital.<sup>86</sup> Martin was characterised in a similar manner to the nurse; comforting, gentle and devoted to her patients, albeit sombrely owing to the loss of her husband at war. In turn, the soldiers who were now patients of Martin's ward respected her and the care she provided them, 'The bestest little nurse this side of the black stump'. Part of the patients' gratitude for Martin, and working to differentiate the services, was that she lacked the regimental strictness and intimidating attitude that characterised the nursing sister. Throughout the story, the sister is seen being critical of the conduct of the AAMWS orderlies; an account that is also reproduced by Holt.

Holt dramatizes the hostility between AANS sisters and AAMWS and the authority sisters commanded over the nursing orderlies, much like Sibley does. As Holt writes, the sisters were always ready to lecture AAMWS about 'some trifling mistake or breach of hospital etiquette' that an AAMWS had just unknowingly made.<sup>87</sup> Subsequently, AAMWS are seen questioning the

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<sup>85</sup> Hallett, *Veiled Warriors*, 23.

<sup>86</sup> *The Sun* (Sydney), 15 December 1946, 5 and 10; *The Mail* (Adelaide), 1 March 1947, 1 and 10.

<sup>87</sup> *The Australian Women's Weekly*, 30 December 1944, 3.

position of the sisters asking, 'Why on earth did these stuffed images of nurses give themselves such airs, just because they were fully trained?'<sup>88</sup> But calming the tension and instilling in readers faith and encouragement in the Army system, was the matron. Described as an Army nurse from the First World War that had a 'knowledge of men and women [that] was wide and deep', the matron eliminated the resentment between the two services.<sup>89</sup> Such leadership and collegiality between the services fostered by veteran nurses is that which was explored in reality in Chapter 1. The matron in Holt's story eases the tension by reminding the servicewomen of their differences. 'Don't be too hasty or intolerant', the matron instructed the sister, 'Remember, it's harder for them', referring to the fact that AAMWS had to learn their way around a hospital ward among the desperate chaos of wartime.<sup>90</sup> Such a distinction between nurse and female orderly was rare in the cultural products of the time, and arguably also within the historical understanding of VAs/AAMWS.

## Conclusion

The image of the nurse is not contested or controversial. She is always a woman, feminine, and familiar. As a non-combatant, the nurse is also able to transcend wartime anxieties and tensions. Much of the wartime rhetoric surrounds the bravery and heroism of soldiers, based in the dominant understanding of the military that is masculine. But the overtly feminine image of the wartime nurse and nursing orderly was deployed by government and commercial media to help comfort and mobilise a nation at war, particularly from 1942 as hostilities commenced in the Pacific. The nurse as the maternal figure allays fears and anxieties about men experiencing the dangers of war and demonstrates the duty and femininity of women contributing to the war effort. Albeit a singular portrayal of servicewomen. William Dargie's portrait, *Group of VADs* draws on

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

these tropes whereby the nursing orderly becomes the nurse. Dargie creates a narrative of servicewomen of the empire that echoes the sentimental Victorian image of Florence Nightingale as the 'Lady with the Lamp'. He is also able to bring the comfort of the nurse—and the nursing orderly—her gentleness and care during the chaos and disruption, while also creating a lasting image of patriotism and self-sacrifice. Still, the portrayal of the servicewomen is overtly feminine and only works to further the myth that VAs/AAMWS identified *as* nurses.

As this chapter has argued, the different contexts of image and fictional based cultural materials depicting VAs and AAMWS place the women of the service alongside professional nurses – both in their war effort as well as how they were understood as women at work and at war. From Dargie's paintings, government recruitment materials, through to published works in commercial media, despite their subtle difference in intent, consistent messaging was seen. Consumed together, these materials all worked to mobilise women to the war effort. Yet, regardless of their intent, these materials all reinforced feminine understandings of women and women's work, and therefore characterised the role and space of servicewomen in the Army within a single narrative. Through some mediums the acumen and paramedical skill developed by VAs and AAMWS is captured and a distinction between professional nurse and VA/AAMWS realised. But this largely depends on its creator and feminine understandings remain dominant. Even works created by Nora Heysen and Sheila Sibley, she herself an AAMWS, draw upon typical interpretations of nurses and patriotic appeals that contributed to a feminine and devoted understanding of VAs and AAMWS as nursing orderlies.

As the previous chapter explored how the controlling institutions shaped the identity of the VAs and AAMWS, this chapter has analysed how the public image of these servicewomen was constructed and maintained. Following this line of inquiry, the next chapter provides a study of the AAMWS at work in the Pacific Campaign, seeking to assess how the military and its nurses

offered AAMWS the space to adopt an identity and understanding of their role: that being as part of the nursing service.

## Chapter 5

### AAMWS Nursing in the Pacific

The AAMWS training school in Yeronga, Queensland was established in November 1942. Set on a five-acre property, it was formerly the home of a Brisbane doctor. Its first course had just 27 students and was a trial to familiarise women with Army organisation, the AAMWS having recently been established as a military service. The women were drilled, taught to salute, and lectured on Army organisation and operations, including salvage. Regarded as a successful exercise, the course which would become known as ‘rookies’ was continued in Queensland as well as in other states. Before the school was moved to Enoggera in August 1943, 642 AAMWS passed through Yeronga undertaking one of the eight three-week so-called ‘rookies’ courses. A Toowoomba school teacher before the war, AAMWS officer, Lieutenant Florence Fuller established the Yeronga school as its first Chief Instructor. ‘Our ambition is to make recruits into good members of the AAMWS’, declared Fuller.<sup>1</sup> Supported by other training staff, including AANS nurse, Patricia Chomley, Fuller explained that their objective was to train AAMWS so that, ‘when they get to their units, they know how to pull their weight’.<sup>2</sup>

Lorna Rookwood and 95 other women commenced their AAMWS ‘rookies’ training on 13 July 1943 in the last course to be taught at Yeronga during the war. Addressed on their first day by AAMWS Assistant Controller Marjorie Roche, the women were received as part of the unique force which had emerged from the VAD movement. Conflating the image and tradition of the AAMWS, however, the only other lecture the women received on their first day of training was given by AANS sister, Irene Clay on the ‘Ethics of the Nursing Profession’. By the eighth intake of rookies at Yeronga, this lecture introducing AAMWS to the nursing profession had taken

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<sup>1</sup> *The Australian Women's Weekly*, 13 March 1943, 19.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

precedence. This is highlighted when compared with the syllabus for the second training course, which instead had taught 'Ethical Procedures of VAs (sic)' in the final week of training. Although military organisation and discipline remained a key part of the course syllabus throughout its evolving format, most lectures received by the AAMWS rookies focussed on topics of nursing. Of the 24 lectures Lorna Rookwood received as part of her three-week course, eight were delivered by an AANS sister with additional lectures on nursing duties given by experienced AAMWS officers.

The nursing duties being taught to AAMWS were covered so that they may be able to 'pull their weight' within military hospitals. But the extent to which the syllabus covered the principles of the nursing profession meant that the AAMWS' training began to resemble that of pupil nurses. This expectation for AAMWS to act as nurse trainees, a position which did not exist within the military, was emphasised to Lorna Rookwood and her fellow AAMWS on the opening day of their rookies' course, Sister Clay stating:

Members of the AAMWS take the place of trainees in military hospitals and although they have not a definite nursing career in view at present, they must adopt a nurse's responsibility and necessary efficiency.<sup>3</sup>

With their place in the military being described in such terms, the women of the AAMWS were introduced to the nursing profession – albeit ranking the lowest and without status. Nevertheless, their induction by members of the nursing profession set the expectation of their work and place within the military medical system as more than an ancillary service.

With the commencement of hostilities in the Pacific in December 1941, the course of the war changed for Australia. To defend the region and its own shores, Australia's priorities shifted to an 'all in' war effort which was largely pursued by the entire nation. This created greater space for women to join in the war effort and included an expansion of AAMWS' service, both in the

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<sup>3</sup> AWM: PR06383/01.

roles they undertook and the geographical locations in which they were done. The resourcing limits of a nation at war necessitated that AAMWS be deployed to forward areas and posted to duties that previously they had largely not been trusted, or permitted, to undertake. This chapter traces the developments of AAMWS' labour during the Pacific Campaign and highlights how these servicewomen came to act largely in the capacity of a pupil nurse. Where the previous chapter has shown how commercial media and the public perpetuated the stereotype of the VA/AAMWS as nurse, this chapter argues how this same perception was reinforced by the military medical service and Army nurses who invited and expected AAMWS working as orderlies to enter the space once reserved for registered nurses.

Through this analysis of AAMWS' ward work caring for patients, questions of emotional trauma and their ability to manage sites of physical and mental trauma is discussed. While VAs and AAMWS were undoubtedly impacted by traumatic experiences before the Pacific Campaign, this chapter notes the changing space of the AAMWS during this period. For instance, as new medical challenges and advancements were being made, AANS nurses were relied upon for more technical duties and with it the tasks assigned to AAMWS developed. Consequently, the spaces assumed by AAMWS in hospitals increased their proximity to sites of bodily and emotional trauma. Noted in the introduction, there have been thorough studies of war and trauma, including gender analyses and the experience of non-combatants offered by the likes of Margaret Higonnet, Christine Hallet, and Christina Twomey.<sup>4</sup> This chapter builds upon the understandings set by these studies to develop a narrative of how untrained servicewomen confronted sites of trauma and how this developed their skill and service throughout the war. It is through this analysis that we can then assess in the next chapters of this thesis the influence such experiences had on the way VAs/AAMWS thought of themselves and identified future possibilities as a nurse or not.

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<sup>4</sup> See Margaret R Higonnet, 'Authenticity and Art in Trauma Narratives of World War I,' *Modernism/Modernity* 9, no.1 (2002); Christine E Hallett, 'Portrayals of Suffering: Perceptions of Trauma in the Writings of First World War Nurses and Volunteers,' *Canadian Bulletin of Medical History* 27, no.1 (2010); Twomey, 'Trauma and the Reinvigoration of Anzac'; Twomey, *The Battle Within*; Michaels and Twomey, *Gender and Trauma*.



## **AAMWS in Australia: Mess, Wards, and Specialisations**

### *First Postings for New Recruits*

Training as a VA in the early years of the Second World War with the objective of enlisting, Bertie Lloyd had been fortunate to be guided by several encouraging nurses before she entered a military hospital. Initially trained in the fractures ward of Sydney Hospital, the civilian matron and charge sister ensured that Lloyd was exposed to as many medical cases and nursing techniques as possible. Then completing her VAD training at the Royal Prince Alfred Hospital, Lloyd was told by the sister, 'Now Miss Lloyd...we don't know what you're going to be asked to do in the Army, so when I ask you to do something you've got to come and learn'.<sup>5</sup> Owing to the training offered by these civilian nurses, by the time Lloyd enlisted for service with the Army she had watched operations being performed, knew how to give injections, and felt more confident in dealing with many kinds of patients and their needs.

Once in the Army, Lloyd was posted to the 12 Australian Camp Hospital at the Sydney Showgrounds. Here she worked under the direction of Sydney surgeon, Captain Leslie LARBALESTIER who noticed the opportunity AAMWS, or enlisted VADs as they were at the time, offered the medical system. Acknowledging the VAs as a capable workforce, LARBALESTIER continued to teach them as part of the medical services, bringing them beyond the realm of women in domestic duties. For example, although it was customary for trained sisters to accompany medical officers on their patient rounds, LARBALESTIER requested instead that he be assisted by the semi-trained women of the VAD. Undertaking rounds with LARBALESTIER, Lloyd recalled that on one occasion he had drawn on a patient's chest illustrating for her, 'Now his lungs there and his lungs are infected', going on to describe the details of pneumonia and how to treat it.<sup>6</sup> As the opportunities being afforded to

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<sup>5</sup> Transcript of interview with Bertie Lloyd, 9 March 2004, Australians at War Film Archive, no.1502.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

VAs encroached on the duties for which professional nurses had trained for many years to carry out, Lloyd noted that the actions of Larbalestier antagonised the AANS sisters.

Tensions between AANS sisters and VAs were not uncommon in the early years of the war, heightened by situations such as that experienced by Bertie Lloyd at the Sydney Showgrounds. The first posting upon enlisting with the Army for many VAs saw them relegated by the sisters to the inane and unskilled duties. 'Well I'm here at last', proclaimed Kathleen 'Kitty' Burke upon commencing duty at the 115 Base Hospital, Heidelberg, 'Can't pretend to be liking it but then there is not much fellow feeling. We [VAs] are not very popular'.<sup>7</sup> For Bernice Jones and Lila McKenzie, like Kitty Burke and many other VAs and AAMWS, they did not see a hospital ward for at least a month after commencing their service. Both Jones and McKenzie enlisted in September 1942; Jones in Victoria was posted to the Caulfield Repatriation Hospital, and McKenzie was sent from Sydney straight to the 104 AGH in Bathurst.

The first task Burke, Jones and McKenzie were 'dumped' into at each of the hospitals was mess duty.<sup>8</sup> Jones stated, 'You peeled an awful lot of vegetables there', noting that her time working in the kitchen at Caulfield meant most of her hours were spent isolated 'in a room well away from anywhere else'.<sup>9</sup> Discontent felt by the women posted at Caulfield was rumoured amongst their fellow servicewomen at nearby Heidelberg, Burke remarking that VAs' duties at Caulfield were essentially equivalent to ward maids, writing:

I heard one of the girls...saying that she had been promoted from washing dishes to cleaning skirting boards. The best job there seems to be cleaning windows.<sup>10</sup>

Being the extent of tasks that the sisters at Caulfield trusted VAs to undertake, Jones remained on domestic duties for four months. Having met the sisters while working in the mess at Bathurst, Lila McKenzie had made a personal connection with them that helped her gain nursing experience

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<sup>7</sup> AWM: PR03002, Letter from Kathleen Burke to Gladys Crawford, 26 November 1941.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Transcript of interview with Bernice Dimmock, 27 April 2004, Australians at War Film Archive, no.1854.

<sup>10</sup> AWM: PR03002, Letter from Kathleen Burke to Gladys Crawford, 29 December 1941.

in the wards after her first month. The tutor sister at 104 AGH, Sister Williamson taught McKenzie and the other VAs how to give injections, the patients lending an arm for practice.<sup>11</sup> Sister Williamson also trusted the VAs to give out mixtures and medications. But there was a limit to their training and the sisters never allowed a VA to tend to a wound, this differing from the experience of the VAs in the Middle East where they were called upon to assist with dressings.

The attitudes of the AANS sisters in Australia towards the presence of the VAs in military establishments changed around the time the service became the AAMWS. The turning point, witnessed by Bertie Lloyd, was the return of service nurses from the Middle East who had worked alongside VAs with the 2/1, 2/6 and 2/7 AGHs. Still working at the Sydney Showgrounds as the Middle East forces came home at the beginning of 1943, Lloyd noted, 'everything changed then'.<sup>12</sup> The returning sisters had noticed AAMWS were underappreciated in Australia by their fellow nurses. Lloyd recalled that the sisters who had returned from the Middle East encouraged those who had remained in Australia to recognise the worth of the AAMWS, saying, 'Look, these girls are not here for glamour, they're here to help, and you'll be grateful for them'.<sup>13</sup> With the recognition of their value being afforded by sisters who had witnessed their skill and commitment in the Middle East, more of the nursing profession was opened to the AAMWS in Australia. As a result, members of the AANS took more time to encourage training AAMWS as pupils of their profession and they were given greater space to serve as part of the military medical system.

### *The Reward is Work*

Writing home to her mother from the 2/5 AGH in October 1943, Edith Donaldson was so pleased to announce that her friend from home and fellow AAMWS, Nell Williams had started work alongside her in the hospital wards. Donaldson wrote that Williams had, 'worked very hard in the

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<sup>11</sup> Transcript of AWM interview with Lila Stocks.

<sup>12</sup> Transcript of AWFA interview with Bertie Lloyd.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

mess since we arrived', and regarded her new duties as a deserved promotion.<sup>14</sup> 'Although there is plenty to be done in the wards', wrote Donaldson, 'it is ever so much more pleasant and you do get a bit of variety', thus demonstrating the sentiment that working in the wards was the reward for one's hard work.<sup>15</sup> Similarly, Gladys Crawford was greatly disappointed when she was shifted from nursing orderly work in a surgical ward to one month's mess duty at the 2/6 AGH. Under the supervision of Captain Ethel Brown, Crawford wrote of the situation:

I think Miss Brown put me there because one day she remarked that I looked very tired, and it is easier in the mess. But I am afraid I am ungrateful enough to feel disappointed, though I must admit I have felt terribly tired this last few days.<sup>16</sup>

Most AAMWS shared the common goal of being given the opportunity to work in order to demonstrate not only a dedication to their duties, but also an eagerness to do more. For Marjorie Brown, she had not faced orthopaedic cases before joining the 103 AGH in Baulkham Hills, Sydney. Brown's duties were new to her, and she did not yet know the nursing techniques for orthopaedic care. Wanting to be of use and to be seen as efficient and capable by her superiors, Brown indicated that she was keen to learn. Recognising the turning point that the sisters from the Middle East had created for the AAMWS, Brown knew that she was lucky to be working in wards with sisters who were now 'fanatical about teaching'.<sup>17</sup> However, for some sisters the changed attitudes had stretched to more than just an acceptance of AAMWS in the wards, growing into an expectation that AAMWS show an enthusiasm for skilled nursing work. For Brown, although she was interested in learning the nursing practices that enabled her to be given more responsibility in her work, she noted that if an AAMWS did not 'watch and learn' from the sister, 'you found yourself [back] in the kitchen or the laundry'.<sup>18</sup> Encouraged to embrace AAMWS as trainees after

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<sup>14</sup> AWM: PR00338, Letter from Edith Donaldson to her mother, 23 October 1943.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> AWM: PR03002, Letter from Gladys Crawford to her mother, 1 November 1943.

<sup>17</sup> Transcript of interview with Marjorie Hancock, 6 May 2003, Australians at War Film Archive, no.27.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

initially resenting the presence of untrained women in the wards, the AANS consequently became methodical in preserving the standards of their profession and ensuring that AAMWS understood the responsibilities they were being given.

Alongside the technical proficiency taught by the sisters in the wards, the AAMWS had to learn the ‘general bearing and behaviour’ for nursing without explicit direction from the trained servicewomen.<sup>19</sup> At the rookies’ school, AAMWS were told that there were three criteria for good nursing: a real love of attending the sick and helpless, a strong constitution, and an even temperament.<sup>20</sup> All three attributes were key to the task of caring for the patient. However, the awareness of the patient as not only a case to be nursed, but as a human was only realised in the wards. On Marjorie Brown’s first day on duty in the amputee ward at the 103 AGH, her sorrow for the patients’ conditions and hesitancy in performing procedures resulted in a serious demeanour. Brown admitted that she was unsure how to react, but her concerned manner was evident to the patients. At the end of her first shift, the patients said to Brown, ‘If you’re goin’ to bring that long face in here tomorrow, you needn’t bother’.<sup>21</sup> A sleepless night followed for Brown as she thought about what the patients had said to her in the ward. But realising her mistake and that the attitude a nurse presents to her patients is a key part of their rehabilitation, the next day Brown offered a smiling face and danced down the ward doing the Lambeth Walk, bringing cheer.

Being mindful of the ward’s psychology became foundational to Brown’s service as an AAMWS working in orthopaedic nursing. Almost all the men in the amputee ward experienced phantom limb, recalled Brown, ‘These phantom limbs pained or itched or were too hot or too cold’.<sup>22</sup> Although the limb had been amputated, and both Brown and the patient knew it, she and the other nurses would stand at the bed and rub the phantom limb when it pained. Brown explained that it would ‘make you want to cry’, but having learnt from her first day in the ward,

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<sup>19</sup> AWM: PR06383/01.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Transcript of AWFA interview with Marjorie Hancock.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

‘you didn’t dare cry’ or show the patients that you felt sorry.<sup>23</sup> As Margaret Higonnet has discussed in relation trauma and gender in the First World War, comradeship and the development of an esprit de corps was a tool employed by a combat unit to protect it against the effects of trauma.<sup>24</sup> With the clear effects of both corporal and psychological trauma experienced by Marjorie Brown’s patients in the Second World War, the positive attitude for which they demanded of her shows an attempt for them to maintain an esprit de corps in their recovery.

Thoroughly enjoying her service and relishing the opportunity to learn and work amongst the nursing and medical professions, Brown’s specialist expertise as an AAMWS in orthopaedics did, however, inhibit her from some opportunities. Her eagerness and aptitude for all aspects of orthopaedic nursing, including the technical and human components, saw Brown become indispensable to the 103 AGH. Like most AAMWS, Brown felt that serving in a forward area would be an experience of great interest and opportunity. But the skills that she had acquired in orthopaedics were not needed in the tropical areas of northern Australia or the islands in the south-west Pacific and were too valuable to lose from Baulkham Hills. As such, Brown never saw service in a forward area, the opportunity instead reserved for AAMWS who had shown proficiency equal to Brown but in general duties or other specialty areas required by forward units.

### *The Forward Areas of Northern Australia*

On 23 March 1943, *The Argus* reported on the preparations of the first contingent of AAMWS from Victoria to be sent to a forward area during the war in the Pacific. Apart from members of the AANS, these servicewomen were to be the most forward and the farthest north since the return of the Middle East forces. Despite the posting being within their home country, Far North Queensland and the Northern Territory were considered forward operational areas within the war

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Higonnet, ‘Authenticity and Art in Trauma,’ 94.

in the Pacific and treated with similar gravity to overseas service. Illustrating the challenges that this 'new venture' for the service would bring, and reflecting their position serving in a forward area, the AAMWS were issued with tin helmets and respirators anticipating warfare conditions, and mosquito nets to combat the threat of common tropical diseases.<sup>25</sup> 'Conditions at times may be trying', warned AAMWS Controller, Lieutenant-Colonel Mollie Walker, 'but at all times you must have courage, cheerfulness, and determination. I know you will'.<sup>26</sup> Since the withdrawal of troops including VADs from the Middle East, the deployment of AAMWS to forward areas in Australia constituted a new test for the service. Walker expressed to the Victorian contingent that, 'It will be on your work and behaviour that depends whether more girls will be sent'.<sup>27</sup> For this reason, the women had all been selected for their aptitude and experience as AAMWS.

Among the 31 Victorian women who were sent as part of this first AAMWS contingent to Northern Australia was Janet 'Jean' Wallace and her older sister, Connie. At the beginning of the war, Jean and Connie had joined their local VAD which had been formed by Alice Appleford, who had since become the AAMWS Assistant Controller in Victoria. Having completed their VA training, the two sisters presented themselves at Royal Park in Melbourne to enlist in the Army on 25 March 1942, Jean just 19 years of age. 'Army hospitals, casualty clearing stations, regimental aid posts, and camp hospitals were now being set up all over the country' in response to the growing war effort in Australia, recited Jean, 'It was therefore a surprise to me that I was being sent to a Repatriation Hospital'.<sup>28</sup> Nevertheless, as Jean and Connie had been working on their family's dairy farm in Warragul for no pay, five shillings per week in the Army was 'quite attractive'.<sup>29</sup> Together with women who had been selected to serve as part of the second contingent of VAs in the Middle East, which never eventuated, the Wallace sisters reluctantly spent twelve months working at the

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<sup>25</sup> *The Argus* (Melbourne), 23 March 1943, 6.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> Jean Waddell, *Shut the Gate* (Adelaide: Lutheran Publishing House, 1989), 34.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

Caulfield Repatriation Hospital under similar conditions experienced by Bernice Jones. Their posting to a forward area therefore, brought much excitement. After extensive travel by train and truck convoy, Jean, Connie and the 29 other AAMWS from Victoria marched in on 1 April 1943 to the 121 AGH, Katherine in the Northern Territory.

Before starting her first shift at the 121 AGH, Jean Wallace felt a sense of nervousness, ‘With all new patients, I wouldn’t know one of their names, or their complaints. Would I know how to do the treatments?’.<sup>30</sup> Being on night duty, Wallace took the opportunity to study between her rounds and, with the help of the sister on duty, learnt who her patients were, their medical histories, and the treatments they were to be given. The 121 AGH at Katherine was a 1200 bed hospital caring for Australian soldiers from Darwin and the Pacific islands, including those suffering from burns and shrapnel wounds. Additionally, the hospital cared for American airmen, Aboriginal patients, local civilians from various stations, and men from the Civil Construction Corps. ‘Every day brought new experiences’, recalled Wallace, ‘there was always something happening. New patients, new treatments to learn, and lectures to attend’.<sup>31</sup> Wallace immersed herself in her nursing duties and extended her knowledge of the profession attending lectures on caring for and treating surgical cases, tropical diseases, pathology, and psychology, ‘things that you wouldn’t have in Caulfield’, she mused.<sup>32</sup>

During her posting at Katherine, Wallace mostly worked in Ward 13 – the ear, nose, throat, and eye ward. Having grown up on a dairy farm, she was used to hard work and applied herself fully to the efficient running of the ward. With routine and organisation, Wallace distributed mixtures and medications, such as Aspirin Phenacetin Codeine to tonsillectomy patients before meals; ensured patients were fed according to any special diets; conducted urine tests four times a day for patients on sulphanilamide; and checked temperatures at 10am, 2pm and 6pm each day,

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid, 63.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, 82.

<sup>32</sup> Transcript of interview with Janet Waddell, 5 May 2004, Australians at War Film Archive, no.1893.



which she regarded more as a roll call than a medical assurance. In between those tasks, treatments were undertaken, rounds were completed with the medical officer if the sister was unavailable, and any other requests from patients were met. With a scarcity of resources in forward operational areas such as Katherine, the labour of everyone was drawn upon with a greater reliance and responsibility. As an adjutant service to the nursing sisters, AAMWS were responsible for the efficient running of wards as demonstrated by Wallace and were called upon to undertake tasks ordinarily assigned to trained nurses. AAMWS, therefore, gained a great deal of nursing experience when posted to forward units such as the 121 AGH.

After twelve months service in Katherine, Jean Wallace was pleased to be returning home to Victoria but knew that things had changed. In one regard, she recalled that there was no sense of excitement on the return journey, but an awareness of the strong service the AAMWS had given. For example, she acknowledged that ‘there were AAMWS at every medical station in the [Northern] Territory now’ as well as throughout Far North Queensland, thus demonstrating that they had worked to the standard expected of them as set out by AAMWS Controller, Mollie Walker.<sup>33</sup> Furthermore, the twelve months service in a forward operational area had changed Jean and her sister Connie as individuals. The nursing experience gained by both Jean and Connie as AAMWS, including the training and practical education they were afforded gave them confidence in their nursing capabilities. At the end of hostilities in the Pacific, Connie was given her discharge from the Army so that she could commence her training as a Registered Nurse at the Royal Melbourne Hospital.

Before the war, Jean and Connie’s mother had encouraged them both to train as nurses. For Jean, at the age of 18 contemplating training for three years ‘seemed like an eternity’, but after the war she was 25 and three years no longer seemed so long.<sup>34</sup> Having begun her relationship

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<sup>33</sup> Waddell, *Shut the Gate*, 93.

<sup>34</sup> Transcript of AWFA interview with Janet Waddell.

with nursing as a VA at the Warragul Hospital in 1939, on 3 December 1947 Jean returned to that same hospital now as a pupil nurse, supported by the Commonwealth Reconstruction Training Scheme. Despite her extensive knowledge and experience in nursing gained as an AAMWS, Jean was given no concessions in her training at Warragul, stating, 'I would pretend I knew nothing about nursing and would start off at the bottom again as I had done at the rookies school'.<sup>35</sup> Jean Wallace is an example of the commitment shown to the nursing profession by AAMWS and the high standard of training members of the service were offered during the war. Having spent the length of the nurse training course in the Army effectively working as a nurse trainee, she did not regard her time at Warragul Hospital as her nurse training, 'I always say I trained in the Army and got my certificate at Warragul Hospital'.<sup>36</sup>

## **Moving Farther Forward with the AANS**

### *'Continuing Work' in the South West Pacific Area*

Coming within six months of being asked to prove themselves in northern Australia, the Minister of the Army, Frank Forde stated that the women of the AAMWS had 'earned a high reputation for efficiency and discipline in the military hospitals on the mainland'.<sup>37</sup> Owing to this recognition, the decision was made to send AAMWS to forward operational areas in the SWPA. 'This is a most important step in the development of the AAMWS', Forde proclaimed. Since the AAMWS was created and the nation's attention turned to the war in the Pacific, the only servicewomen who had been posted overseas were members of the AANS. As such, the extension of the service boundary for AAMWS to the islands of the SWPA was, as stated by Forde, a 'new sphere'.<sup>38</sup> The challenges of climate, isolation, and lack of resources present in northern Australia was only a fraction of the

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<sup>35</sup> Waddell, *Shut the Gate*, 165.

<sup>36</sup> Transcript of AWFA interview with Janet Waddell.

<sup>37</sup> *The Advertiser* (Sydney), 11 September 1943, 5.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

conditions experienced on the SWPA islands. Yet, for the women of the AAMWS, this new opportunity was surrounded by excitement as they were grateful for the task and eager to get to work. Reporting on the first draft of AAMWS to sail to New Guinea in September 1943, *Women's Weekly* correspondent, Margaret Dorset remarked:

I saw them go off to a term of hard work among all the strain of war with the same high spirits they'd have taken on a summer cruise in other days. This didn't arise from ignorance of the job ahead, but from enthusiasm for it.<sup>39</sup>

For many AAMWS, like most service personnel, the opportunity to serve on foreign soil was seen as the pinnacle of wartime service. 'We've been waiting a long time', exclaimed AAMWS Mavis Bentley on being selected for New Guinea.<sup>40</sup> Bentley had enlisted with the AIF on 4 December 1941 and was set to sail to the Middle East with the second draft of VAs when the posting was cancelled. Waiting almost two years, Bentley eventually saw service abroad when she arrived in New Guinea in September 1943. Like Bentley, the majority of AAMWS in the first contingent of 300 sent to New Guinea had around two years' service experience but had never been posted abroad. But of those who did have overseas operational experience, their determination to be selected again was no less. 'Those who have been away before were not contented until they were chosen', remarked Captain Barbara Evans.<sup>41</sup> For AAMWS Betty Goodwin, who had served in the Middle East in 1942 when the service was still the VAD, she saw her task in the SWPA as, 'going out again and continuing with our work'.<sup>42</sup>

However, not all AAMWS with prior experience of overseas service were given the opportunity for a second time, despite their credentials and capability. One such AAMWS was Gladys Crawford. Joining the 2/6 AGH as a VA in the Middle East at the beginning of 1942, Crawford was one of the few AAMWS in 1943 who had seen service abroad. Remaining with the

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<sup>39</sup> *The Australian Women's Weekly*, 25 September 1943, 9.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> *The West Australian* (Perth), 10 May 1945, 8.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

2/6 AGH in Rocky Creek in Far North Queensland under the command of Colonel Rex Money since their return from the Middle East, when the unit was moved to the SWPA islands of Morotai and Labuan, Crawford was forced to stay in Australia. 'I have had a very great sorrow this week. I have to leave the unit', Crawford wrote to her mother, 'because I am too old'.<sup>43</sup> The official orders were that AAMWS on overseas duty must not be older than 35 years and Crawford was now 36. 'I rather expected it, but that didn't make it any easier when the blow fell', she stated.<sup>44</sup> Expressing her frustration at the situation, Crawford wrote to her mother:

I understand our Captain here would prefer to keep the older girls...and I had so hoped that her advice would be taken. But apparently they prefer to work these things out on paper rather than from personal experience.<sup>45</sup>

The disappointment Crawford felt was both for the missed opportunity for further duty overseas, which she regarded 'would have been so interesting', but additionally that she would have to leave the unit to which she had become so attached.<sup>46</sup> As Sister Gillies had lectured to AAMWS at their rookies' training, 'The hospital staff is a military unit and is more than a collection of people working at an establishment where invalids are treated'.<sup>47</sup> Hospital units that remained together for extended periods developed an esprit de corps which united the personnel regardless of their position as an AAMWS, sister, or medical officer. For some AAMWS, this strong sentiment felt for their unit caused significant personal challenges for them as their wartime service progressed. For Crawford, being transferred from the 2/6 AGH caused great sadness in saying farewell to her colleagues, but she was further confronted with having to adjust to a new hospital. 'It is vastly different from what we were used to', she remarked, but remaining hopeful despite the upset, stated, 'It will be alright when we settle down'.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> AWM: PR03002, Letter from Gladys Crawford to her mother, 16 October 1944.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid, 2 October 1944.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid, 16 October 1944.

<sup>47</sup> AWM: PR06383/01.

<sup>48</sup> AWM: PR03002, Letter from Gladys Crawford to her mother, 24 October 1944.

Likewise, many AAMWS were drawn by loyalty to their unit and work and, consequently, declined the offer for promotion. Pamela Bushell remarked in 1943, 'I've been a Private for two years, and I think it's the best rank in the Army'.<sup>49</sup> When the opportunity arose for AAMWS serving in New Guinea to train to become an officer, nobody applied. One such AAMWS was Lila McKenzie who reflected that there was no interest among the AAMWS in becoming an officer because they 'felt that they'd rather be with the unit than be sent to some officers' training school back on the mainland. I certainly had that feeling'.<sup>50</sup> Consequently, Major Joan Christie, who oversaw all AAMWS in New Guinea, was forced to nominate several women to take the promotion. The possibility of increased pay, less gruelling work, and more comfortable conditions did not tempt the women of the AAMWS who saw their place amongst the challenges of frontline medical care.

### *Conditions on the SWPA Islands*

'Little can be done to moderate the discomforts of the climate', reported *Women's Weekly* correspondent, Alice Jackson from New Guinea in December 1943.<sup>51</sup> Yet, the challenges of the tropics were only intensified for AAMWS by issues of wartime supply and the demands of their work in the island locations. With limited resources in Torokina, Bougainville, AAMWS Maud Whiting became an expert in mending and preparing all manner of surgical equipment for reuse. Serving as a theatre orderly, along with assisting surgeons during operations, Whiting was required to monitor the use of instruments and sterilise what was needed.<sup>52</sup> To keep up with demand, an autoclave along with Primus stoves to boil equipment was used, everything being washed and sterilised ready for the next procedure. Another measure of the conditions in military hospitals in

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<sup>49</sup> *The Australian Women's Weekly*, 25 September 1943, 9.

<sup>50</sup> Transcript of AWM interview with Lila Stocks.

<sup>51</sup> *The Australian Women's Weekly*, 4 December 1943, 16.

<sup>52</sup> Transcript of interview with Maud McKellar, 14 May 2003, Australians at War Film Archive, no.154.

the SWPA, Whiting recalled the frequent task assigned to her of repairing rubber surgical gloves. Salvaging all supplies, surgical gloves with holes were not disposed of, but were patched over by AAMWS. ‘Sister would check them after and blow into them to see if there was any air coming in’, Maud recalled, ‘And they were worn over and over again’.<sup>53</sup>

Stretching the limited resources available to military hospitals in the SWPA also extended to the labour of their staff. As journalist, Alice Jackson came to appreciate, the AAMWS were ‘young women whose stamina and energy [were] being continually drained by the nature of their work’.<sup>54</sup> Serving in the Army without concessions for their gender, one medical officer in New Guinea proclaimed:

Nothing makes me quite so angry as to hear anyone talk of their [AAMWS] work as a ‘glamour’ job. Believe me, there is definitely NO glamour for girls on service here.<sup>55</sup>

During her time with the 2/5 AGH in New Guinea, AAMWS Lila McKenzie saw hard and dirty work in the wards for the widespread tropical diseases of scrub typhus, malaria, and dysentery, as well as the burns and facio-maxillary ward. Each ward, McKenzie recalled, had its own challenges for the nursing staff. For example, malaria patients were more active and so McKenzie had to ‘keep very aware’ of their activities as on one occasion a patient had concocted a batch of ‘jungle juice’.<sup>56</sup> In Ward 13 for scrub typhus McKenzie remarked that ‘there was a lot of nursing’ required.<sup>57</sup> As there was little known about scrub typhus, the medical and nursing teams did a lot of gruelling ‘experimenting’ to identify effective treatments. Conditions in the shared burns and facio-maxillary ward, too, had its own tiring demands. With 36 facio-maxillary patients at one end of the ward, all with their jaws wired shut, and 36 burns patients at the other end, duties were

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> *The Australian Women’s Weekly*, 4 December 1943, 16.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Transcript of AWM interview with Lila Stocks.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

arduous. Nurses and AAMWS had to prepare appropriate meals for the patients and feed them; those with mouth tubes requiring extra attention and care during mealtimes.

One of the most horrific experiences for Lila McKenzie during the war was her first shift in New Guinea. ‘That first morning on duty I would see things that I had never seen in my life before’, she recalled.<sup>58</sup> On 7 September 1943, the Australian troops of the 2/33 Battalion mustered in Port Moresby to be airlifted into combat when an American Liberator bomber failed during take-off and crashed into the marshalled soldiers. Carrying 2800 gallons of petrol, the Liberator was said to have lit the whole area in an ‘intense glare’, the fire blazing for an hour as ammunition continued to explode.<sup>59</sup> McKenzie and the contingent of AAMWS reinforcements received the injured on their first shift at the 2/5 AGH. Suffering horrific burns, 15 men of the 2/33 Battalion were killed instantly, a further 44 men died from their injuries in hospital, and 92 survived their wounds after hospitalisation.<sup>60</sup>

It was vital for AAMWS to manage the emotions evoked by sites of trauma in order to effectively undertake their duties. As Maud Whiting recalled, when patients were admitted to hospital straight from battle, they would watch the faces of the hospital staff as they withdrew the bandages, the patients looking to assess the seriousness of their injuries based on the reactions to their wounds.<sup>61</sup> For Lila McKenzie, her ability to repress her horror and sadness came unquestioningly, ‘You just do’.<sup>62</sup> One AANS nurse working alongside AAMWS in New Guinea was reported in the *Women’s Weekly* saying:

We had years of training before we enlisted. We are thoroughly accustomed to standing up to any strain, but most of these youngsters [AAMWS] have had no real toughening.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> David Dexter, *Australia in the War of 1939-1945, Series One – Army, Volume VI – The New Guinea Offensives* (Canberra: Australian War Memorial, 1961) 358.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Transcript of AWFA interview with Maud McKellar.

<sup>62</sup> Transcript of AWM interview with Lila Stocks.

<sup>63</sup> *The Australian Women’s Weekly*, 4 December 1943, 16.

But as McKenzie determined, AAMWS respected the position of the trained sisters and their ability to cope, and therefore turned to them for their cues, 'We knew that we had to help [the sisters] and we just drew a bit of strength from them'.<sup>64</sup> Though, as Maud Whiting noted, coping did not mean that AAMWS were absent of emotion. Reflecting upon the loss of an Australian soldier aged 17 who died after a week in hospital having been struck in the torso by a grenade, Whiting said, 'It was a shocking thing to see a young fine lad...die like that'.<sup>65</sup> Witnessing such work of the AAMWS during her tour of military establishments in New Guinea, correspondent Alice Jackson concluded, 'I do not know any job in the women's Services, in munitions, or commerce on the mainland which calls for such qualities of fortitude'.<sup>66</sup>

## Writing Home from the Pacific Islands

Throughout the war Australian troops turned to letter writing whenever they were distanced from their loved ones. 'Letters are the great link with home', wrote journalist Alice Jackson, encouraging her *Women's Weekly* audience, 'If you who read this have a daughter or a friend in the AAMWS in New Guinea, write to her often and cheerily'.<sup>67</sup> As historian Joy Damousi highlighted in her close examination of the letters written by General George Vasey to his wife, Jessie during the war, letters from home kept those serving abroad connected to their domestic life.<sup>68</sup> Letters brought one's home, family, and community close to them during times of physical distance, and for some provided a reminder of why they had enlisted. Although letters were often private in nature, containing information specific to one's family or community, news was often shared amongst campmates. In turn, whilst one could not be physically present for their family milestones and significant events, sharing news with others created a collective that responded to the emotion; it

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<sup>64</sup> Transcript of AWM interview with Lila Stocks.

<sup>65</sup> Transcript of AWFA interview with Maud McKellar.

<sup>66</sup> *The Australian Women's Weekly*, 4 December 1943, 16.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>68</sup> Joy Damousi, *The Labour of Loss: Mourning, Memory, and Wartime Bereavement in Australia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 105-125.



enhanced the positives and supported the blows. In the remote location of Atherton, Queensland, Gladys Crawford wrote to her mother of the members of the 2/6 AGH:

The girls here were all so interested to hear of Beryl's babies. It makes one realise just how much we are one family here, we all seem to share the joys and sorrows of everyone.<sup>69</sup>

Crawford had just received news that her sister, Beryl, had given birth to twins, and although nobody from the 2/6 AGH had met Beryl, they shared in the families' happiness. Without knowing what news was to follow, Crawford also remarked how the women of the 2/6 AGH shared in the sorrows of their campmates. At only a few days old, one of Beryl's twins died. Having shared in her celebrations, the women of Crawford's unit then rallied around her to support her in her grief.

At the other end of the correspondence were loved ones at home. Letters written from forward areas portrayed for families and friends on the homefront experiences of life in a theatre of war, as well as reassured them of the author's safety. For those serving, having someone at home to write to offered an audience for them to share their experiences and interpretations of war. However, the imposition of censorship limited the extent one could explore aspects of the war within letters. 'It's hardly worth the bother of writing a letter', determined AAMWS Jessie Laurie upon seeing her letter scored out after it was censored by an officer, 'I've said nothing in there'.<sup>70</sup> Unable to write about their location or the movement of units and being careful not to mention specific information about the war, AAMWS Jill Linton said, 'After a while, what do you write about? It's the same thing every day'.<sup>71</sup> With anything she thought was of interest being cut out by the officers, Linton felt the purpose of her letters was that it, 'just lets people know that you're still in the land of the living'.<sup>72</sup> Nevertheless, letter writing was maintained as a regular activity for many, including AAMWS Edith Donaldson who wrote weekly to her mother while in the Army. From New Guinea where she was posted with the 2/5 AGH in September 1943,

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<sup>69</sup> AWM: PR03002, Letter from Gladys Crawford to her mother, 6 October 1943.

<sup>70</sup> Transcript of interview with Jessie Timcke, 30 June 2004, Australians at War Film Archive, no.2017.

<sup>71</sup> Transcript of AWM interview with Jill Linton.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

Donaldson offered a glimpse of her war work. 'I have been on mess duties for the last two days – quite a change from banging on a typewriter', wrote the former stenographer to her mother, 'and tomorrow I will be in the wards – a very pleasant surprise, believe me'.<sup>73</sup> With censorship restrictions at the forefront of her writing, vague details of her duties were all that Donaldson could provide. 'I am still working in the wards, and loving it of course', Donaldson said on 15 September 1943, her letter the following week offering, 'I have had yet another change – this time am on night duty'.<sup>74</sup>

In her study of British nurses during the First World War, Christine Hallett found that in addition to being conscious of censorship, nurses also self-imposed restrictions that embroidered or suppressed detail.<sup>75</sup> In a close reading of the letters Edith Donaldson wrote home, it is evident that AAMWS in the Second World War also employed such authorial choices. Creating a light-hearted impression of night duty for her family, Donaldson wrote:

I like it very much – especially waking the patients up while it is still dark to stick a thermometer in their mouths. I haven't been sworn at yet, although I bet they'd like to say just what they think. Some of the lads look so funny when they're waking up that I'm afraid I do the rounds with a perpetual grin on my face.<sup>76</sup>

More commonly, Hallett argues, First World War nurses wrote with authorial intention that sought to mitigate the impact of their trauma when sharing their experiences with their family and friends. This, too, is evident in Donaldson's letters which demonstrated an awareness of the trauma experienced by those grieving on the homefront. For example, upon receiving news in a letter from home that a family friend serving in the Pacific had been killed in action, Donaldson identified that one of her patients was from the same unit as her friend. From her patient,

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<sup>73</sup> AWM: PR00338, Letter from Edith Donaldson to her mother, 8 September 1943.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid, 15 September 1943; 24 September 1943.

<sup>75</sup> Christine E Hallett, 'The Personal Writings of First World War Nurses: A Study of the Interplay of Authorial Intention and Scholarly Interpretation,' *Nursing Inquiry* 14, no.4 (2007), 322; Hallett, 'Portrayals of Suffering,' 69.

<sup>76</sup> AWM: PR00338, Letter from Edith Donaldson to her mother, 24 September 1943.

Donaldson was able to learn of the circumstances that led to her friend's death. Fighting a duel with two of the enemy, Donaldson's friend from home, Alan was initially wounded in the shoulder. While receiving medical treatment on the battlefield, a bombing raid came over and Alan was killed. Writing only briefly to her family as to avoid censorship, Donaldson shared part of what she had learned, but concluded, 'I naturally can't tell you the full story, lest it was really rotten luck'.<sup>77</sup> Having gained information of interest to those she knew at home, Donaldson felt compelled to write to Alan's partner, Bess, who was also a friend. Conscious of the effect the information may have, Donaldson disclosed to her family that she would omit details to protect Bess:

I feel I can't write too much to Bess, but I know she would like to hear that I had met someone who was with him at the time even though I can't, and wouldn't, give her the full details.<sup>78</sup>

### *Avoiding Official Censorship*

Among the letters Edith Donaldson wrote in New Guinea were two that evaded official censorship. Bypassing the formal channels for mail in the Army, these two uncensored letters were delivered to Donaldson's mother via entrepreneurial ways. On both occasions, patients who were returning to Australia for greater medical treatment or discharge offered to carry home letters for Donaldson, posting them once in Australia via regular mail without oversight by censors. This, therefore, allowed Donaldson to disclose information and offer interpretations that were usually barred by the censor, thus creating a significant insight into her wartime experience. Writing with the knowledge that she 'won't have to bother about censorship' in these letters, Donaldson was able to share an open account of topics that were not usually permitted.<sup>79</sup> However, she still made

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid, 9 October 1943.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid, 26 November 1943.

authorial choices—as she had done when writing about her friend’s death—that suppressed details and aimed to create an impression that protected the recipient, her mother. As such, the uncensored letters penned by Donaldson while serving in the Pacific are a unique source that dismantles one common barrier for historical understanding but that is still layered in its context.

In the opening lines of her first uncensored letter, Donaldson highlighted the significance she saw in the opportunity to write freely, stating:

As we are not permitted to say anything about the wards we work in...and as that is the main topic of general conversation I find it very hard to find news to put in my ordinary letters.<sup>80</sup>

Without detailed discussion of their work in general correspondence, Donaldson provides a rare source that describes the service of AAMWS and her feelings towards her role. After working in the malaria ward followed by nursing dysentery cases, she was rostered to the psychiatry ward of the 2/5 AGH. Attempting to allay any concerns her mother may have felt, Donaldson wrote that her posting to the psychiatry ward was, ‘at my own request’, but does disclose in jest that after six weeks she was ‘almost as bomb happy as some of the patients’.<sup>81</sup> Speaking of her patients in terms usually rejected by the censor, Donaldson shared that there were not ‘many bad cases’ in the psychiatry ward, but that ‘the few we have are quite mad and wander around with wild looks in their eyes’.<sup>82</sup> Illustrating the extremes of nursing psychiatric cases in the Pacific islands during the war, Donaldson stated, ‘Occasionally when they have injections about six of us have to sit on them, my position being across the knees’, again covering the trauma with humour going on to write, ‘needless to say, if they buck too much I go shooting up in the air!’.<sup>83</sup> While the humorous accounts given by Donaldson create comical scenes that work to mitigate their traumatic reality for her mother, as Hallett suggests, finding joy through a light-hearted outlook was also a key

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

coping mechanism for those experiencing the war on the frontline. Commenting on the nature of her work in the psychiatric ward, Donaldson expressed, 'it really is awfully interesting, but it's essential to keep one's sense of humour'.<sup>84</sup>

Written almost three months after the first, when Donaldson penned her second uncensored letter she had been transferred from the psychiatric ward, 'much to my disgust', she stated.<sup>85</sup> She had been rostered onto 'the unenviable job of relieving', which saw her cover the nightshift in various wards while the AAMWS who regularly staffed those wards had the night off.<sup>86</sup> Yet, she acknowledged that relieving gave her 'plenty of variety' in her work, including exposure to surgical wards.<sup>87</sup> 'Until I landed this job', Donaldson wrote, 'I had had nothing to do with surgical wards but had kept to the medical side of the business'.<sup>88</sup> However, with the change in her responsibilities came new challenges. 'Some of the ghastly wounds I've seen this week take a bit of getting used to', she wrote to her mother in a manner not typical of general correspondence, disclosing:

On my first night in surgical I had to instil my willpower to stop me from racing outside and having my heart up. However, I managed to last the distance, but I must admit when I came off duty I sat down and had a good old howl.<sup>89</sup>

Without previous exposure to surgical cases or training to ready her for the sites of trauma, Donaldson had to find ways to manage the impact herself. After the distress she felt on her first night in a surgical ward that led her to tears, by her third night Donaldson stated that she had suppressed her sorrow, writing, 'I am more or less immune and can walk away from a ward in the morning and forget all about it'.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid, 13 February 1944.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

Any mention of the progress of war was strictly forbidden under the censor's eye, so within her uncensored letters Donaldson could offer her family some hopeful information about the situation in the Pacific. 'This place at the moment is as full of rumours as a porcupine is of prickles. It's simply not done to repeat any of them', she wrote, 'but the general idea seems to be that we will be enjoying the comforts of home before long'.<sup>91</sup> Yet, the opportunity to write home without the imposition of censorship also gave Donaldson the unique space to think about and articulate her response to the war, including her emotional reactions to the trauma she was experiencing. Donaldson's first exposure to surgical cases caught her unprepared and her physiological response to traumatic situations was not an isolated incident. 'I used to feel really sick listening to some of the stories they [soldiers] told about what they had seen and done', she explained, 'gruesome talk they'd tell without turning a hair'.<sup>92</sup> At first Donaldson was unable to fathom how someone may be unmoved by the trauma, exclaiming, 'It's surprising how hardened one becomes'.<sup>93</sup> However, upon commencing work in surgical wards where she witnessed sites previously unimaginable to her, Donaldson stated, 'It's made me understand why the boys who have been over the top become so hard and callous'.<sup>94</sup> For Donaldson, the traumatic sites she experienced working in the surgical wards of the 2/5 AGH in New Guinea led her to conclude that:

I can quite realise now that sights like that, and far worse, have been an everyday occurrence with them and just don't mean a thing anymore.<sup>95</sup>

An emotion likely not to have been shown in the wards, Donaldson expresses her sympathy for her patients within her uncensored letters. 'Poor devils, it's a wretched business', she wrote regarding the horrors faced by the troops, also illustrating her own response to the war.<sup>96</sup> In her expressions that show her own vulnerability to wartime trauma, Donaldson also includes these

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid, 26 November 1943.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid, 13 February 1944.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

sympathies. 'I'll admit it does become a bit trying sometimes...but the boys have to put up with a lot more than we have'.<sup>97</sup> In this, Donaldson places the trauma of men above her own, expressing that their experience was more severe and significant thus contributing to the historically masculine hierarchy of war. However, describing her emotions within the context of her patients' experiences assists Donaldson in her endeavour to lessen the impact of her trauma to protect her mother. 'Don't worry about me, Mum. I'm really quite happy, and we make a lot of fun', she wrote in attempt to provide her family with some reassurance about her work.<sup>98</sup> 'I'm not a bit sorry I came, and it will be an interesting experience to look back on', she maintained in hope that her family would not be concerned for her.<sup>99</sup>

## Conclusion

The Second World War, and the strain that is placed on the medical and health systems, created an environment where boundaries that had once defined profession, skill, and voluntarism were blurred. Presenting themselves as an organisation ready and willing to serve, by 1943 members of the AAMWS were seen by the military medical and nursing services as not only a labour force, but also as a body of women eager to learn. Pressures of need paired with the presence and availability of VAs/AAMWS illustrates how responsibility can be shifted across the usual definitions of the spaces that are afforded to those deemed to be skilled and those that are not. Having evolved from a voluntary civilian reserve into a formal military service, the duties of AAMWS was continuously shifting. Yet, AAMWS did not shy away from opportunities, in fact they embraced them and accepted that acknowledgement for their good work was to be offered greater responsibility. Demonstrating their desire for work, AAMWS gained the respect of nurses and medical officers and became key resources within the military medical system. Initial hesitations of Army nurses

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<sup>97</sup> Ibid, 26 November 1943.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

towards the AAMWS were overcome and increasingly AAMWS were sent into situations to assist nurses.

Consequently, the efficient running of military hospitals was aided by AAMWS assuming a position akin to that of the pupil nurse within the civilian hospital system of the time. Taking the place of what was effectively a trainee within the wards, AAMWS gained a great deal of nursing experience working alongside trained professionals. However, although AAMWS had some initial training and preparation for their work, which readied them for the routine and discipline of military hospitals and were warned that they would need a 'strong constitution', they were not prepared for the trauma which they encountered. The increased responsibilities AAMWS were afforded, and the new spaces they occupied, led to their exposure to new sites of trauma which impacted many of the women. Nevertheless, AAMWS showed that they had the mettle and continued to find interest and passion in their duties supporting the nursing of patients throughout Australia and the Pacific. Having been afforded the space by the service nurses to glimpse at and act as part of the nursing profession as this chapter has shown, Chapter 6 then turns to the Army's recognition of AAMWS' efforts which came by way of offering them the chance to become fully trained nurses.



## Chapter 6

### Aids to become Nurses: The AAMWS Nurse Training Scheme

The full strength of 84 civilian VAs were withdrawn from service at Sydney Hospital on 14 June 1943. *The Sun* described their removal as owing to the ‘disagreeable attitude’ and protest arising from the trained nursing staff.<sup>1</sup> Deputy-Controller of NSW civilian VADs, Dorothy Wilby demanded that the voluntary service of these women ‘should be recognised by civilian nurses’, and threatened that if civil hospitals did not want the help of the VAs, then they would easily find work elsewhere.<sup>2</sup> These women did not return to their voluntary duties as orderlies and hospital assistants for four days.

Objections to the presence of civilian VAs by nurses at Sydney Hospital was founded on the misunderstanding of a leaked government proposal, combined with confusion between civilian VAs and the paid military auxiliary. Yet, this local grievance was not isolated. Controversy surrounded the leaked government proposal which sought to train AAMWS in military hospitals to become registered nurses. Civilian nurses and nurse trainees campaigned across the nation against the scheme, gaining support from nurse associations and some politicians. As debate continued, so did the coverage in the nation’s newspapers. Sparked by a press leak, this issue remained a political concern and was encouraged by ongoing media attention. Not only does this case study highlight political and interjurisdictional divisions during the war, but it also shows a fracture of the nursing profession between those enlisted in the military and their civilian counterparts. Furthermore, in a period when the whole nation seemed to support the war effort, this example draws upon protest and debate launched by civilians against a measure proposed by the government and that was deemed urgent. It also challenges the notion that the press supported

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<sup>1</sup> *The Sun* (Sydney), 15 June 1943, 3.

<sup>2</sup> *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 15 June 1943, 7.

all government strategies during the war and that papers were completely inhibited by wartime censorship.

Using materials from the restricted collections of the Australian Nursing Federation and the Royal Victorian College of Nursing, as well as newspaper reports and government records, this chapter examines the scheme to train AAMWS for their nursing qualifications in the Army, and the controversy that enveloped it. No deep and sustained examination of this aspect of the history of the AAWMS has been conducted until now. Yet, it demonstrates the service's relationship to the nursing profession, including the aspects that divide them and those that bind them. It is the moment when AAMWS did, indeed, become nurses and give truth to the stereotype. Furthermore, the scheme's effect on the professional status of nursing is a significant part of a longer debate of the nursing profession that surrounded the place of the nursing assistant. Research undertaken for this chapter has traced the servicewomen who participated in this scheme and their ongoing place in the nursing profession. While highlighting the tensions and fragmentations between nurses, jurisdictions, and individuals, this chapter also questions whether the scheme can be seen as effecting any positive outcome.

### **A National Problem and a Military Plan**

By 1941, Australian states were experiencing a severe shortage of nurses. In part, this was due to the resourcing of military medical establishments being drawn from the civil health system. However, the nurse staffing pressures effected both military and civil hospitals as the allure of new job opportunities for women pulled people away from the profession. The conditions of nursing were incomparable with the 'less arduous and onerous work and more attractive pay' of other jobs.<sup>3</sup> As historian Marilyn Lake noted, women who undertook jobs during the war that were

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<sup>3</sup> *The Mercury* (Hobart), 12 November 1941, 6.

previously earmarked for men earned unprecedentedly high wages owing to the WEB.<sup>4</sup> Established in 1942, the WEB determined the appropriate pay for women in their new occupations, awarding between 60 and 90 per cent of the male wage. Contrastingly, civilian nurses' pay for a 96-hour fortnight remained unfavourable compared to other 44-hour per week female occupations.<sup>5</sup> For instance, in a judgement by the Queensland Arbitration Court it was noted that a trained staff nurses in that state were paid approximately £4 per week, whereas a 21-year-old clerical worker without a qualification received at least 86 per cent of that wage.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, women could not commence their nurse training until the age of 18, but other employment opportunities were available for women from age 16. And so, girls who would have otherwise taken up nursing, instead took up work in the auxiliary forces or war industries much earlier. This diminished the number of women and girls entering the nursing profession and, therefore, the shortage of nurse trainees became an urgent issue.

Hospitals that had previously enjoyed lengthy wait lists for women wishing to undertake nurse training were by 1941 decrying the lists' non-existence. Tasmania's Director of Public Health, EJ Tudor stated that for nursing positions in Tasmania's regional locations, 'it is seldom that more than one application is received'.<sup>7</sup> Considering a measure to improve the situation, the Tasmanian Nurses' Registration Board began discussions in November 1941, proposing to condense the four-year nurse training period. In April 1942, under the Emergency Nursing Service Order, the Victorian Government introduced compulsory registration for all trained nurses and midwives under the age of 60 in an effort to best direct their services. This advanced a voluntary register which had been developed earlier in the conflict by the Victorian Nurses' Registration Board. Alongside this, the Victorian Chief Health Officer convened an advisory committee with

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<sup>4</sup> Lake, *Getting Equal*, 188.

<sup>5</sup> Glenda Law, 'I Have Never Liked Trade Unionism': The Development of the Royal Australian Nursing Federation, Queensland Branch, 1904-45,' in *Women, Class and History*, 209-210.

<sup>6</sup> *Queensland Government Gazette* CLXI, no.71, 8 September 1943.

<sup>7</sup> *The Mercury* (Hobart), 12 November 1941, 6.

the Matrons-in-Chief of the Army and Air Force nursing services, the Nurses' Registration Board, and the Royal Victorian College of Nursing. Using the register, the advisory committee was tasked with organising and maintaining the adequate supply of nurses throughout Victoria, giving attention to the number being enlisted in the forces.

Ten months after Victoria introduced the compulsory registration of qualified nurses in that state, the Manpower Directorate did the same on a federal level.<sup>8</sup> Under the National Security Act, the Manpower Directorate was responsible for organising the workforce by directing labour to essential industries. Announced in February 1943 by the Director-General of Manpower, Wallace Wurth, all women, irrespective of age and marital status, with nurse registration or the qualifications for such, and all nurse trainees and those commencing training were required to notify the Manpower Directorate of their qualifications and employment status. Penalties applied for those who failed to register, and Wurth warned that women who were assessed by the Manpower Directorate to be 'not using [their nursing qualifications] to the best advantage would be directed from their present employment'.<sup>9</sup> Wurth released figures gained through the compulsory nurse registration in May 1943, included here in Table 2. The Manpower Directorate had found that there were 45,060 women with nursing qualifications in Australia, excluding Western Australia.<sup>10</sup> Of this total, there were just 2773 that were unmarried and not in employment. However, 55 per cent of women who were unmarried and unemployed stated that they were not willing to work, and only 16 per cent of married women indicated they would consider finding part-time work.<sup>11</sup> Wurth warned that the Manpower Directorate would investigate each of the cases where qualified nurses were employed in other occupations, and where women were unmarried and unemployed.

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<sup>8</sup> *The Argus* (Melbourne), 20 February 1943, 4.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> It is unknown why Western Australia was excluded and no comparable data has been located.

<sup>11</sup> *The Advertiser* (Adelaide), 26 May 1943, 4.

**Table 2:** National Register of Women with Nursing Qualifications, May 1943.

Number of women with nursing qualifications	45,060
Engaged in nursing duties	24,816
Registered nurses	14,483
Pupil nurses	10,333
Employed in other work	1848
Not in employment	18,396
Married	15,583
Willing to work part-time (has dependants)	1241
Willing to work part-time (no dependants)	1220
Not willing to work	13,122
Unmarried	2773
Willing to work full-time	408
Willing to work part-time	835
Not willing to work	1530

In June 1943, Charles Bellemore, NSW Deputy-Director of Manpower, cautioned further that qualified nurses found not working within their trained profession would be directed into hospital occupation.<sup>12</sup> Manpower officials in NSW learned of three nurses that were working as factory machinists and swiftly directed the women to re-join their profession at their local hospital. As a profession, nurses had been seeking fairer working conditions and increased pay for over a decade. With the war bringing new job opportunities for women that had higher wages, less hours, and better conditions, the number of women wanting to work as a nurse was declining.

Seeking to identify a solution to the situation, military and government officials identified a cohort of women that they deemed suitable for nurse training. It was also their assumption that these women wished to become nurses and so would welcome the opportunity. The AAMWS was a workforce already assisting the Medical Corps and working alongside the professional nursing service in hospital wards as orderlies, many without any qualification. As penned by the Prime

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<sup>12</sup> *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 16 June 1943, 6.

Minister, the belief of the Government was that the AAMWS consisted of ‘many women who would, in the ordinary course, have entered the [civil] training hospitals [as nurse trainees], but whose interests have been diverted to war work’.<sup>13</sup> As has been stated, the shortage of nurse trainees was owing to the mobilisation of women towards the war effort. That is, where a woman or girl may have once thought of a career in nursing before the war, her employment prospects were broadened with the increased job opportunities for women in both civilian occupations and the military auxiliaries. However, it cannot be assumed that the women who joined the AAMWS were those who may have looked towards a career in nursing if it were not for the war. For instance, many of the AAMWS who had begun as civilians VAs would have had the chance to join the profession before the war.

Conscious that no more nurses could be released to the forces from civil hospitals, a scheme was developed to provide nurse training in military hospitals to members of the AAMWS. As the AAMWS were already supporting the resourcing of military hospitals, it was seen as a convenient source for potential nurse trainees. Furthermore, deploying current AAMWS would not reduce the strength of the military service, nor would it place any further strain on the civil nursing network. The Prime Minister stated that the number of women already enlisted in the AAMWS was ‘sufficient to keep the Army training schools filled for some time to come’.<sup>14</sup> Coralie Poolman, Secretary of the NSW civilian VAD, identified that all 69 AAMWS from NSW who had served in the Middle East as VAs wished to become nurses, already exceeding the proposed quota of 39 trainees from that state as part of the first intake of the scheme.<sup>15</sup>

Conceived by the Army DGMS, Major-General Roy Burston and Colonel Annie Sage, Army Matron-in-Chief, the proposed scheme was envisaged by those embedded within the system. They were experienced leaders of the medical and nursing professions and had first-hand

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<sup>13</sup> University of Melbourne Archives, Australian Nursing Federation, Federal Office Collection, 1986.149.E/78, Letter from Prime Minister John Curtin to state premiers, 18 February 1943.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 2 June 1943, 10.

knowledge of the AAMWS' capabilities. They also had an acute awareness of the situation that effected the resourcing of civil and military hospitals. Gaining support for the scheme from the Minister for the Army, Frank Forde, the proposal was taken to federal cabinet. Receiving the backing of the Prime Minister, John Curtin, the scheme was given support. However, owing to nurse qualifications being controlled by each state, the support of each state government and their respective nurses' registration board was required. On 18 February 1943, the Prime Minister wrote to all state premiers seeking their approval of the scheme to train AAMWS as nurses. Curtin began his letter to state premiers by identifying the problem of nurse shortages that plagued both military and civil hospitals. To signal the advantages for them, he claimed that state approval of the scheme would have 'many beneficial results for all concerned'.<sup>16</sup> Full particulars of the proposed scheme were set out in the correspondence, detailing that AAMWS would undertake two years of nurse training in a military base hospital, treating both medical and surgical cases. Then, owing to most patients being men, trainees would enter a civil hospital to complete their training in areas such as gynaecology and paediatrics. Curtin acknowledged that to gain state approval, the premiers would have to liaise with their nurses' registration boards, which had not previously been consulted on the topic.

Although Major-General Burston had conferred with military and government officials, including the Director-General of Manpower, Wallace Wurth, civil nursing associations and state authorities had not been consulted. While there is no indication that the lack of conference was intentional, it was seen later by nursing leaders to be a poor oversight and a clear marker of disrespect.<sup>17</sup> When the proposed scheme was then leaked to the press, it resulted in considerable protest and objection from civilian nurses and nurse associations, and caution from state nurses' registration boards.

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<sup>16</sup> University of Melbourne Archives, Australian Nursing Federation, Federal Office Collection, 1986.149.E/78, Letter from Prime Minister John Curtin to state premiers, 18 February 1943.

<sup>17</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 21 June 1943, 6; *The Sun* (Sydney), 19 June 1944, 2.

## The Leaked Scheme and Government Silence

When the Prime Minister wrote to state premiers in February 1943, seeking their ‘early and favourable consideration’ of the scheme, there had been no official public communication regarding the proposal.<sup>18</sup> There had been limited discussion with key organisations outside of the military, and communication with civil nursing bodies had been non-existent. However, on 26 May 1943, extracts of the response to the Prime Minister from the South Australian Premier, Thomas Playford, regarding the proposal were published in the *Adelaide Advertiser*.<sup>19</sup> The article provided brief editorial content, letting the Premier’s words detailing the specific conditions under which South Australia would accept the scheme, speak for themselves. As the proposal was in its infancy, the Premier’s letter conveyed specific administrative suggestions from the South Australian Nurses’ Registration Board and highlighted potential points of concern. This included the possibility of discontent from civilian trainees owing to the pay and uniform of the AAMWS. Reciprocity was also raised as a matter of concern, South Australia calling for the scheme’s uniformity so that it would not interfere with existing agreements for reciprocal nurse registration between Australian states and the United Kingdom.

Following the media leak, the matter then lay silent in the papers for two weeks. That was until 11 June 1943, when the papers in every state capital published news of the rallies held the previous night by nurses and nurse trainees at the three main Sydney hospitals: Prince Henry, Sydney, and Royal Prince Alfred. Summarising the reason for the rallies, Maylean Heffron, a nurse at Sydney’s Prince Henry’s Hospital, stated, ‘This meeting protests against the proposed...training of the AAMWS. We demand a clear explanation and the withdrawal of the proposal’.<sup>20</sup> It was claimed that 70 per cent of the nursing staff attended the protests and unanimously supported the resolution that Major-General Burston withdraw the proposal, or they were prepared to resign.

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<sup>18</sup> University of Melbourne Archives, Australian Nursing Federation, Federal Office Collection, 1986.149.E/78, Letter from Prime Minister John Curtin to state premiers, 18 February 1943.

<sup>19</sup> *The Advertiser* (Adelaide), 26 May 1943, 4.

<sup>20</sup> *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 11 June 1943, 4.



According to the protest spokesperson, Maylean Heffron, the scheme was ‘nothing but an affront to the many thousands of nurses who had slaved for four years [training] at public hospitals’.<sup>21</sup>

Arising from the Sydney protests, a resolution was sent to the Prime Minister, the Minister for the Army, and the NSW Minister for Health requesting that, ‘the present high standard of nursing be guarded assiduously’.<sup>22</sup> The civilian nurses claimed that their primary concern was for their professional status, and that it was at risk under the conditions of the proposed scheme. Nurse training at civil hospitals had been developed tirelessly over many years and was seen to have achieved a high standard that afforded nurses respect and professional status. It was suggested by the protesting nurses that in no way could military hospitals offer the same quality of training or uphold the levels of discipline and professionalisation that had been achieved in civil hospitals. There was also concern felt regarding the unanswered question of reciprocity with the United Kingdom. Through an agreement between the nurses’ registration boards in Australia and the United Kingdom, a nurse who had trained in Australia could gain their registration in the United Kingdom. To Australian nurses, such an agreement acknowledged the professionalism of Australian nursing.

However, as notable journalist Colin Simpson said, the ‘hard fact’ was that civilian nurses felt unfairly treated by the continuing poor pay and conditions of nursing in Australia.<sup>23</sup> This sentiment was expressed by Heffron who indicated that the Army had much more appeal than civil nursing, stating:

Most of us joined the nursing service before the war. There is no more glamour attached to it now than then and no less hard work; nor have we any uniform to inform the general public of our work.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 15 June 1943, 7.

<sup>23</sup> *The Sun* (Sydney), 20 June 1943, p4.

<sup>24</sup> *The West Australian* (Perth), 11 June 1943, 4.

Protests in Sydney were ongoing, and their cause spread to other jurisdictions. On 29 June, rallies of similar numbers of civilian nurses and nurse trainees protesting the AAMWS training scheme were held in Melbourne at Prince Henry's Hospital. Meetings continued to be arranged by civilian nurses and their associations to discuss the matter, despite the lack of new information.

Although the proposal had been leaked with incomplete details of its administration, neither Curtin nor his Government provided the press with clearer information about the scheme, let alone the civil hospitals. Hospital officials could not respond to the concerns of their staff, unable to provide clearer information about the proposal as all they knew of it was from the press reports. Only after civilian nurses continued to raise their grievances in public forums did government and military authorities begin to respond. This was without coordination or the sophisticated approach to the press that is associated with Prime Minister Curtin, a former journalist. It was reported that an official from the Manpower Directorate warned that the nurses who threatened to resign in protest would be 'violating the National Security Regulations', while Burston stated that the protests were, 'premature and made before the nurses knew the full details of the plan'.<sup>25</sup> Wallace Wurth, also fuelled unrest when he warned that if the plan was not supported, the alternative would be to 'direct girls against their will to enter the nursing profession'.<sup>26</sup> But as the details of the proposal were still being negotiated and determined by the states, the government did not issue more specific information about the scheme.

### *Taking Issue, Taking Aim: Public Debate in the Press*

Statements from official sources attempting to allay concerns were piecemeal and resulted in further criticism in the press. Burtson defended the proposal, saying that the training scheme

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<sup>25</sup> *The Telegraph* (Brisbane), 11 June 1943, 4; *The Advertiser* (Adelaide), 11 June 1943, 5.

<sup>26</sup> *The Argus* (Melbourne), 14 June 1943, 4.

adopted the highest standards from existing state requirements.<sup>27</sup> He also assured that the responsibility to assess a trainee and approve their registration as a qualified nurse remained with the state nurses' registration boards.<sup>28</sup> But letters to the editor published in the press across the nation fuelled debate and, combined with the ongoing protests, became increasingly critical of the AAMWS, not just the proposed scheme.

Military leaders had identified AAMWS' strength of character through their service in military hospital wards, and thus recognised their suitability as candidates to enter the nursing profession. Civilian nurses, however, had not seen AAMWS at work. Nevertheless, the proposed training scheme angered civilian nurses and they developed animosity towards the AAMWS. Although Maylean Heffron was quoted as saying, 'We have no quarrel whatsoever with the AAMWS or with the civilian VAs who are doing a splendid wartime job', statements of protest by civilian nurses turned critical of the servicewomen.<sup>29</sup> Nurses at Prince Henry Hospital in Sydney—where Heffron was a nurse and led the protests—gave an ultimatum to medical leaders, stating:

Give them a certain time to staff hospitals with VAs. If they believe VAs to be so qualified and efficient, they should be willing to do this; but if they can't, then they should see the unfairness of the scheme and drop it.<sup>30</sup>

Demonstrating the ongoing challenge faced by the service, here the organisational identity of the service was mistaken – either the AAMWS were mislabelled in this instance as VAs, or the distinction between the servicewomen and civilian VAs continued to prove too much for the public to comprehend. Nevertheless, nurses in Sydney warned that even if these women successfully undertook two years of training in military hospitals to satisfy the Nurses' Registration Board, when they entered civil hospitals in their third year it would 'create a crisis'.<sup>31</sup> Nurse Werne

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<sup>27</sup> *The Advertiser* (Adelaide), 11 June 1943, 5; *The Sun* (Sydney), 14 June 1943, 2; *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 18 June 1943, 4.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 17 June 1943, 4.

<sup>30</sup> *The Sun* (Sydney), 14 June 1943, 2.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 15 June 1943, 3.

from Paramatta Hospital stated, 'Nurses who have had to train under less glamorous and less remunerative conditions will not take to them [AAMWS trainees] too kindly'.<sup>32</sup>

The privileges and conditions afforded to women in the services was a sticking point with civilian nurses and heightened tensions between the two cohorts. The military was seen as providing its members, including possible AAMWS nurse trainees, with benefits that were incomparable to that offered to civilian nurses. A South Australian nurse trainee wrote to *The Advertiser* asking:

Why should they [AAMWS] get this privilege, plus a glamorous uniform, higher pay, and concession rates for leave, while we probationers spend four years training, with no privileges and on such a low rate of pay?<sup>33</sup>

The discrepancy in pay was noticeable. A third-year civilian nurse trainee received 4s 2d a day, not including any concessions or her board and lodging. An AAMWS under the age of 21 was paid 3s 10d per day, and 4s 4d if she was over 21. But AAMWS also received 1s 6d per week deferred pay, as well as postal and travel concessions, tax exemptions, and her lodgings were provided. Furthermore, under the scheme an AAMWS training as a nurse would undertake their third year as a nurse trainee in a civil hospital with the pay of 8s a day, twice what her civilian counterpart received.<sup>34</sup> Nurse trainees in Tasmania wrote to *The Mercury* and questioned, 'With such bright prospects for service trainees, what girl would prefer a civilian training?'.<sup>35</sup>

Although the scheme had been designed to ease the nurse shortage crisis, civilian nurses questioned the impact of the scheme on the civil training system and their profession more broadly. They argued that the number of women seeking to become trainees at civil hospitals would decline further, suggesting that they would instead be lured by the prospect of training in the Army. Those cautious of the scheme argued that the benefits provided in the AAMWS, which

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> *The Advertiser* (Adelaide), 16 June 1943, 6.

<sup>34</sup> *The Sun* (Sydney), 20 June 1943, 4.

<sup>35</sup> *The Mercury* (Hobart), 21 June 1943, 3.

were not afforded to civilian nurses, would further deter potential nurse trainees from entering the profession through civil hospitals. That was despite the Prime Minister's initial communication to state premiers, which stated that the current cohort of AAMWS already offered enough potential students.

This, however, did not account for the fact that the training scheme would effectively end any prospect for civilian nurses to be enlisted. Nursing had been the main avenue for women to serve in the military before the creation of the women's auxiliaries in 1942. As such, nurse training in a civil hospital had offered a unique future possibility for women to join the forces. But with the depleting number of qualified nurses available for both military and civil needs, the opportunity to enlist with the services had already been denied to many nurses. The notion of a training scheme that would further hinder their chances to directly contribute to the war effort provoked the existing dissatisfaction felt by civilian nurses waiting to be called upon for military service.<sup>36</sup> A trainee at Prince Henry Hospital who was in her third year felt resentment towards the advantages given to the AAMWS, questioning the skills required by the military when she stated, 'I cannot go abroad with the troops, yet practically totally unskilled and unqualified AAMWS can'.<sup>37</sup>

Although nurses at the Royal Prince Alfred Hospital stated, 'We do not for a moment grudge these girls their career in the Army', it was evident that civilian nurses felt that the military had delivered them a blow.<sup>38</sup> For decades, nurses and nursing associations had battled to achieve recognition and status for their profession. But as the West Australian branch of the Australasian Trained Nurses' Association highlighted in a letter to the editor, civilian nurses did not receive the public recognition of 'honour and glory' that was given to servicewomen.<sup>39</sup> The war had created a new social status where the public placed service personnel at the apex. With a recognisable military

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<sup>36</sup> *The Sun* (Sydney), 14 June 1943, 2; 16 June 1943, 2.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid*, 15 June 1943, 3.

<sup>38</sup> NAA: MP742/1, 21/3/598 Part 2, Nurses from the Royal Prince Alfred Hospital to the Hon JA Beasley MP, 12 August 1943.

<sup>39</sup> *The West Australian* (Perth), 18 June 1943, 4.

uniform that was permitted to be worn while off duty, it was easy to identify the contribution to the war of servicewomen. As such, AAMWS received public gratitude for their efforts. Some civilian nurses expressed their contempt for this as they had nothing to signify their jobs in public, albeit as part of a restricted occupation. Maylean Heffron stated, 'We have often been glared at by girls in the services because we are not in uniform'.<sup>40</sup> But it was rightfully acknowledged by civilian nurses that their work and service in a civilian setting was important in contributing to the nation's overall war effort. Making this point publicly, nurse trainees in Hobart wrote to *The Mercury*, 'We consider any job well done at the present time is helping the war effort. After all, who would attend civilian patients if we all joined the Army?'.<sup>41</sup>

The question of recognition was not confined to the immediate issue of being 'glared at' on the street. The high status afforded to those with military service was predicted to be a positive advantage in future. Raised at the protests in Sydney, the scheme triggered concerns regarding post-war employment opportunities for nurses. As one nurse attending the Sydney protests stated, '[AAMWS] would always have a psychological advantage in the eyes of the public'.<sup>42</sup> Exhibiting resentment towards the opportunity being offered to servicewomen and the status their service career offered, Heffron proclaimed, 'We did not need a war to make us become nurses... They [AAMWS] knew when they enlisted that they would have no official status at the end of the war'.<sup>43</sup>

Only two letters to the editor in support of the scheme have been located in the leading city newspapers. *The Sydney Morning Herald* published a letter from 'Service Girl' who wrote that she was, 'disappointed to note the attitude adopted by so many nurses'.<sup>44</sup> Offering a positive outlook and encouraging a tactical approach for improving civilian nurse pay and conditions, 'Service Girl' was hopeful that the profession could support the AAMWS training scheme. She

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid, 11 June 1943, 4.

<sup>41</sup> *The Mercury* (Hobart), 21 June 1943, 3.

<sup>42</sup> *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 16 June 1943, 6.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid, 15 June 1943, 7.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid, 18 June 1943, 3.

believed that the AAMWS would bring with them their better pay, thus improving the standards for civilian trainees. The letter concluded, 'Let these girls train for three years, and answer a crying need'.<sup>45</sup> Similarly, an East Malvern resident wrote to *The Argus* with regard to the severe shortage of nurses stating, 'If such a scheme as suggested is not introduced immediately the consequences may be serious'.<sup>46</sup> Regrettably, the shortage of nurses continued. Almost two years later *The West Australian* published another letter to the editor. The correspondent warned that the acute shortage of nurses should be a concern of the whole community and wrote that it was 'to be regretted that adverse circumstances have arisen out of the proposed scheme to part-train the service girl in a military hospital'.<sup>47</sup> They deplored the fuss regarding pay and stated there is no glamour in a uniform or within either the AAMWS or the nursing profession.

### *Controlling the Narrative: The Coordinated Approach of Nurse Associations*

Responding to the protesting civilian nurses, including the 200 from Sydney's Prince Henry Hospital who were threatening to resign if the scheme was not scrapped, Minister Forde released a press statement. 'These trainee nurses', the press release said, 'obviously have a wrong conception of the plan'.<sup>48</sup> Forde then offered a more detailed explanation of the plan. His statement attempted to address the concerns of civilian nurses and nurse trainees, reassuring that the syllabus adopted the highest standards of each state registration board and would provide a course consistent with civilian training. Forde also took the opportunity to announce that the plan, as detailed in the Prime Minister's letter to state premiers, had been approved with minor amendments by all states, except NSW. Having received support from the states, Forde asserted that the scheme protected the interests of the nursing profession and would preserve to it, 'many women who would in the

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> *The Argus* (Melbourne), 18 June 1943, 8.

<sup>47</sup> *The West Australian* (Perth), 20 March 1945, 3.

<sup>48</sup> NAA: MP742/1, 21/3/598 Part 2, Ministerial Press Release, 16 June 1943.

normal course have entered training hospitals, but whose interests have been directed to war work'.<sup>49</sup>

However, on the same day that Forde released his press statement, *The Sun* published a scathing editorial on the Australian Government's 'habit' of failing to consult with representative bodies on policy changes. With the proposal having 'raised resentment', *The Sun* claimed, 'It is to be regretted that...the Army authorities did not consult the nurses as well as the leaders of the profession itself'.<sup>50</sup> Without being consulted during the planning of the scheme, and as the Government continued to overlook their authority, civilian nursing associations, which were versed in such challenges to power, began their appeal. The professional association for nursing, the ATNA sent a letter of protest to the Prime Minister and Minister for Health. It stated not only that they thought the scheme would be too difficult to implement, but also articulated their grievance that the nursing associations had not been informed of the proposal and remained excluded from the discussions.<sup>51</sup> As had become a feature of the controversy, the protest was recorded in the press, the ATNA Secretary, Evelyn Paget Evans saying:

The whole scheme appears to be ill-considered and based on a lack of knowledge of the essentials of nursing. It is to be deplored that these arrangements were made without consulting the recognised nursing organisations.<sup>52</sup>

Similar reactions were felt by the NSW Nurses' Association, the trade union organisation for nurses in that state. Its Secretary, Georgina McCready stating, 'We have been side-stepped all the way through'.<sup>53</sup>

National collaboration between the numerous branches of the various nursing associations created a unified and consolidated fight against the scheme. Following the ATNA's public

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> *The Sun* (Sydney), 15 June 1943, 4.

<sup>51</sup> *The Argus* (Melbourne), 16 June 1943, 3.

<sup>52</sup> *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 21 June 1943, 6.

<sup>53</sup> *The Sun* (Sydney), 19 June 1944, 2.



opposition to the scheme, Evans wrote to her Victorian counterparts at the Royal Victorian College of Nursing (RVCN), inviting them to join the protest. President of the RVCN, Jane Bell, convened a special meeting of the College at Melbourne's Prince Henry's Hospital, inviting all registered and trainee nurses to attend, regardless of their RVCN membership. As reported in *UNA*, the journal of the RVCN, the meeting at Prince Henry's was 'to give nurses the opportunity to express their views in regard to the proposed scheme'.<sup>54</sup> However, Bell, a prominent nursing figure and outspoken advocate for the professional status of nursing, used her position as Chair of the meeting and 'saluted the young [NSW] nurses for their courage and foresight' to oppose the AAMWS training scheme.<sup>55</sup> Consequently, when Colonel Annie Sage rose to represent the Government and military at the meeting, the crowd was unwelcoming.

Echoing the protests of civilian nurses, the NSW Nurses' Association, the ATNA, and the RVCN argued that the discipline and experience of civil hospital training could not be matched in a military setting. Secretary of the South Australian branch of the ATNA, and a former AANS Matron-in-Chief, Ella Sinclair Wood encapsulated this sentiment by claiming, 'The atmosphere of a military hospital is very different from that of a civil hospital. The discipline is not the same'.<sup>56</sup> Colonel Annie Sage, the then current AANS Matron-in-Chief also believed that the discipline of the two spheres was different. Yet, unlike the former Matron-in-Chief, Sinclair Wood, Sage held the opinion that military discipline was far tighter and more greatly regulated. When addressing the concerns of civilian nurses in Victoria, Sage stated that discipline was paramount in the military. This statement was understood by civilian nurses as a suggestion that their discipline was lacking, to which there was 'much laughter and murmurings...at this remark and Col[onel] S[age] very annoyed'.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> University of Melbourne Archives, Royal Victorian College of Nursing Collection, 1974.85 Box 9, 'Special Meeting – Proposed Army and Civil Nurse Training Scheme', *UNA* XLI, 2 August 1943, 150-4.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>56</sup> *The Advertiser* (Adelaide), 12 June 1943, 5.

<sup>57</sup> University of Melbourne Archives, Royal Victorian College of Nursing Collection, 1974.85 Box 9, Draft Report of the RVCN Special Meeting, 29 June 1943.

Dedicated to her career as a nurse, Sage attended the RVCN meeting of civilian nurses to speak to fellow members of her profession. Owing to the leaked announcement of the proposed scheme in the press and the ‘misunderstandings’ that followed, Sage explained that she felt sorry for the situation that had been created and thought civilian nurses ‘required an explanation’.<sup>58</sup> As a nurse committed to maintaining the quality and status of the profession, Sage outlined that her motivation for designing the scheme was to prevent the part-trained nurse from threatening their skilled workforce after the war. In a belief that would have been shared by RVCN President, Jane Bell, Sage stated, ‘The semi-trained nurse [is] a menace to the nursing profession’.<sup>59</sup> The threat to the profession by the unqualified nurse had contributed to the push for nursing becoming a registered occupation throughout Australia during the 1920s. Protecting the educational standards of training for nurses, including barring any who aimed to lessen the status of and respect for nurses was fundamental for leaders of the nursing profession, especially Bell. For AAMWS to be used effectively in the running of military hospitals and care for patients, Sage stated that they did need some training. The risk was, therefore, identified that after their war service, these women could enter the community as part-trained nurses. They may then offer their services for a cheaper rate than a qualified nurse and potentially with less skill. ‘This must be prevented as far as possible’, Sage was reported as saying in *UNA*.<sup>60</sup> Yet, edited out of the published report, perhaps at Bell’s request, was that Sage also stated that she had ‘fought tooth and nail’ to get the authorities to view the so-called part-trained nurse as a risk to the community and nursing profession.<sup>61</sup> As a member of the profession, Sage was reiterating her commitment to nursing. However, the narrative in this instance was being controlled by civilians. Also omitted from the published report were Sage’s

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<sup>58</sup> University of Melbourne Archives, Royal Victorian College of Nursing Collection, 1974.85 Box 9, ‘Special Meeting – Proposed Army and Civil Nurse Training Scheme’, *UNA* XLI, 2 August 1943, 150-4.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>61</sup> University of Melbourne Archives, Royal Victorian College of Nursing Collection, 1974.85 Box 9, Draft Report of the RVCN Special Meeting, 29 June 1943.

direct calls to nurses to support the scheme, ‘Whether you want them turned out as semi-trained after the war or whether you are ready to cooperate, it’s for nurses to say’.<sup>62</sup>

The imposition of censorship by civilian nursing leaders that controlled the narrative of their protest and omitted suggestion of wholesome debate was not uncommon. In a confidential letter between the office bearers of the RVCN and the Australian Nursing Federation (ANF), the national governing body for the RVCN and the ATNA, it was confirmed ‘unofficially’ that the matrons of the Victorian nurse training schools did not oppose the scheme. Rather, their opinion was that ‘There is valuable material to be recruited from the AAMWS...which would otherwise be lost to nurse training’.<sup>63</sup> But, such acceptance of the scheme by civilian nurses was buried by the steadfast opposition of the nursing associations.

## **The Question of New South Wales**

More than five months had passed since Prime Minister Curtin wrote to state premiers regarding the proposal, and still no response had been received from NSW. Being in the only jurisdiction that had not approved the plan, only three days after he had been re-elected as Prime Minister, Curtin telegrammed NSW Premier, Bill McKell, seeking a response.<sup>64</sup> The following day, McKell replied and stated that the matter was ‘receiving consideration’.<sup>65</sup> The impression was given that McKell was still discussing the proposal with the NSW Nurses’ Registration Board. However, a month earlier, *The Sun* reported that despite the Registration Board’s support for the scheme, with some changes consistent with the other states, McKell’s Government was going to reject the proposal.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> University of Melbourne Archives, Royal Victorian College of Nursing Collection, 1974.85 Box 9, Letter from RVCN Secretary, M Anderson, to ANF National Secretary, EP Evans, 23 June 1943.

<sup>64</sup> NAA: MP742/1, 21/3/598 Part 2, Telegram from Prime Minister John Curtin to NSW Premier Bill McKell, 24 August 1943.

<sup>65</sup> NAA: MP742/1, 21/3/598 Part 2, Telegram from NSW Premier McKell to Prime Minister Curtin, 25 August 1943.

<sup>66</sup> *The Sun* (Sydney), 2 July 1943, 3.

Without an official response from the NSW Government, Minister Forde took the proposed scheme to the War Cabinet for consideration on 6 September 1943. But the matter was deferred until a response could be obtained from McKell.<sup>67</sup> Correspondence was finally received by the Prime Minister from Premier McKell in October. McKell assured the Prime Minister that the matter had received careful consideration but advised that the proposal could not be approved in its 'present form so far as this State is concerned'.<sup>68</sup> In order to discuss the proposal with the objective of attaining a uniform scheme, Premier McKell urged the Prime Minister to arrange a conference for members of the military, federal and state governments, and their respective nurses' registration boards. Premier McKell wrote to the Prime Minister that if the conference should be held, 'I should like to assure you that...my government will be glad to give further consideration to the matter'.<sup>69</sup>

As requested by NSW, a conference was held on 24 and 25 January 1944 at Victoria Barracks in Melbourne under the chairmanship of federal public servant, Frank Rowe. In his opening remarks Rowe, who was the Director-General of Social Services, reflected on the origin of the controversy, stating:

It is an undeniable, if unfortunate, fact that as a result of premature and inaccurate publicity various State bodies received a totally incorrect impression of the Army's proposals and, as is only natural where the basis of consideration is wrong, the conclusions drawn therefrom are also likely to be somewhat wide of the mark.<sup>70</sup>

To correct the misconceptions of the scheme and hear the concerns of the conference members, DGMS Major-General Burston and Matron-in-Chief, Colonel Annie Sage both attended.

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<sup>67</sup> NAA: A5954, 809/2, War Cabinet Minutes, vol.14, Minute no.3030.

<sup>68</sup> NAA: MP742/1, 21/3/598 Part 2, Correspondence from NSW Premier McKell to Prime Minister Curtin, 19 October 1943.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> NAA: MP742/1, 21/3/598 Part 2, Transcript of Conference Proceedings, 24-25 January 1944.

As well as representatives from each of the state nurses' registration boards, Jane Bell participated in the conference as a representative for the national nursing association, the ANF. Only receiving her invitation to attend the conference days before it began, Bell was determined to ensure the views of her nursing organisation and representation for its 15,000 members were put before the authorities. As Bell stated at the conference, she felt that the ANF was 'entitled to say something'.<sup>71</sup> Although, in a private reflection, Bell commented that she thought that it was a 'triumph that the ANF [had] secured representation' at the government conference.<sup>72</sup> The position of the ANF at the conference was that the Army should release members of the AAMWS, who desired to become nurses, so that they may undertake their full nurse training in a civil hospital. But writing privately to the National President of the ANF after the conference, Bell revealed her faith in the scheme and the success of her representation at the conference, writing:

I think we have put the Military on their toes to provide a good training in their Hospitals...  
If they do all they have promised...I am certain then they can offer facilities not at present available in many civil training schools.<sup>73</sup>

Passed unanimously, the resolutions of the conference were designed to ensure equity in the pay and conditions of all nurse trainees, as well as standardisation in their training. The syllabus for training AAMWS as nurses in military hospitals was accepted in its entirety, and five states agreed to recognise the course. But the representative for NSW, Registrar of the NSW Nurses' Registration Board, JV Boyle, could not provide assurance that his state would recognise the period of training for nurses in military hospitals. As such, it was requested that consultation continue directly with the NSW Nurses' Registration Board.

Having chaired the conference, and now somewhat determined to deliver a positive outcome for the Government, Frank Rowe met with the NSW Nurses' Registration Board on

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> University of Melbourne Archives, Australian Nursing Federation, Federal Office Collection, 1986.149.E/78, Letter from Jane Bell to Adelaide Maud Kellett, c. January 1944.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

18 May 1944. Following his meeting, Rowe felt positive. 'After giving further consideration to the whole question', Rowe wrote to the Department of the Army Secretary, Frank Sinclair, 'the Board has signified its willingness to recognise the course of training'.<sup>74</sup> However, the Board emphasised that although they had been granted Ministerial authority to hear Rowe's detailed explanation of the scheme, the official response to the proposal would be communicated to the Prime Minister by Premier McKell.

When a further three months passed with no correspondence received from McKell, Rowe again met with the Registrar of the NSW Nurses' Registration Board, JV Boyle, along with the Secretary of the NSW Department of Health. During this meeting Rowe was able to learn that both public servants thought the scheme in its present form 'should prove acceptable to the State', but that their opinions were personal and unofficial.<sup>75</sup> Seeking an official response, Rowe met with Premier McKell later that same morning. McKell afforded Rowe the opportunity to discuss the scheme thoroughly but remained steadfast in his opposition. As McKell stated during the meeting, he regarded the idea as being 'unfair to the ordinary civilian trainee nurses...[and] not in accord with his idea of unionism'.<sup>76</sup> Responding frankly to the Premier, Rowe stated that his opinion was that McKell had been 'prejudiced by personal views and that careful official consideration was justified'.<sup>77</sup> Suggesting that the scheme would be implemented regardless of the participation of NSW, Rowe's advice for the Premier to give the proposal 'official consideration' was a final attempt to gain NSW's support.

It was recognised that the stance of the NSW Government regarding the scheme was not based on the advice from their expert registration board, as was the case in the other states. Nor was the lack of interjurisdictional cooperation based on political lines. Both federally and in NSW

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<sup>74</sup> NAA: MP742/1, 21/3/598 Part 2, Letter from the Director-General of Social Services to the Department of Army Secretary, 25 May 1944.

<sup>75</sup> NAA: MP742/1, 21/3/598 Part 1, Letter from the Director-General of Social Services to the Department of Army Secretary, 29 March 1945.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

there were Labor governments. Furthermore, although Sydney saw the largest protests, significant objections were raised by civilian nursing bodies in all states and had been received by their governments. Still, all states except NSW had given their support to the plan. As noted by Rowe when he suggested that McKell had been 'prejudiced by personal views', it was not necessarily the point of the objections that caused the NSW Government to hear the protestors' concerns. Rather, it was who the protestors were.

Maylean Heffron, who was the spokesperson for Sydney nurses protesting the scheme, was the eldest daughter of a member of McKell's Cabinet, Minister for National Emergency Services, Bob Heffron. And McKell's own daughter, Betty, was also a nurse at Prince Henry Hospital and had taken a key role in the protests. As Premier, McKell had already initiated a review into the conditions of nursing in NSW following his daughter's experience as a nurse trainee. The review committee was tasked with investigating the reorganisation of the nursing profession in NSW with the aim of improving the professional status and training of nurses. The review included consideration of a superannuation scheme, the uniformity of practical nursing methods in hospitals, and the establishment of a nurse training college. Consequently, with one of the main reasons behind the AAMWS scheme being to address the shortage of nurse trainees, the NSW Health Minister, Gus Kelly, reported that he was confident that his state's own proposal would address the shortage of nurse trainees.

### **AAMWS Begin Nurse Training Without All States**

Anticipating state approval, and to obtain expressions of interest in the scheme, Major-General Burston called for applications from interested AAMWS in June 1943. The requirements were that applicants must be between the ages of 18 and 30 and have the necessary educational qualifications stipulated by their respective state registration board. Applicants would then be selected based on the suitability of their character, with preference given to AAMWS with

overseas service experience, AAMWS who were VAs prior to joining the Army, and then other members. By May 1944, suitable applications had been received from 134 AAMWS from across all states.<sup>78</sup> Following the national conference in January 1944, which had endorsed the syllabus for training, the first intake of AAMWS nurse trainees commenced on 1 March 1944. Training began with an initial seven-week course at the AAMWS Land Headquarters Training School at Darley, Victoria and was followed by an eight-week period of practical experience in the military base hospital of their home state, except for Tasmanians who continued their training in Victoria.<sup>79</sup> On completion of this initial period, trainees were assessed by the matrons and tutor sisters regarding their suitability to continue training as pupil nurses. If deemed suitable, their nurse training would continue for two years in a military base hospital before completing their education in civilian training hospitals with particular emphasis on nursing women and children.

The commencement of the programme angered the NSW Government and civilian nursing organisations. The NSW Government had not yet provided an official response to the proposal and their federal counterparts had not maintained communication with them about its progress. Upon learning that AAMWS were receiving lectures on nursing in military hospitals, civilian nurses in Sydney made further protests to Minister Gus Kelly. The NSW Government in turn continued their support for civilian nurses, not only agreeing to consult with the nursing associations on the Army's proposal but stating it would not accept the scheme without their approval.<sup>80</sup> Minister Kelly was outraged that the Army had commenced training and stated that, 'either the Army is telling these girls fairy tales, or it has no respect for our opinions'.<sup>81</sup> However, a year earlier Kelly had publicly supported the Sydney civilian nurses by saying, 'I agree entirely with the nurses' complaints'.<sup>82</sup> With the position of the NSW Government only being learnt

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<sup>78</sup> NAA: MP742/1, 21/3/598 Part 2, Memorandum from DGMS, 22 May 1944.

<sup>79</sup> Tasmanians trained in Victoria owing to the relatively small size of 111 AGH (Campbell Town).

<sup>80</sup> *The Sun* (Sydney), 4 July 1944, 2.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 2 July 1943, 3.



through the press, the Department for the Army determined in February 1945 that it was ‘doubtful if further representations [would] bring a satisfactory reply’.<sup>83</sup>

Although AAMWS had already commenced training as nurses with the hope NSW would recognise the course, government authorities decided to progress with the scheme without them. Endorsement for the scheme to be undertaken on this basis was given by the War Cabinet on 4 October 1945.<sup>84</sup> However, as it became clear to AAMWS from NSW that their government was not going to recognise their training as nurses in the military, they began to withdraw their applications. The Department for the Army recorded in June 1945 that there had been 79 applicants from NSW who were approved to undertake the nurse training course. However, of the 79 applicants, 37 had withdrawn their interest prior to commencing at Darley, five had failed the preliminary training, and the remaining 37 had all requested to be discharged from the course.<sup>85</sup> Again, the press was central to the controversy with the AAMWS learning through newspaper reports that NSW had refused to recognise the scheme. Both Sybil Hatfield and Elsie Seccombe referred to the press in their request to withdraw from the course stating respectively, ‘Since the advertising of the cancellation of the Scheme in the press’ and, ‘As it appeared in the paper that the course was being abandoned in NSW’.<sup>86</sup> Nevertheless, at least 11 AAMWS who enlisted in NSW maintained their participation in the Army’s scheme by undertaking their nurse training in another jurisdiction. One of these women was Yvonne Groves who began the course at Darley on 31 October 1944 and completed her training in Queensland. Groves undertook her first two years of training at the 112 (Brisbane) Military Hospital where she was described as, ‘a very satisfactory pupil nurse’ by the matron and tutor sister.<sup>87</sup> Groves was then released from the Army to finalise her civilian hospital training at Brisbane’s Mater Hospital. In 1948, Groves returned to

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<sup>83</sup> NAA: MP742/1, 21/3/598 Part 1, Correspondence from the Army Adjutant-General to the Department of Army Secretary, 14 February 1945.

<sup>84</sup> NAA: A2673, War Cabinet Minutes, vol.16, Minute no.4470.

<sup>85</sup> NAA: MP742/1, 21/3/598 Part 1, Army Minute Paper, 25 June 1945.

<sup>86</sup> NAA: MP742/1, 21/3/598.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

her home state and gained her nurse registration in NSW on 22 March. She then continued in the profession, becoming a registered midwife at Sydney's Mater Hospital on 7 December 1950.

In the official history of the medical services in the Second World War, Alan Walker and Gwen Jacobson wrote of the AAMWS nurse training program that the lack of NSW's participation to some extent 'negated the value of the scheme'.<sup>88</sup> Due to the ongoing controversy stirred by civilian nurses and nurse trainees that obstructed a response from the NSW Government, the implementation of the scheme was delayed. AAMWS did not begin training as nurses until March 1944, long after the initiative was first considered. Furthermore, without the positions to offer training at the large military base hospital at Concord in Sydney, the program was reduced in its capacity. Consequently, the number of participants that the scheme was able to reach was much lower than what had initially been conceived. On the occasion of the final passing out parade from the Darley Training School on 21 September 1945, *The Age* reported that 116 AAMWS had undertaken the preliminary training course for probationary nurses.<sup>89</sup> It was thought, therefore, that the scheme did little to address the shortage of trained nurses that threatened both military and civil hospitals. However, in February 1946, *The Sydney Morning Herald* stated that the shortage of nurses had been relieved to some extent in states other than NSW by their adoption of the AAMWS training scheme.

As the second intake of AAMWS trained at Darley in May 1944, NSW Deputy-Director of Manpower, Charles Bellemore pleaded again for more women to join the nursing profession in NSW.<sup>90</sup> Bellemore stated that approximately 300 nurse trainees were desperately needed in metropolitan and country hospitals across the state to address its severe shortage of nurses. With no significant attempts by the NSW Government to improve the conditions for nurses or make the profession more alluring to potential recruits, the shortage continued into the post-war years.

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<sup>88</sup> Walker, *Medical Services*, 485.

<sup>89</sup> *The Age* (Melbourne), 21 September 1945, 5.

<sup>90</sup> *The Sun* (Sydney), 14 May 1944, 10.

In February 1946, *The Sydney Morning Herald* reported that ‘staff shortages still harass hospitals’, stating, ‘practically every hospital in Sydney and in the country [towns] is still suffering from a desperate shortage of trained nurses’.<sup>91</sup> The Manpower Directorate recorded that the need was for a further 459 trained nurses and 220 nurse trainees in NSW. As a result, hospitals across the state were reducing the number of beds open to the public. But as the press continued to report the negative impacts of the nurse shortage in NSW throughout 1946, other states began to witness the positive impact of the AAMWS nurse trainees as they started to enter civil hospitals.

### *Training to be of Benefit to the Profession and Community*

Having commenced their preliminary course at Darley, Victoria on 1 March 1944, followed by the successful completion of two years nurse training at a military base hospital, the first intake of AAMWS nurse trainees began to enter civil hospitals in metropolitan and regional areas as third year probationer nurses from March 1946. The merits of training AAMWS to become registered nurses had long been imagined by government and military leaders. But as the trainees entered the civil system and became registered nurses, hospital authorities and leaders of the medical and nursing professions also saw the benefits of the scheme. The ability of civil training hospitals to provide adequate third-year training to the AAMWS had not been doubted. But it was hoped by the profession that their initial training in military hospitals, as well as their disposition, would meet their expectations. To AANS Major Joan Paige, the attitude and capability of the AAMWS nurse trainees was never in question, stating that AAMWS had ‘proved their worth in the wards’.<sup>92</sup>

Member of the AANS, Joan Paige oversaw the training school at Darley.<sup>93</sup> A suitable and qualified candidate for Commanding Officer of Darley, Paige had been employed as a tutor sister

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<sup>91</sup> *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 14 February 1946, 2.

<sup>92</sup> BJ Paige, ‘Training the AAMWS as Nurses’, in *Lest We Forget: Australian Army Nursing Service*, ed., Annette Wellesley-Smith (Melbourne: Australian Army Nursing Service, 1944), 25.

<sup>93</sup> NAA: B2458, F2269 [Paige, Beatrice Joan].

at Sydney's Royal Prince Alfred Hospital prior to her enlistment. The Army had capitalised on Paige's capacity as a teacher before her appointment to Darley, having been attached to No.3 AAMC Training Battalion, working to prepare male medical orderlies for the field. Her collegiality with AAMWS also preceded Darley as she was one of the first Army nurses to admire the work of VAs, serving together in the Middle East in 1940. Despite the tension caused by the scheme with NSW and the state's civilian nurses, Paige was one of several nurses from NSW who contributed to the implementation of the scheme. Captain Beatrice Hanmer and Lieutenant Thelma Smith are just two other examples of Army nurses from NSW who contributed to the educational expertise at Darley as tutor sisters.

The Darley tutor sisters who led the AAMWS' seven-week course of instruction were critical to the success of the scheme. Not only was their teaching ability key, but they also played a pivotal role in shaping the AAMWS trainees and inducting them into the profession. Most of the tutor sisters had previous civil or military experience as instructors and found the opportunity to train AAMWS rewarding. Working closely with her class, who all camped on site, a tutor sister became invested in the outcomes of her students. The sisters were described as waiting anxiously alongside their students in anticipation of final exam results and 'feeling a glow of pride when the results [were] published'.<sup>94</sup> Demonstrating her awareness of nurse training as not only medical, but also about the profession's standards of character, Paige described Darley as:

An absorbing life...[with] much to be done, an example to set, [and] an ideal to hold in front of those who are beginning the life of attending the sick.<sup>95</sup>

Attention to how the AAMWS were trained also extended to their physical environment at Darley. Demonstrating concern for upholding the standard of education set by the civil profession, five replica wards were built at Darley. This was designed to prepare nurse trainees for

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<sup>94</sup> Paige, 'Training the AAMWS,' 25.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

their continued education in hospitals by replicating the hospital environment. The buildings imitated a military hospital ward in most aspects for tutor sisters to provide scenario lessons, but with modifications at one end to provide suitable teaching spaces for lectures. The majority of the seven-week course was conducted within these wards with one or two theoretical lectures per day and the rest of the time devoted to practical work. The preliminary course aimed to educate AAMWS in essential areas of nursing such as hygiene, anatomy, and physiology as well as to train them proficiently in elementary nursing procedures. Although, many of these subjects reflect the work that AAMWS had already been undertaking in hospitals as orderlies.

After the AAMWS nurse trainees left Darley, they commenced two years of training at a military base hospital. Under the supervision of the hospital's matron and tutor sister, AAMWS nurse trainees were assessed after their first eight weeks. The requirement, based on the syllabus adopted from civilian training standards, was that the AAMWS needed to demonstrate their proficiency in basic nursing tasks. These included patient admission, care and disposal of bedding, the prevention of bedsores, as well as sterilising instruments, setting trays, preparing and giving hypodermic injections, and collecting samples for laboratory inspection. Tasks which had all been undertaken by AAMWS since they were VAs in the Middle East. As such, reports submitted by the matron and tutor sister of the 112 (Brisbane) Military Hospital illustrate the proficiency of the students. For her work as a theatre nurse and doing sutures and dressings on the surgical ward, Margaret Davies was described by her matron and tutor sister as 'satisfactory' in a simple but meaningful remark.<sup>96</sup> Similar assessments made by the matron and tutor sister of the other AAMWS nurse trainees highlight their enthusiasm for nursing and the opportunity that they had been given, describing the students as 'interested', 'most reliable' and 'alert'.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> NAA: MP742/1, 21/3/598.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

Initially, the Matron of the 110 (Perth) Military Hospital thought that nurse trainees would not get an adequate education within her wards owing to the lack of seriously ill medical cases.<sup>98</sup> However, it was decided that nurse trainees would be able to obtain an ‘excellent training...with the material and equipment at their disposal’ in Perth. The ‘dangerously and seriously ill’ list of patients from the 110 (Perth) Military Hospital for the period between February and May 1945 highlights the variety of cases, including but not limited to arterial obstruction, septic abortion, fractured skull, gunshot wound of the chest, partial amputation, and pulmonary tuberculosis.<sup>99</sup> As Burston saw the situation, nurse trainees in the military would raise the standard of nursing through their exposure to this variety of medical and surgical cases. According to him, military hospitals offered experiences caring for patients with diseases, namely tropical, that were ‘not [yet] seen in civil life...but will be common for some time in the post-war period’.<sup>100</sup>

All elements of the scheme, including the course design, expertise of the teaching staff, and the enthusiasm of the participants guaranteed it as a worthwhile endeavour, if not as far reaching as had initially been planned. From the first participants who began in March 1944 until the end of hostilities, there were nine intakes of AAMWS for the preliminary course at the Land Headquarters (LHQ) Training School at Darley. According to *The Age*, this saw 116 AAMWS pass through Darley in preparation for their nurse training. Owing to the way records were created and have since been maintained, including the nature of the scheme resulting in materials being produced by military, federal, and state authorities, it is unknown exactly how many AAMWS became registered nurses through the scheme. Research conducted for this study has identified 55 women who successfully completed their AAMWS training and associated period in a civil hospital and became registered nurses. Yet, it is estimated that this figure could be doubled. Of the 55 AAMWS found to have registered as nurses, it has been identified that 15 studied to become

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<sup>98</sup> NAA: MP742/1, 21/3/598 Part 1, Correspondence from Principal Matron, Western Command to Matron-in-Chief, AANS, 31 May 1945.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

<sup>100</sup> NAA: MP742/1, 21/3/598 Part 2, Transcript of Conference Proceedings.

midwives and continued their career in nursing throughout the post-war years and for some into the 1950s.

Of the women who became nurses through the AAMWS training scheme, the significance of their ongoing contribution to the community and nursing profession is illustrated by the career of Joan Godfrey.<sup>101</sup> On 1 February 1943, 20-year-old Joan Estelle Godfrey enlisted with the AAMWS in her hometown of Brisbane. Thirteen months later, now Private Godfrey, she joined the first class for AAMWS nurse trainees at the LHQ Training School at Darley, Victoria. After completing her two-year period with the 112 (Brisbane) Military Hospital, she swapped her khaki for the probationer nurse uniform of Cairns General Hospital. Godfrey was registered as a fully qualified nurse in Queensland on 1 September 1947, officially commencing her more than four-decade service to the profession. Godfrey was not only a skilled nurse and midwife, but she also devoted much of her career to nurse education and improving the professional status of nurses. By 1949, Godfrey had already been appointed as Tutor Sister at Brisbane Hospital. This role then led to future opportunities for her to contribute to nurse education, including in 1965 becoming the Queensland Branch Principal of the Australian College of Nursing, a position which she held for 12 years. Another significant milestone in her career as nurse and nurse educator took place when Godfrey became the first Head of the Department of Nursing Studies at Queensland Institute of Technology in 1978, preparing a future generation of nurses with professional skill and character. Following her term as National President of the Australian Royal College of Nursing, Godfrey was invested as an Officer of the Order of the British Empire in 1984 for her dedication to nursing and nurse education, an illustrious career which began with the AAMWS.

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<sup>101</sup> See Helen Hamilton and Joan Godfrey, 'Joan Estelle Godfrey, OBE,' *Encyclopedia of Australian Science*, accessed: 3 February 2021, <https://www.coas.info/biogs/P004453b.htm>.

## Conclusion

Shrouded in controversy, the AAMWS nurse training scheme was not able to deliver the great and widespread solution to Australia's nurse shortage problem that it had been designed to address. With a course delayed in its beginning and reduced in its capacity owing to its rejection by NSW, the scheme suffered. Criticised by civilian nurses and nursing associations, it was ultimately the personal interests of members of the NSW's Government that complicated the planning and implementation of the scheme. Yet, it is this interjurisdictional tension and opposition of civilians to a government and military plan in a period when the war effort was greatly supported by the nation that makes it significant in Australia's history of the Second World War.

Although their opposition caused fractures between the service and civilian cohorts of their profession, there were some benefits for nurses. The interest of the press in the civilian nurses' protests facilitated an opportunity for the public to be informed of the professional standards they held and the threats to their profession that concerned them. For the most part, civilian nurses and nursing associations were united in their concerns, which fostered cooperation between the organisations and created a unified approach to their objections. The scheme was also a success in some ways, as it gave at least 55 women a proficient education for a meaningful post-war career that benefited them and their communities. When all AAMWS who had commenced their nurse training in the Army were discharged to continue their education at civil hospitals in 1946, Controller of the AAMWS, Lieutenant-Colonel May Douglas wrote to her state colleagues. In her letter, Douglas remarked:

Although we shall all be out of the Army, I hope to keep in touch with them...and shall watch their careers with great interest. The pupil nurses are doing a splendid job...and it is confidently expected that they will successfully complete their training and embark on a happy and useful career as civilian nurses.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> NAA: MP742, 21/3/598 Part 1, Letter from AAMWS Controller to all Assistant Controllers, 22 November 1946.



Although the scheme was not able to train as many AAMWS to become nurses as had initially been hoped, the AAMWS who became nurses were of use to the civilian community for many years and contributed to maintaining and improving the high professional standards of nursing. But, regardless of its significance in the history of the AAMWS and the nursing profession in Australia, the scheme was only a small aspect of the service. It only reached a tiny portion, perhaps only 116 servicewomen, of the entire cohort of approximately 8500 AAMWS. The narrative of the AAMWS as an auxiliary solely attached to nursing is also problematic. Offering a deeper analysis of the place of AAMWS in the war, which has not previously been researched, the following chapter explores the breadth of technical roles and skilled tasks undertaken by servicewomen in the AAMWS during the war.

**PART III**  
**Historical Narrative and Reflection**

## Chapter 7

### Not All Nurses: AAMWS Beyond the Ward

Jessie Laurie commenced her affiliation with nursing in 1939, joining the Dugan VA detachment in Adelaide. Eager to volunteer for the Army when the opportunity came, Laurie was one of just 24 South Australian women to serve in the Middle East as a VA during the war. A clerk in her civilian life, Laurie was first allocated to general duties in the Middle East with the 2/1 AGH and then the 2/6 AGH. While with the 2/6 AGH, Laurie was assigned to the service of Major George Halliday. An ear, nose, and throat (ENT) specialist, Halliday ran a clinic for troops in the area and Laurie was selected to work as his assistant. Alongside one male orderly, Laurie prepared the ENT clinic each day for Halliday. In addition to helping Halliday undertake treatments and procedures, Laurie was also responsible for the preparation of instruments and maintaining the clinic's records. Supplementing her time spent assisting Halliday at the ENT clinic, Laurie also worked in the ENT ward of the 2/6 AGH caring for admitted patients.

After the Australian forces were withdrawn from the Middle East in 1942 and redirected to the Pacific Campaign, Halliday recommenced his clinical work in Far North Queensland for troops camped on the Atherton Tableland. Now an AAMWS, Jessie Laurie re-joined Halliday as his assistant and helped staff his small mobile hearing clinic. Her duties in Atherton were like those she had undertaken in the Middle East, but with the added complexities brought about by being a mobile unit. An appropriate site for the clinic had to be identified at each location, all its equipment needed to be packed carefully for transportation, and then the clinic and all equipment had to be set up ready for Halliday to carry out his consultations. Laurie noted that because most patients presented for a hearing test, there were few actual treatments conducted by Halliday with the mobile clinic.<sup>1</sup> During the war if a soldier was found to be deaf, they would be medically discharged

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<sup>1</sup> Transcript of AWFA interview with Jessie Timcke.

and sent home. Recalled by Laurie, Halliday undertook few proper hearing tests and even fewer treatments noting that, ‘It was amazing the number of people that we caught that were...making out that they were deaf’.<sup>2</sup>

Through her work with Halliday, Laurie took the role of the VA and then the AAMWS beyond the walls of the hospital. Her duties at the ENT clinic in the Middle East and with the mobile hearing clinic in Far North Queensland were varied and encompassed more than the typical tasks assigned to a nursing orderly. Photographs, oral histories, newspaper reports, and military personnel dossiers reveal some of the AAMWS that ‘march[ed] side by side with the Lady of the Lamp’, including ‘the lady of the laundry, and her good companions, the ladies of the skillet and scrubbing brush’.<sup>3</sup> The experience of these servicewomen was largely shaped by the changing nature of the war as the conflict intensified and moved closer to the Australian homefront. The case studies in this chapter highlight that as the war developed, so did the military and medical spheres’ acceptance of the AAMWS. Occupations and duties not widely accessible to women in civilian contexts before the war, and not previously filled by women within the military, became available. From expert medical ancillary and allied services and technical specialist roles to opportunities to certify in emerging professions, the AAMWS was a skilled workforce of servicewomen.

There were numerous positions filled by women of the AAMWS that extended beyond the hospital ward – roles that contributed nonetheless to the care and treatment of patients and the effective and efficient running of the military medical service. Some of these roles were based in the medical sphere but diverged from the previous work done by VAs/AAMWS that saw them directed by nurses in the wards and interacting directly with patients at their bedside. Other duties were less embedded in medical or nursing practice but employed principles of healthcare and

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> *The Argus* (Melbourne), 10 July 1943, 3.

contributed to the broad and complex network of patient care. While the war necessitated that women undertake these roles, they extended the previously prescribed spaces of the auxiliary that had been confined to domestic duties at large military base hospitals in the nation's capital cities. Alongside those directly interacting with patients in the wards, the AAMWS came to include servicewomen who staffed pathology laboratories, worked as radiology attendants, and ran the dispensary. As cooks, clerks, and officers, AAMWS also contributed to the organisation and operation of hospitals and the military medical service more broadly. In these roles women were seen to be entering domains already seen by society at the time to be women's spaces. However, Australia's narrative of the war at the time had changed and so these domestic duties gained a new importance. Although many of the positions that the AAMWS held did not involve direct contact with soldiers—and have thus gained little attention in the historical narrative—their significance during the war was no less than the AAMWS by the bedside.

## **A System of Medical Women**

### *An Auxiliary of Skill*

Like Jessie Laurie, who began her service in the ward, once they had developed the skill and confidence deemed necessary for the new position, AAMWS were called upon for various duties beyond the hospital. For instance, knowledge and experience administering first aid and treating patients was fundamental for AAMWS who were asked to staff troop transport trains. Before commencing troop train work, AAMWS had to spend time serving at a military hospital or camp Regimental Aid Post (RAP), and a medical officer would then assess her suitability for the task. Replacing the male medical staff and trained AANS nurses who had worked troop transports with AAMWS only confirmed that the AAMC had come to trust the capabilities of these servicewomen, once regarded unskilled.

AAMWS Corporal Elsie Fleming worked at the 113 AGH, Concord for 14 months before being posted to troop train duty on the Sydney-Melbourne run.<sup>4</sup> As the only RAP attendant onboard extensive cross-country journeys, and often the only medical personnel on the train, AAMWS were required to handle any situation with which they were presented. On the 2500 kilometre East-West line between Adelaide and Perth, assistance was only available from a trained nurse at Tarcoola, approximately 700 kilometres from Adelaide, and Cook which was more than 1500 kilometres from Perth.<sup>5</sup> In addition to conducting treatments, dressing wounds, and dispensing aspirins, it was also necessary for the troop train AAMWS to have sound judgement in order to advise when a patient needed to be taken off the train and hospitalised. Working the East-West line, Corporal Charmian Faull faced chickenpox, malaria, Barcoo rot sores, and identified a suspected case of appendicitis.<sup>6</sup> From Perth to Melbourne and all the way north to Townsville, the skilled AAMWS that staffed troop trains cared for patients in remote locations where there was no hospital. The care they provided worked to ensure troops received the treatment that they required without delay – albeit dispensed from a servicewoman without a formal qualification. With their aptitude for first aid nursing, AAMWS coordinated the medical assistance required across the network of troop transport lines, thus also relieving medical and nursing professionals for more technical duties.

Complementing the efforts of the AAMWS that worked directly with patients were those whose contribution as an auxiliary to the medical service lay adjacent to patient wards. Army Blood and Serum Preparation Units, which supplemented the related work of the Red Cross, were crucial to the military's response to the medical emergency caused by the war. Embedded within the military medical system, AAMWS assisted the operations of blood collection under the direction of trained sisters. Tasks allocated to AAMWS in these units did not extend to patient care nor

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<sup>4</sup> *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 7 April 1943, 5.

<sup>5</sup> *The Australian Women's Weekly*, 29 April 1944, 12.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

called for a deep knowledge of nursing; the sisters managed interactions with donors. However, an appreciation for medical science and an awareness of specialist techniques was essential and as such, extended the definition of the AAMWS' service.

Requiring skill and attention, AAMWS were relied upon to ensure the scarce resource being collected was prepared according to the conditions protocol determined. From the moment the blood began to be taken, an AAMWS acted as a 'twiddler', manually agitating the bottle collecting the blood to prevent it coagulating.<sup>7</sup> Once complete, an AAMWS would then take the blood to be separated by another AAMWS who assisted the separation of the plasma and red corpuscles.<sup>8</sup> The next task in the process for an AAMWS was meticulously washing the bottles and needles that had been used for collection. Then AAMWS would run the autoclaves, sterilising the equipment so that it could be used again. Depicted by official war artist Nora Heysen (Figure 10), Private Rosalin Dallas was an AAMWS posted to the 2 Australian Blood and Serum Preparation Unit at Sydney with the job of sharpening the needles. The astute focus of Dallas on her task is depicted in Heysen's portrait with the necessary skill for the job evident by the boxes of equipment laid open on the table. Captured in another painting by Nora Heysen (Figure 18), even the job of washing bottles at a blood and serum preparation unit was not a menial task. Seen wearing protective clothing in a sterile laboratory-like setting, Private Dorene Lawrence is depicted by Heysen with as much concentration and careful approach to her duties as Dallas.

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<sup>7</sup> NAA: AWM80, 1/569, 'Maids of All Work', Department of Information, Radio Broadcast, AAMWS, 2 April 1945.

<sup>8</sup> Transcript of AWFA interview with Bertie Lloyd.



**Figure 18:** *Washing Bottles* (Private Dorene Lawrence), Nora Heysen, Sydney, 1944 (AWM: ART22680).

From the ‘twiddler’ who handled the blood collection to the ‘needle sharpener’ who prepared the equipment, AAMWS’ tasks at blood and serum preparation units were based on medical science and provided essential support to the military’s blood transfusion service. Although AAMWS in these units were not patient facing, their work had a direct impact on the ability of others—medical professionals—to treat casualties of the war. Therefore, the direct impact the work of the AAMWS in these units was having on the medical response to the war and patient recovery gave AAMWS a significance and a gravity to their work. Fulfilling each role in the process also saw these units become a female-dominated space within the historically masculine domain of the medical sciences.

### *Training in Technical Roles*

Managing a complex medical service, the military employed a varied and critical collection of workers in highly technical roles. Reflecting societal constructs of the time and historical attitudes



of the military, initially only men were enlisted for such tasks. However, as the nation's manpower was stretched throughout the changing course of the war, women began to be accepted to fill the multitude of duties that were required to enhance the service of the military's medical response. Many of these women were AAMWS. Some joined the AAMWS as professionals who had gained their qualifications before enlisting, while others submitted themselves to their duties and trained in the Army. For instance, Jean Kell had obtained her diploma of radiography and worked for four years in a Melbourne hospital before being appointed as Staff-Sergeant in charge of x-rays at the No.1 Australian Orthopaedic Hospital in Frankston, Victoria.<sup>9</sup> Whereas, Private Lorna Lucas undertook an x-ray course through the Army Education Service while learning the practical skills working as an x-ray technician with the 2/5 AGH.<sup>10</sup> It was the medical emergency caused by the war that saw an increased need for such roles as x-ray technicians and, consequently, that which further opened such technical spaces to women. As historian Kirsty Harris has discussed, war focuses circumstances for women and creates space for them to develop new skills, including those which extend their occupations beyond their civilian counterparts, as seen in the example of Australian Army nurses in the First World War.<sup>11</sup> In this example of the AAMWS during the Second World War, not only were women called upon to employ their skills and qualifications in new ways and in new spaces, such as the military. Here, the Army afforded women an effective structure whereby they were encouraged to pursue training to gain qualifications in technical roles once thought unobtainable by many.

In addition to those who applied for further education, some women were invited to take on roles that required technical training. The AAMWS was identified as a pool of candidates where intelligent and enthusiastic workers may be found for specialised duties. To assist the activities conducted by the Australian Chemical Warfare Research and Experimental Section, members of

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<sup>9</sup> *The Argus* (Melbourne), 12 March 1943, 6.

<sup>10</sup> *The Weekly Times* (Melbourne), 6 March 1946, 22.

<sup>11</sup> Kirsty Harris, 'New Horizons: Australian Nurses at Work in World War I,' *Endeavour* 38, no.2 (2014); Kirsty Harris, *More Than Bombs and Bandages: Australian Army Nurses at Work in World War I* (Newport: Big Sky Publishing, 2011).

the AAMWS and AWAS were carefully selected for their propensity for technical work of a scientific nature and were called upon to join the unit. Set out by Lieutenant-Colonel Frederick Gorrill, Commanding Officer of the Section, candidates needed to have their School Leaving Certificate and it was 'essential', Gorrill stated, that they 'be interested in scientific work and anxious to study'.<sup>12</sup> Gorrill described that the work was 'of a very technical character', and warned that owing to the seriousness of the task, 'unless personnel can be trained to undertake such work, they are of no value to the Research Laboratories'.<sup>13</sup> Privates Maisie Dart, Marie Matthews, and Cynthia Johnson were identified as suitable AAMWS to respond to Gorrill's request and joined the Section as laboratory assistants in September 1943.<sup>14</sup>

Posted to the tropical area of Innisfail in northern Queensland, where the Chemical Warfare Research and Experimental Section was located, AAMWS worked as technicians in the chemistry and physiology laboratories.<sup>15</sup> Cynthia Johnson joined the Section's protective clothing group where she maintained and issued items used by personnel in field trials. The primary focus of the Section was the testing of equipment and development of ointments to protect against and treat injuries caused by warfare gases. This work culminated in a series of simulations known as the Brook Island Trials where mustard gas was dropped from Beaufort bombers onto the Brook islands, and defence procedures and equipment tested on a large scale.<sup>16</sup> Assigned to the chemistry group, Marie Matthews played a significant part in the preparation and undertaking of the trials. One of Matthews' tasks relating to the trials was to go into the contaminated test site once the bomb had been dropped to conduct sampling, including the measurement of the concentration of

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<sup>12</sup> NAA: MP727/1, GP14/118, Correspondence from Lt-Col Frederick Gorrill to General Services Officer Major Carer, 1 September 1943.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> NAA: MP727/1, GP14/118, Response to Lt-Col Frederick Gorrill from Adjutant-General's Office, 18 September 1943.

<sup>15</sup> See AWM: P01831.014.

<sup>16</sup> See: Bridget Goodwin, *Keen as Mustard: Britain's Horrific Chemical Warfare Experiments in Australia* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1998); Richard Gillis, *Australian Field Trial with Mustard Gas, 1942-1945* (Canberra: Department of Defence, 1985).

toxic vapours in the atmosphere.<sup>17</sup> Under the direction of the Section's scientific leaders, the servicewomen of the AAMWS and AWAS directly contributed to the collection of knowledge being gained to inform a richer understanding of some of the causes of patient hospitalisation during the war. The urgency of such work and the demands of war certainly created the context for women to enter these new workplaces, including the hazardous field experiment sites. Stepping in to undertake the experimental work required for the highly technical, hazardous, and secret assignments of the Chemical Warfare Research and Experimental Section, these AAMWS' contributions to the war remained confidential for 30 years thereafter.

Specialised roles that relied on precision and discipline, like that required for scientific experimentation, were also established in the newly emerging military's facio-maxillary and plastic units. Here, too, AAMWS filled some of the positions. An artful process often conducted over extended periods and with multiple procedures performed, the facio-maxillary and plastic units worked to provide improvement and prosthetic solutions for patients severely injured in battle. Used as a tool by medical officers to monitor progress over time, photography formed a key aspect for plastic reconstructions. At the 115 AGH at Heidelberg, AAMWS Corporal Violet Hale was employed as a full-time photographer for the No.2 Facio-Maxillary and Plastic Unit. Recording the process, Hale's photographs were used to compare reconstruction stages and, for instance, to analyse improvements such as movement range for injured fingers.<sup>18</sup> Assessing the photographs where we can see Hale at work, it is evident that patients are exposed to their most vulnerable state, exhibiting their bare and mutilated bodies. While the politics of care and gender considerations for interactions of bodies has been considered for nurses and nursing orderlies, some AAMWS who entered positions related to allied health spaces faced similar situations. Furthermore, the example of Hale's job highlights that sites of trauma extended beyond the patient ward. While Hale worked within a military hospital, she was removed from direct patient care and

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<sup>17</sup> Transcript of interview with Sylvia Stoltz, 28 June 2004, Australians at War Film Archive, no.2036.

<sup>18</sup> See AWM: 085072.

only interacted with men after they had recovered from their initial wounds. The job to reconstruct the body was a secondary task, yet by its nature it meant that sites of trauma were still present by way of scars and deformities. Although we do not know how this might have affected Hale or her patients, it remains an interesting example of AAMWS' experiences. The contribution by AAMWS to the reconstruction of male bodies deformed by the war also demonstrates an attempt to maintain the humanitarianism of the military medical service. As historians Mark Harrison and Jane Brooks have argued, this notion became overshadowed by an expectation that the medical services functioned primarily to return soldiers back to health so that they may re-join the fighting forces.<sup>19</sup> Instead, the work of the reconstruction teams was to aim to improve the post-war lives of their patients, not to send them back into the war.

Similarly, another highly specialised reconstruction role performed by an AAMWS was that of Sergeant Thelma Powell at the No.1 Facio-Maxillary and Plastic Unit based at the 113 AGH, Concord. Initially serving as an AAMWS in Townsville with administrative duties, when the opportunity arose for Powell to train as an artist painting artificial eyes, she 'grasped it'.<sup>20</sup> Staff-Sergeant John Brain, a commercial illustrator before the war, trained Powell for the role; Powell only having an interest in art due to a pre-war hobby of smoke etching china.<sup>21</sup> Requiring fine attention to detail to match the colour and features of a patient's remaining eye, Brain described Powell as, 'doing an extremely worthwhile job and doing it very efficiently'.<sup>22</sup> From photographic records of her work, Powell is seen to take meticulous care in the highly-technical craft that her role demanded. And like Violet Hale, the reconstruction work of Thelma Powell required intimate association with her male patients. Powell had to study and work with her patients to produce a unique acrylic eye painted by hand to match the recipient (see Figure 19). This wartime position offered her the training and experience in a job that would not have been

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<sup>19</sup> Harrison, *Medicine and Victory*, 2; Brooks, *Negotiating Nursing*, 2.

<sup>20</sup> Powell quoted in *The Sun* (Sydney), 24 June 1945, 11.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

available to her under ordinary circumstances. The situation brought by the war, including the dependency on women's labour that eventuated through the strengthening of the women's services, forced the creation of new opportunities and roles that were seized by AAMWS; servicewomen who responded receptively to the changing needs that developed throughout the course of the war.



**Figure 19:** *Private EM Boyle sitting before Sergeant Powell, Sydney, 15 March 1946 (AWM: 126431).*

### *Women in Medical Sciences and Allied Professions*

Owing to their gender, professional women in medical and scientific fields who were appointed to positions in the Army were received with organisational hesitation and confusion. In society more broadly, there were still very few women working in the medical professions. According to the Australian Census before the war, in 1933 there were less than 300 female doctors (making up just 6.61 per cent of all Australian doctors), just over 400 pharmacists (less than 15 per cent of the profession), and only 36 allied health professionals where men made up 90 per cent of the workforce.<sup>23</sup> While their services were eventually recognised as necessary contributions to the network of care provided by the military medical service, the organisational position and

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<sup>23</sup> Hannah Forsyth, 'Reconsidering Women's Role in the Economy,' 68-69.

remuneration of specialist women was precarious. Historically, the military had not offered women other than professional nurses the opportunity to join its ranks. Owing to their gender and the societal expectations at the time for women, the military's decision to accept professional women as the war intensified, created disruptions and ambiguous organisation for these servicewomen.

Excluding medical officers who were commissioned in the AAMC throughout the war, servicewomen in technical positions supporting the medical response were for a period enlisted as members of the AAMWS, rather than with the AAMC. Qualified dieticians and occupational therapists were given appointments in the AAMWS from its inception mid-way through the war and from May 1943, female physiotherapists, biochemists, pathologists, and pharmacists joined them. Prior to this organisational change, servicewomen in the latter occupations had received commission in the AAMC and received equivalent pay and privileges to their male counterparts. As lieutenants in the AAMC, these professional women received 16/- per day.<sup>24</sup> But upon their transfer to the AAMWS, their rank as lieutenants saw only a rate of pay of 10/8d per day, reverting to the lower rates paid to the women's services.<sup>25</sup>

Additionally, being established out of the VADs, the AAMWS was perceived to be an untrained auxiliary. Qualified servicewomen felt this characterisation did not accurately representing their status and skill. 'The Army still didn't know what to do with us and they put us in the AAMWS', described physiotherapist, Margaret Mack, 'well we didn't want to put in the AAMWS because the AAMWS were untrained personnel and we were all university qualified'.<sup>26</sup> Despite attempts to create hierarchy through rank and pay that defined officers from other ranks, discontent was felt by some of the servicewomen.<sup>27</sup> Protest, however, was only launched on their behalf by civilian associations such as the Australian Federation of Women Voters who deplored

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<sup>24</sup> Walker, *Medical Services*, 422.

<sup>25</sup> NAA: A2684, 998, Women's Auxiliary Services – Rates of Pay for Adults and Minors.

<sup>26</sup> Transcript of interview with Margaret Mack, 8 October 2003, Australians at War Film Archive, no.1062.

<sup>27</sup> Walker, *Medical Services*, 420.

the women's transfer to the junior service of the AAMWS and reduction in pay.<sup>28</sup> Recounted in the official history of Australia in the war, the Army's Chief Physiotherapist, Captain Alison McArthur-Campbell asked enlisted physiotherapists to refrain from requesting increased pay, stating that the issue was a political question and engagement in such debate would be inappropriate.<sup>29</sup> Nevertheless, on 1 September 1944, servicewomen working in the medical sciences and allied health professions, including dieticians and occupational therapists, were transferred from the AAMWS to the AAMC. However, equal pay for these qualified servicewomen was not reinstated with separate rates of pay for female officers being maintained. Offering their professional services to the war effort, the inconsistent approach towards including qualified women in the military medical services detracted from any proper recognition of their work and the impact it had on patient recovery.

Notwithstanding women professionals being financially undervalued by the military, qualified members of the medical services taking issue with the AAMWS as an ancillary contributed to the misconception and mischaracterisation of AAMWS as 'unskilled'. Essential tasks were effectively carried out by AAMWS who lacked prior qualifications, but who proved to be dedicated and gained experience and skill through their work. Despite their lack of formal training, AAMWS were trusted to fill numerous roles that required skill and confidence to perform the fundamental duties of the position. Furthermore, it was through the AAMWS that servicewomen were trained to become qualified members of the same professional services that took issue with the auxiliary service. Beginning when they were officers in the AAMWS, qualified occupational therapists supervised and trained junior members in preparation for qualification within the developing profession that was still in its infancy.<sup>30</sup> When female officers of the professions, including occupational therapists were transferred to the AAMC in September 1944, occupational therapy

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<sup>28</sup> *The Telegraph* (Brisbane), 10 August 1943, 4; *The Dawn* (Perth), 15 November 1944, 3.

<sup>29</sup> Walker, *Medical Services*, 423.

<sup>30</sup> Trainees also undertook a shortened course at the Occupational Therapy Training Centre in Sydney as part of their training. See Walker, *Medical Services*, 425-7; NAA: MP60/1, 148/43.

assistants and those servicewomen training for their occupational therapy qualification remained in the AAMWS. However, as the servicewomen completed their training and gained their diploma in occupational therapy, they were given commissioned rank and transferred to the AAMC as officers. The separation between supervisor and trainee in practice was purely administrative. However, the transfer of AAMWS once they became qualified occupational therapists only contributed to the narrative that the AAMWS was a service of unqualified women; a characterisation which harmed the status of the AAMWS and failed to recognise the skill that they demonstrated and the importance of their work. Work that was both highly coordinated and dedicated and maintained the steadiness of labour and systematic operations of the military medical service which was demanded by the intensity of the war during the Pacific Campaign.

### **Behind the Scenes: ‘Business Girls’ for the Army**

Contrary to portrayals of the AAMWS as a service of and for unqualified and untrained women, Perth’s *Daily News* proclaimed in January 1943, ‘For those with ambition, or with previous knowledge and qualifications, the AAMWS offers splendid opportunities’.<sup>31</sup> As the growing cohort of metropolitan ‘business girls’ had been drawn to the VAD before the war, volunteering in their spare time, the AAMWS then continued this appeal during the war. But unlike being a civilian VA who trained in first aid, the AAMWS called upon women with business and commercial experience to fulfil the growing number of office-type roles in military hospitals. Qualifications in typing and shorthand were desired for AAMWS assigned as hospital clerks and secretaries, experienced shopkeepers and dressmakers were posted to quartermaster stores, and women that had trained as telephonists operated hospital switchboards. The jobs available to AAMWS were numerous and varied, and the knowledge and skill brought by women to these roles was fundamental to the effectiveness of the service. Supporting the running of a hospital and its administration, it was the

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<sup>31</sup> *The Daily News* (Perth), 23 January 1943, 6.



servicewomen behind the scenes whose contribution was often not readily seen that allowed for the common depiction of an AAMWS as a nursing orderly, to be held in esteem.

Administrative positions, however, were not completely void of interaction with patients, nor were these AAMWS without receipt of affection from patients. ‘Mopsie the cheery redhead’ they used to call me’, recalled Elizabeth Wilson who was fondly regarded by patients at the 2/4 AGH as an AAMWS working in the hospital’s post office.<sup>32</sup> Entering the wards to pass out the mail to patients, Wilson recalled, ‘you’d go through, and the boys would all welcome you...and [ask] did I have any mail for them’.<sup>33</sup> It was not her task to provide the ‘care at the bedside’ that was offered by the sisters and AAMWS nursing orderlies, but Wilson saw that her duties were also an important part of patients’ recovery. Post and parcels received from their loved ones provided comfort and encouragement for patients’ mental recovery:

Never ever let it [the post] build up...because we knew how important it was for them to get their mail when they’d been away... Some of them [were] very sad cases [and] hadn’t heard from home for 9 months.<sup>34</sup>

And this attention was not limited to those in the wards. ‘I had to keep huge amounts of nominal records’, Wilson said, ‘[patients] came and went everyday...and [I’d] readdress all their mail and get it off as quickly as possible’.<sup>35</sup> The efficiency with which Wilson conducted her work to ensure mail was received by its addressee as soon as practicable was dedication that extended beyond the expectations of her role. She highlighted this most clearly through the common occurrence where she would not wait for the civilian postal service to reach her AGH to deliver the day’s post. Instead, Wilson would walk to the postal depot to collect the large bags of mail, ‘get[ting] them off a loading dock onto my back’, before she would then ‘stagger’ back to the

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<sup>32</sup> Transcript of interview with Elizabeth Riddel, 29 August 2003, Australians at War Film Archive, no.625.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

AGH.<sup>36</sup> Wilson explained that as a result, she would have the mail ‘sorted and up to the wards long before he [the civilian postman] got there’.<sup>37</sup> Elizabeth Wilson demonstrates a great appreciation for the role that post played during the war, and offers an example of how a dedicated non-nursing AAMWS worked to support a hospital and its patients.

Having pride in one’s work as a non-nursing AAMWS was felt by many servicewomen. According to a ‘curly-haired typist’ working at an AGH in Perth, she had ‘quite the best job’.<sup>38</sup> This AAMWS, who remained unnamed in the newspaper article where she was quoted, outlined her duties by saying, ‘I follow the doctor on his morning rounds, take down anything he says about the patients, and type out each patient’s report’.<sup>39</sup> However, exposure to the work of the medical and nursing staffs, as experienced by this unnamed AAMWS assistant, was not the case for all clerks and typists working with and creating hospital records. Some were challenged by the dispiriting nature of war.

Edith Matthews had worked as a clerk at Townsville’s ambulance centre before she enlisted in the AAMWS in May 1943. With her prior experience managing records in a medical-related office, Matthews’ knowledge saw her assigned to clerical duties in the AAMWS. Posted to the 112 AGH at Greenslopes, Brisbane, Matthews formed part of a crucial clerical team in the hospital’s main office. But unlike Elizabeth Wilson who formed bonds with patients delivering their post, Matthews and the other AAMWS working in Greenslopes’ main office were told to ‘never get attached to patients’.<sup>40</sup> One of the responsibilities of the clerical staff was to complete the paperwork required when a patient died, including assisting their families with the necessary forms. Parents and partners would be notified of their loved one’s death and then brought to the clerks to decide what arrangements would be made, such as having the body taken to a different

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> *The Daily News* (Perth), 23 January 1943, 6.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Transcript of interview with Edith Matthews, 22 January 2004, Australians at War Film Archive, no.1446.

town for a funeral. This aspect of their work ‘used to get us all down a bit’, described Matthews.<sup>41</sup> ‘Some of the parents were too upset’ to make such decisions, she recalled, and even after a cup of tea and a chat provided by Matthews, ‘some of them couldn’t, and then we’d give some of them the papers and say, “Oh bring that back tomorrow” and we’d fix it up from there’.<sup>42</sup> There was little pleasure to be found in some clerical duties, but an appreciation might be found in that someone had to do the job and people like Edith Matthews did it professionally. Yet, despite the challenges Matthews faced in her role during the war, after her discharge she eventually returned to Townsville where she worked in the office of the public hospital for 31 years until her retirement.

Like Edith Matthews and many other AAMWS who had worked in civilian offices before the war, Bernice Jones joined the AAMWS having already undertaken a clerical course which had given her sought after qualifications in typing and shorthand. Once in the Army, Jones was able to further her training and became a pupil of the Army’s Ivanhoe Signal School. The additional training, qualifications, and new opportunities offered to servicewomen by the Army was seen to indicate an acceptance of, respect for, and reliance upon women’s labour. Housed in a part of Ivanhoe Grammar School in Melbourne, Jones recalled her month-long course, ‘We learnt codes of various sorts, we learnt to work on a telephone...we had an exercise book that was full by the time we’d finished’.<sup>43</sup> Although women had entered the workforce in many civilian office-based jobs before the war, the war increased the need for more women to enter these occupations. As such, the military made it more accessible for many women to undertake training and gain qualifications in these roles. However, the effects of these experiences varied for the women both during and after the war.

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Transcript of AWFA interview with Bernice Dimmock.

Completing the one-month course in the Army, Bernice Jones was qualified as a telephonist and posted to duty at the military base hospital in Heidelberg. Here she worked the large switchboard which serviced the 115 AGH and the 6 RAAF hospital. Describing the scale of the telephonists' work at Heidelberg, Jones explained that the switchboard, 'went right along the wall...And there were four girls on at a time and we worked around the clock... It was a busy switchboard'.<sup>44</sup> Reflecting decades after the war, Jones recalled that there was 'quite a lot [that] went on that we didn't know anything about, we just plugged them in and connected them up'.<sup>45</sup> The role of the telephonist during the war was an important job that supported the timely flow of communication and information. Although at the time there was much that Jones was not privy to, she realised her job was supporting people such as Major Benjamin Rank, a pioneer of plastic surgery who led innovations and techniques in response to wartime injuries.

In addition to the support that Jones and her fellow telephonists offered to the coordination of communication and information across the military medical system, the job allowed her to pursue her own ambitions. Through her additional training to become a telephonist, she was able to secure a position that saw her achieve her goal of serving overseas. In August 1944, Jones left Heidelberg and was sent to the tropical islands of New Guinea. Leaving behind the wall-sized switchboard in Heidelberg, Jones' new role involved operating a small one-person portable switchboard at a camp hospital. Characteristic of the limited resources in the isolated camp hospitals in the islands of the south-west Pacific, the portable switchboard proved unreliable. For a time, Jones operated the switchboard from within a steamy tent where the tropical weather interfered with switchboard. 'It gave you shocks', she recalled of the battery-operated machine, due to the rain and humidity causing the telephonists' hands to become damp and sweaty.<sup>46</sup> Nevertheless, Jones' posting to the 2/7 AGH at Lae and then further on to the 2/8 AGH at

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

Jacquinet Bay, saw her become part of a small cohort of AAMWS that served the furthest north in the Pacific Campaign: 'It was good, we were a unit at last'.<sup>47</sup>

But not all AAMWS shared the aspiration to see service overseas. While her clerical background and additional training in the Army saw Bernice Jones posted abroad, Sheila Conley had no such ambition. Before enlisting in the AAMWS, Conley worked a full-time office job at Nestle where she met her husband to be, Ralph. When Ralph enlisted in the Army in July 1941, Conley began taking civilian VA lectures, 'to do something that would contribute more directly to the winning of the war'.<sup>48</sup> When news reached her that Ralph, who she had married shortly before he sailed for overseas service, was now missing in action, it 'only made me more determined than ever to do my bit', Conley explained.<sup>49</sup> But for Conley, her work was a means to an end. 'Like everybody else I am only waiting for one thing, and that is Peace'.<sup>50</sup> Working as a clerical assistant in the Secretarial Section to the Deputy-Director of Medical Services, Colonel AM McIntosh, Conley's work was 'responsible and highly interesting'.<sup>51</sup> But with her husband, Ralph now found, her aim—arguably shaped by societal pressures and, in her case, a realisation that she could have been widowed—was to commence her role as wife and mother. Shaped by the experience of Ralph being missing in action, Conley remarked, 'You can just imagine I am looking forward to setting up housekeeping as soon as the war is over'.<sup>52</sup>

## **New Meaning for Domestic Duties**

Seeming to attempt to reinstate historical gendered roles for women, Major-General Victor Stantke suggested in September 1943 that:

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> NAA: AWM61, 422/1/3506, *Uniform News* 1, no.1, April 1943.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

The longer the war lasts, the less inclined will such female personnel be prepared to take up home duties upon the efficiency of which the future of the nation is largely dependent.<sup>53</sup> As the General Officer Commanding, Queensland Lines of Communication Area, Major-General Stantke proposed the establishment of a domestic science course for members of the AAMWS and AWAS to, as he described, 'divert them from the rut into which many have slipped'.<sup>54</sup> With the war disrupting what Stantke believed to be women's natural exposure in peacetime to homemaking, this domestic science course was designed to create an educational experience that would 'enable them [servicewomen] to assume home duties and responsibilities in the post war world'.<sup>55</sup> The first of five terms of the course commenced on 2 February 1944 and covered topics including cooking, dressmaking, mothercraft, house planning, and craftwork. Although the curriculum did not necessarily translate to any duties of the women's services, there was the additional expectation on students to return to their units as group leaders and engage other servicewomen in such activities.<sup>56</sup> Before the fifth term of the course commenced in June 1945, the Army Education Directorate requested that places at the Brisbane school be made available to 30 students, including 13 each from Victoria and New South Wales, taking the total number of course participants throughout its existence to 128.<sup>57</sup>

Contrastingly, Lieutenant-Colonel Kathleen Best recognised that many of the duties assigned to members of the AAMWS were in fact extensions of tasks usually performed by women occupied in home duties during peacetime.<sup>58</sup> However, unlike those attempting to administer a retrograde step for women, the AAMWS Controller, Best pronounced that, 'Tasks that were ordinarily considered menial in everyday life took on the highest significance in the AAMWS...and

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<sup>53</sup> NAA: MP742/1, 323/17/1335, Correspondence from GOC Queensland Lines of Communication Area to Allied Land Forces Headquarters, 10 September 1943.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid, Correspondence from General Staff Officer III Technical Land Headquarters (Brisbane) to Director of Medical Training, 24 April 1945.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid; NAA: MP742/1, 323/17/1335, Memorandum from Director of Military Training, 1 June 1945.

<sup>58</sup> *The Argus* (Melbourne), 22 January 1943, 6.

had a new valuation'.<sup>59</sup> The importance of hygiene that had been realised for the success of medical treatment and patient recovery brought a reverence for cleaning. Private Sheila Sibley of the AAMWS stated, 'Everyone knows that the sick started to get well the day it was discovered that dirt meant germs and germs meant death'.<sup>60</sup> Strict guidelines for cleaning, the necessary task often assigned to AAMWS, were imposed, but the link between patient care and hygiene gave the once domestic task new gravity and urgency.

Likewise, common household jobs in the kitchen and laundry, considered at the time by some to be women's domains, found new meaning in the military. The kitchen was inextricably linked to diet and nutrition, and the laundry to hygiene. However, noting the gendered assumptions, many laundry and kitchen positions in the Army were assigned to servicewomen in the AAMWS. Where women had been largely confined to domestic spaces in civil life, some military leaders during the war aimed to promote the value of women's work. Kathleen Best asserted that the work of AAMWS in these areas was of great importance and crucial to a hospital's organisation. 'If the laundry...in any hospital broke down for even a week', explained Best, 'then the efficiency of that [entire] hospital would be impaired'.<sup>61</sup> Moreover, while this work was integral to the ongoing performance of medical establishments, the capabilities of servicewomen in hospital laundries and kitchens also developed beyond domestic expectations. The work had gained a new significance but also barely reflected its domestic equivalent. Yet, the historical narrative of the servicewomen who undertook these roles largely echoes the gendered societal preconceptions of the time that the war did not offer new opportunities or meaning in this space.

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid, 10 July 1943, 3.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid, 22 January 1943, 6.

## *Ladies of the Laundry*<sup>62</sup>

Commencing service at ‘rookies’ training at Enoggera, Brisbane, the school’s officers identified the propensity for marching of new AAMWS recruit, Vera Downey.<sup>63</sup> The officers sought to promote Downey to Lance-Corporal and offer her the opportunity to undertake the role of Physical Training Instructor at the school. However, signing the oath of enlistment on 3 September 1943 at age 18, Downey was classed as a ‘minor’.<sup>64</sup> Being under 21 years, her enlistment in the AAMWS came with a condition: Vera Downey was to be posted to the same unit as her mother, Amelia Downey, who at age 40 had joined the AAMWS alongside Vera. Despite the attempts of the officers at Enoggera to keep her, Downey was informed that her first posting was to be with her mother at the 4 Australian Hospital Mobile Laundry Unit. Initially, Downey had thought that she would never be ‘stuffed’ in a laundry, so upon hearing of her posting she cried her eyes out thinking of herself scrubbing linen in washtubs and wringing out clothes by hand.<sup>65</sup>

Like Downey, Sheila Sibley had also thought of laundry work as undesirable, imagining ‘dark visions of miling and toiling over a hot washtub’.<sup>66</sup> But on becoming a laundry orderly at the 115 AGH in Heidelberg, Sibley soon recognised the perks of the role and concluded that the job was her privilege.<sup>67</sup> In a basic sense, Sibley stated, the ‘lady of the laundry’ was not on duty until 8:30am and so was afforded a leisurely ‘sleep-in’:

When the nursing orderlies are sponging their last patient, you’re scooping in your morning porridge. When you’re sauntering over the duckboards to work, the rest of the AAMWS are milling round the hospital like a thousand busy ants.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid, 10 July 1943, 3.

<sup>63</sup> Transcript of interview with Vera Bradley, 12 January 2004, Australians at War Film Archive, no.1120.

<sup>64</sup> NAA: B884, QF272202 [Bradley, Vera Gladys].

<sup>65</sup> Transcript of AWFA interview with Vera Bradley.

<sup>66</sup> *The Argus* (Melbourne), 10 July 1943, 3.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.



But not to diminish the hard-working laundry orderly, Sibley also came to appreciate that the laundry was fundamental to the maintenance of hygiene in hospitals with direct correlation to the health and recovery of patients. To her, the laundry became the battlefield and the machines her weapons for at once she was contributing to the war in a broad sense, but also in a specific war for hygiene. Echoing the propagandist message proclaimed by military officers and health professionals that the laundry led in this battle for hygiene, Sibley wrote:

What may look like a washing-machine in our big military hospitals is really artillery firing its rounds of good clean washing against the enemies, disease and death.<sup>69</sup>

In order to foster these new attitudes that gave domestic work new meaning, Sibley appeals here to military terminology that was common in wartime and at the fore the minds of a nation at war. These once masculine phrases of war were not only employed to garner respect for women's labour, but it also illustrates a shift in the wartime narrative when women were given space to emphasise their contribution to the war effort.

Reported in Lismore's *Northern Star* in April 1943, it was stated that, 'laundry is probably the largest problem that any hospital has to deal with'.<sup>70</sup> This argument was particularly appropriate when considering the temporary nature and remote locations of military hospitals across Australia and their attempt to maintain hygienic standards in the Australian outback. With many military medical establishments isolated from civilian populations, and even more so from existing steam laundries, the creation of mobile laundry units was the solution. As soon as Vera Downey joined the 4 Australian Hospital Mobile Laundry Unit at Charters Towers in northern Queensland, she found that the unit was nothing like what she had imagined.<sup>71</sup> The mobile laundry was packed into a trailer that Downey thought resembled a circus wagon, 'but instead of the lion, we had the big washing machines and driers', she stated.<sup>72</sup> Once stationary, tents were erected, as were lines to

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> *The Northern Star* (Lismore), 6 April 1943, 2.

<sup>71</sup> Transcript of AWFA interview with Vera Bradley.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

hang the washing on, and then the laundry was set to operate. At its peak, Downey recalled that there were 75 AAMWS working at the mobile laundry covering roles on the line, in the ironing room, the folding tent, and sorting and packing the 3500 articles that were processed each day to be returned to the wards they came from.<sup>73</sup> The washing, which required heavy lifting that the military did not permit women to do, was undertaken by male orderlies posted to the mobile laundry unit. Noting that laundry work in the military bore no resemblance to its domestic counterpart, but at once reinforcing gendered expectations of the time, *The Northern Star* noted, 'how the housewife must envy' the industrial machinery of the hospital laundry used to wash, dry, press and sort linen and clothing.<sup>74</sup> Given the ingrained gendered expectations within society at the time, the attempt of those like Kathleen Best and Sheila Sibley to highlight the true nature of AAMWS' work and afford their labour proper recognition, were overshadowed.

*Ought to be 'Paid a King's Ransom...[for] What They Made Out of Army Rations'*<sup>75</sup>

According to *The Age*, Marie Chandler was prompted to enlist in the AAMWS in December 1942 owing to her experience of cooking at home for five people.<sup>76</sup> Throughout the war, VAs and then AAMWS were posted to medical units and military hospitals in Australia and abroad with the task of catering for hospital staff and patients. While Chandler was assigned to work in a hospital kitchen, there was little to relate this work as an AAMWS to domestic cooking, as suggested in the press. Determined by Warrant Officer Edward Sayer, 'If a girl is a good cook in civilian life, it does not mean that she is a good Army cook'.<sup>77</sup> Instructing in a cooking school for AAMWS in Brisbane, Sayer, who had been a chef before the war, understood the complexities of Army cooking and how it differed from domestic experience. Namely, in addition to the difference in quantities

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid; *The Northern Star* (Lismore), 6 April 1943, 2.

<sup>74</sup> *The Northern Star* (Lismore), 6 April 1943, 2.

<sup>75</sup> Transcript of AWM interview with Alice Penman.

<sup>76</sup> *The Age* (Melbourne), 12 March 1943, 3.

<sup>77</sup> *The Telegraph* (Brisbane), 2 March 1943, 4.

needed, cooks had to ensure a nutritious and balanced diet was provided to personnel while using rations and new products such as dehydrated eggs, as well as learn the dietary requirements for patients and their ailments.

The complexities of Army dietetics and catering as handled by VAs and AAMWS were not appreciated by the press, and their value lessened by some journalists. Reported in the women's pages of Adelaide's *Advertiser*, 'Marian March' was taken on a guided tour of a military hospital by AAMWS State Commandant, Captain Marjorie Draper.<sup>78</sup> Dorothy Dolling, writing under the name 'Marian March', was also the State President of the South Australian Country Women's Association. The various duties of AAMWS were displayed to Dolling and their significance highlighted by Draper. But the conclusion Dolling made of the AAMWS working in the hospital kitchen was published, reading, 'They enjoy their work, these AAMWS cooks, even if they entered the service as cooks just because cooks are always needed'.<sup>79</sup> With these remarks Dolling devalued these women's work and any notion of the impact their position might have within the context of the military or women's labour. Reports such as Dolling's overlooked the art required to cook nutritious and enjoyable food with what supplies could be obtained, and the precision needed for preparing specific patient meals, and instead reinforced cultural ideas of the woman as homemaker.

Furthermore, societal expectations of the time that considered the kitchen to be a woman's domain were challenged by the fact that the kitchen was not necessarily familiar to all women in the VAD and AAMWS. The daughter of the Consul for France and Belgium in Perth, Yvonne Antoine grew up in a house with servants, and it was not until her father's death in 1935 that she began to learn to cook.<sup>80</sup> Arguably with less than basic cooking knowledge, Antoine's contribution to the Army was better spent undertaking clerical duties. Similarly, Sheila Sibley, who was later

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<sup>78</sup> *The Advertiser* (Adelaide), 3 February 1943, 3.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>80</sup> Transcript of AWFA interview with Yvonne Day.

transferred to laundry duty, had been posted to a hospital kitchen. There was not a 'rawer rookie', Sibley wrote of herself, saying:

From the first the cooks held no great hopes for me. One look at the way I went about things convinced them I'd never been in a kitchen before in all my life.<sup>81</sup>

From the posting of the first VAs to the Middle East in 1941, the selection of those who would be assigned as cooks was based upon their experience, and not an assumption of their domestic work. Of the eight VAs who served as cooks in the Middle East, three had undertaken formal cooking courses, two others had extensive experience in convalescent home kitchens, one worked in a delicatessen, and only two were appointed based on knowledge of their home cooking experience.<sup>82</sup> While a necessity for workers later in the war saw inexperienced women, such as Sheila Sibley, appointed to the kitchen, this is an example of the commitment shown to VAs and AAMWS by their leaders to develop their capabilities. Before moving to the laundry, Sibley had improved her kitchen skills, saying of the cooks who taught her but had once thought her incompetent in the kitchen, "They finally relented so far as to have a kind of sneaking fondness for me".<sup>83</sup>

Seeing the work of hospital cooks as a mere extension of their domestic civilian lives not only demonstrates a misunderstanding of these women's Army service, but it also neglects to note the new skills learnt by women in these roles. In addition to those who were introduced to the kitchen for the first time during the war, many servicewomen who were experienced cooks before enlisting received further training in the AAMWS. At the Army cooking school led by Warrant Officer Edward Sayer in Brisbane, AAMWS received lectures on cookhouse hygiene, management of kitchens, and cooking in the field, as well as on estimating quantities, ordering supplies, nutrition, and special diets. Practical subjects included breadmaking, pastry cooking, and the

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<sup>81</sup> *The Argus* (Melbourne), 20 March 1943, 3.

<sup>82</sup> AWM: PR00884.

<sup>83</sup> *The Argus* (Melbourne), 20 March 1943, 3.

making of soups and gravies. This training, which saw servicewomen become versatile all-rounders in the kitchen, only further differentiated their work in the Army from domestic experience. The perception that cooks in the AAMWS were reinforcing historical gendered norms was eventually challenged in the press. Readers of Brisbane's *Telegraph* on 2 March 1943 were confronted with an image of three servicewomen 'taking off the silverside from a bullock of beef'.<sup>84</sup> As part of the training course for AAMWS cooks, servicewomen were taught butchery from the practice of breaking down carcasses, to knowledge of the various cuts of meat and how to prepare them. This strong visual of AAMWS practicing butchery engaged the press and presented the public more broadly with an alternative understanding of servicewomen as cooks in the Army. Butchery was yet another, but arguably the most striking skill acquired by women in the AAMWS that highlighted their work as cooks as a significant role for the efficiency of the Army, and unlike the work usually undertaken by women.

### **Comfort and Assurance: AAMWS Unit Leadership**

The extensive experience of an AAMWS such as Private Bertie Lloyd, whose association with the service began in 1937 as a VA with the Ku-Ring-Gai Detachment where she was Assistant Commandant, would have qualified her to be considered for promotion in the Army. But for Lloyd, like many others in the service, this was not something to which she aspired. 'Once you got rank you were taken out of the nursing, and that's what I didn't want', stated Lloyd.<sup>85</sup> Working in the wards as an AAMWS caring for patients alongside the nursing sisters gave Lloyd a feeling of satisfaction. She had always enjoyed nursing and the opportunity to work in a hospital with patients was not something she was going to willingly give up, 'I said I wanted to nurse and that's [all]'.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> *The Telegraph* (Brisbane), 2 March 1943, 4.

<sup>85</sup> Transcript of AWFA interview with Bertie Lloyd.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*

Owing to the hierarchical nature of the military, leadership positions in the AAMWS were a necessary part of overseeing the direction and efficiency of servicewomen. The most senior officers of the service represented AAMWS' interests in the Army and helped set the strategies and policies that guided these servicewomen within the context of a medical unit, hospital, and the military medical network more broadly. The thought of having to do such work would have certainly dismayed AAMWS like Bertie Lloyd who only wanted to nurse. As Lloyd noted, even her sergeant at the 12 Australian Camp Hospital at the Sydney Showgrounds was tied up with administrative tasks that took her away from all nursing work.<sup>87</sup> However, despite the hesitations AAMWS might have had towards taking on an officer role, the need to guide the servicewomen remained, especially within units.

### *Caring for the Carers: Welfare and Wellbeing*

Although diverted from work in the wards, it was the women who accepted leadership positions in military camps and hospitals that oversaw the AAMWS as individuals and responded to their specific needs. Acting as AAMWS Senior Non-Commissioned Officer (NCO) at a camp hospital, Edith Donaldson wrote of her duties to her mother:

I have to arrange for leave passes for the girls...and juggle rosters with the Matron for leave days – in fact listen to all the complaints (which are very few, thank goodness) ...it's a full-time job in itself.<sup>88</sup>

Noticing that this may have sounded overwhelming to her mother, Donaldson qualified her remarks by saying, 'I must sound full of complaints, but I'm not really. I am very happy here, and love every minute of it'.<sup>89</sup> Overseeing AAMWS in a unit, ensuring their rosters allowed for adequate rest and recreational leave where possible and that their complaints were heard, the NCO

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> AWM: PR00338.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

became responsible for the health and wellbeing of her team. As Camp Orderly Officer, Rita Hind was responsible for caring for the women in her unit if they got sick, no matter the time of day or night. Assuming this matriarchal position, which also saw Hind support ‘the girls’ with other matters, she wrote that it was ‘a 24 [hours] a day, 7 days a week job’.<sup>90</sup> Furthermore, while scheduled to have one day off a week, Hind noted, ‘Unless I go down to the Beach, [I] often find something [that] crops up that has to be attended to’.<sup>91</sup> With the challenges and demands of the role, Hind admitted, ‘I sometimes wish that I was back in the wards again’.<sup>92</sup> Yet, she appreciated that she had been selected for the position owing to her personal qualities and capabilities and understood that ‘somebody has to do this job’.<sup>93</sup> And despite any dissatisfaction she felt when facing the challenges of the role, Rita Hind undertook her duties with attention to those she was supporting and showed her affection for them stating, ‘The girls are a marvellous crowd to deal with’.<sup>94</sup>

Undertaking many of the same duties that were assigned to camp orderly officers, from 1944 AAMWS began to replace nurses as ‘home sisters’. This position within the AANS had been filled by a trained nurse but was not nursing in nature. The general routine duties of the home sister were having charge of the nurses’ mess and accommodation. As AANS Major Jean Headberry, assistant to Matron-in-Chief Annie Sage, wrote on Sage’s behalf, ‘The fact that Sisters have, in the past, performed many duties which require no professional skill has always been deplored’.<sup>95</sup> The decision to replace home sisters with AAMWS came as the shortage of trained nurses worsened. As the Matron-in-Chief urged to the DGMS, given ‘the existing crisis regarding staff’, AAMWS relieving sisters of non-nursing tasks was essential for enabling trained nurses to

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<sup>90</sup> AWM: PR03574.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> NAA: MP742/1, 21/4/353, Memorandum from Major J Headberry for Matron-in-Chief to DGMS, c. June 1945.

employ their skills where they were most urgently needed; that being, where they could 'give the patients adequate nursing care'.<sup>96</sup>

However, as AAMWS officers were posted to overseas units and base hospitals to act as home sisters, unease was felt by some. Lieutenant-Colonel George Gibson, Commanding Officer of the 2/14 AGH, wrote that an AAMWS officer might only replace a member of the AANS as 'Home Sister' at his AGH if they were 'especially selected' for the role and had a 'natural flair for domestic administration'.<sup>97</sup> Additionally, overseeing the mess and living quarters, it had been the responsibility of the home sister, as a senior AANS officer, to enforce discipline when required. As the AAMWS was a junior service to the AANS within the Army's hierarchy, it was felt that an AAMWS officer acting as Home Sister did not have the authority to enforce the rules and regulations of the 'Home'.<sup>98</sup> The solution, as outlined by Major Alice Appleford, AAMWS Assistant Controller, was that, 'If any occasion should arise [where discipline is required]...it is expected that the AAMWS Officer will make her comments to the Matron' so that she may respond accordingly.<sup>99</sup> Yet, as noted in a draft of the official history, despite these issues, the end of the war together with a situation where the AAMWS were becoming short of officers, saw the policy of replacement 'never fully implemented'.<sup>100</sup>

As camp orderly officer or acting home sister, these servicewomen took on a managerial role within the military hierarchy, but its function in practice was to provide a pseudo-parent to the women living and working within a pseudo-home environment. In many ways, these positions called upon servicewomen to assume the spaces commonly expected of women in the domestic home as housewife and mother. She ensured everyone was fed, that they had somewhere to sleep,

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> NAA: MP742/1, 21/4/353, Correspondence from Lieutenant-Colonel Gibson, Commanding Officer 2/14 AGH to DDMS Queensland Lines of Communication Area, 2 June 1945.

<sup>98</sup> NAA: MP742/1, 21/4/353, Correspondence from Captain Yates AAMWS, Commandant 106 AGH to Assistant Controller AAMWS, Victoria Lines of Communication Area, 3 May 1945.

<sup>99</sup> NAA: MP742/1, 21/4/353, Reply to Captain Yates AAMWS, Commandant 106 AGH from Assistant Controller AAMWS, Victoria Lines of Communication Area, 11 May 1945.

<sup>100</sup> NAA: AWM227/10.



and that their spaces remained cleaned, and was also expected to listen to the women's complaints and act as mediator when necessary. Yet, creating such roles for women in the military demonstrated the value of this work that was underappreciated and undervalued in society at the time. Domestic servants had been employed on poor wages in civilian households, but domestic work was largely unpaid. These roles in the military placed a higher monetary value on this work, furthered by their rank as NCOs. Furthermore, the inclusion of these positions in camps demonstrates that this work was deemed necessary, acknowledging that they provided the assurance that enabled personnel to undertake their own duties effectively and efficiently.

## **Conclusion**

Public perceptions during the war fostered the stereotype of the VA/AAMWS as a nurse, and this has continued to shape historical consciousness as the preceding chapters have shown. Consequently, this has limited the space given to the experience of many servicewomen. The cohort of AAMWS that worked in patient wards caring for soldiers at their bedsides was only one part of a much larger auxiliary service. AAMWS contributed to all facets of hospital organisation and operation and were a fundamental part to the effective and efficient network of military medical services. When the war in the Pacific stretched the nation's ability to respond to the emerging needs, women entered new spaces and assumed new roles. Although the extent of the responsibilities asked of AAMWS may have largely been driven by the manpower crisis, these servicewomen presented themselves for such roles that previously would not have been imagined for them, such as Thelma Powell painting artificial eyes. They also embraced these opportunities and turned to any task that was required. Whether it was a consequence of the shortage of male labour, or a strategic decision, the Army not only accepted women's labour but they relied upon it and respected it, working to further the skills and capabilities of its servicewomen. Furthermore, spaces that had historically been assigned to women as housewives and mothers gained new

meaning within a military context and were expanded beyond their domestic counterparts. Without giving time and attention to exploring such roles of AAMWS, including in the kitchen delivering upon diet and nutrition and in the laundry fighting the hygiene battle, this service would continue to be dismissed as an untrained and unqualified auxiliary. However, highlighting servicewomen who undertook butchery courses or were offered the opportunity by the Army to further their training in business and health professions, the AAMWS emerges as a skilled and indispensable service. The extent to which these servicewomen were able to continue to apply their new skills and experiences in their post-war lives is discussed in the next chapter.

## Chapter 8

### Recollection and Reflection: Creating Their Own Story

As she wrote encouragingly with the aim of providing constructive feedback, in 1979 Mary Critch asked of Enid Herring, 'Is 'They wanted to be Nightingales' a title for the finished book?'.<sup>1</sup> Both were former members of the AAMWS working on their own separate compilations of the VAD/AAMWS in the Second World War. Critch, however, was alarmed by Herring's choice of a title, and put the question to Herring, asking:

Is it not rather embarrassing to the hundreds of AAMW (sic) who worked as General Duty and Mess Orderlies, as clerks, cooks etc and never saw the inside of a ward?<sup>2</sup>

Referencing Florence Nightingale, the woman noted for her humanitarian efforts during the Crimean War and cited by some as shaping modern nursing, Herring chose to perpetuate a problematic stereotype of VAs and AAMWS. As this thesis has shown, the First World War myth that all VAs either aspired to be nurses or, in fact, already saw themselves as nurses was a common perception that tainted the VAD and AAMWS in the Second World War. While writing her own account of the VAD/AAMWS, Herring could have chosen to debunk this myth. Yet, she claimed its truth.

Recognising the problematic nature of the title, Herring included an author's note in the preface to the book. Here, Herring argued that Nightingale represented all service work done by VAs/AAMWS, as Nightingale herself 'swept, she wrote letters and filled out forms, she mopped and saw to the laundry. Her work was to serve'.<sup>3</sup> But in the private correspondence between Herring and Critch, Herring perpetuates the myth that all VAs/AAMWS wanted to be nurses and recalls statements of the service's former leaders to support her opinion:

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<sup>1</sup> AWM: 3DRL/8023, Letter from Mary Critch to Enid Herring, 2 October 1979.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Herring, *They Wanted to be Nightingales*, np.

I heard Joyce Snelling (Asst. Controller NSW) wail from inside her officer – (I was waiting outside to be interviewed). ‘They ALL want to be Nightingales, yet I have to staff the clerical, laundries and so on’. I thought at the time, what a marvellous title for a book...<sup>4</sup>

The origins of Herring’s title became her starting point for collating recollections from former servicewomen. The conclusion made by Herring defending her title was, ‘SO – it was a case of their not BEING Nightingales but WANTING to be’.<sup>5</sup> As this thesis has argued, some women were drawn to the VAD/AAMWS because of its role caring for patients, yet many more had no ambition to enter a ward, and certainly there was no strong notion that they were nurses – they were VAs and AAMWS with a separate identity. Nevertheless, Herring’s choice of title, and Critch feeling compelled to question it, exemplifies that people can experience, understand, and characterise events differently.

The final chapter of this thesis explores how VAs/AAMWS reflected upon the war and their wartime service and how they came to understand themselves in war through such reflective practices. Particular attention is given here to the key themes explored in the previous chapters, such as the identity of these servicewomen as VAs/AAMWS and their notion of being nurses, and the impact the war had on women’s lives. Beginning with sources created with the intent of greatest accessibility, collective service histories written and compiled by former VAs/AAMWS are drawn upon to explore the nature of the service’s general accounts. As the first historical narratives offered since the end of the war, these works highlight how former members of the service chose to portray their service and the ways that they remembered their experience. As broad histories, these publications are then paired against examples of more specific reflective moments VAs/AAMWS penned during the war, as well as those in later decades that were captured as part of oral history interviews and in written memoirs. The context of these sources differs greatly, and this is discussed throughout the chapter. But still, they are all examples of reflective practice and

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<sup>4</sup> AWM: 3DRL/8023, Reply to Mary Critch from Enid Herring, 16 October 1979.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. Emphasis made by Herring.

are linked strongly through the ways in which they reveal how VAs/AAMWS understood the war and their part in it. As Christine Hallett argued in her study of First World War short stories, which I suggest may apply to other literary texts and reflective practices:

The reader is never told whether these are drawn directly from the experience of the author, or fabricated from her imagination. We are, rather left to make the assumption that the depth and vividness of her experience has permitted her to write what...may or may not be factually 'correct'.<sup>6</sup>

Whether written in reflection of memoir or poetry, or recounted in oral history, the focus of this chapter is to explore these sources as avenues into the experiences of servicewomen and how they confronted these events.

## **Making a Record: Public Histories Penned by AAMWS**

### *Creating Space in the National Narrative*

In the late 1970s both Mary Critch and Enid Herring began working on their own histories of the VAD/AAMWS during the war. As historian Ann Curthoys notes, prior to the 1970s there was 'little interest indeed in Australian history of women'.<sup>7</sup> Critch and Herring then followed the emerging trend of feminist historians that aimed to challenge this historiographical and public narrative by making space for women's stories. Yet, adopting a typical style of the time, both Critch and Herring demonstrate a tendency that appeared where women were written into the story but without any challenge to the prescribed masculine narrative. Mary Critch's *Our Kind of War* was the first account published by a former member of the service in 1981. It creates the first record penned outside the official history but offers a unit record style narrative of the VAs and AAMWS. Released the following year, Enid Herring's *They Wanted To Be Nightingales* adopts a similar unit

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<sup>6</sup> Hallett, 'The Personal Writings of Nurses,' 326.

<sup>7</sup> Ann Curthoys, 'Gender Studies in Australian History: A History,' *Australian Feminist Studies* 15, no.31 (2000), 26.

history style recounting stories from former servicewomen that plays to the heroic and suffering male soldier.

As historian Carolyn Holbrook notes, the decline of Anzac Day in the 1960s and 1970s was followed by an ‘unpredicted revival’ in the 1980s.<sup>8</sup> Holbrook suggests that in part this was owing to the shift in the Anzac narrative pioneered by historian Bill Gammage in his 1974 book, *The Broken Years*.<sup>9</sup> Here, the personal stories of soldiers, including their vulnerability and trauma replaced the imperial and militarist dominance of earlier narratives. The absence of any publications by or about the VAD/AAMWS prior to the 1980s, other than a brief chapter in the official history, reflects this dominance of male-centric militaristic narratives that had been created in Australia. The turn then in the 1980s to write women’s histories of the war is a convergence of both the rise in feminist history and then the emergence of personal stories evoked by Gammage.

Recognising the new ways of writing history and working to further the re-emergence of Anzac commemoration, the Australian War Memorial sponsored Enid Herring to prepare her manuscript. Yet, working under the gaze of such an institution bringing Anzac back into the political consciousness of the nation, Herring’s publication shows a considered tone as a result. The Memorial supported Herring by way of funding and access to materials and people. Consequently, the book finds its foundations in building upon the national narrative of Australia at war, rather than significantly challenging this approach or offering an alternative interpretation. Despite focussing on servicewomen’s experiences, publications such as this place women as in service to men. Perhaps unintentionally, but reflecting the societal conditions of the time, such histories reinforce the argument made by Margaret Higonnet that women’s efforts during the war, whether new or advanced, were made secondary to men’s experiences.<sup>10</sup> While Herring did bring many unheard accounts of the war from women into the literature, by framing her publication

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<sup>8</sup> Holbrook, *Anzac*, 5.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, 134.

<sup>10</sup> Higonnet et al., *Behind the Lines*, 31-47.

around the premise that ‘they wanted to be Nightingales’, the book evokes the gendered nature of care-related work. As I have argued throughout this thesis, women’s service in the war contributed to the economy and efficiency of the nation’s effort and their work holds significance without comparison or emphasis of men’s experiences.

The most recent account to be published by a former member of the VAD/AAMWS was in 1995, by Betty Mount-Batten.<sup>11</sup> Coinciding with the fiftieth anniversary of the end of the war, the compilation, *From Blue to Khaki*, like the earlier works by Critch and Herring, adopts a unit history style. It traces the various postings and medical units that VAs/AAMWS were assigned to and includes brief biographical entries of the service’s leaders. Her motivation for the publication, Mount-Batten stated, was that ‘I felt we were always the underdog, and we still are’.<sup>12</sup> Established out of the civilian VAD movement, Mount-Batten felt that the public and some fellow servicewomen and men misunderstood who the enlisted VAs/AAMWS were. ‘That was why I wrote it’, Mount-Batten explained, ‘to try to clear up a few things’.<sup>13</sup> However, much like the works of Critch and Herring, the publication’s audience was primarily former members of the VAD/AAMWS and those with a connection to the service. As such, much of the critical engagement and discussion about hardships and challenges are omitted and thus creates a largely positive narrative and recollection for readers. As historian Alistair Thompson put, ‘Memories are ‘significant pasts’ that we compose to make a more comfortable sense of our life over time’.<sup>14</sup> In other words, it is easier to recall and offer to others, perhaps especially in a published commemorative work, the positive anecdotes and memories that are non-confrontational or made humorous to lessen their shock. Furthermore, this publication came just five years after the Prime Minister, Bob Hawke, travelled to Gallipoli with a group of First World War veterans. This political attention gave these veterans ‘late celebrity’ in their life, one which I suggest was reflected onto

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<sup>11</sup> Mount-Batten, *From Blue to Khaki*.

<sup>12</sup> Transcript of interview with Betty Mount-Batten, 30 April 2003, Australians at War Film Archive, no.3.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Thomson, *Anzac Memories*, 13.

veterans of other wars, too.<sup>15</sup> Consequently, the politicisation of veterans and their memories worked to impart nationalist interpretations and supplant even the possibility of alternative public narratives. Thus, the reflections captured by Betty Mount-Batten for public consumption simply echo the prescribed understanding of war and the nation.

Yet, while emulating the dominant political narrative, the reflections offered by VAs/AAMWS in these publications reveals that members of the service largely began to regard their experience as unappealing and uninteresting by the 1980s. Discussed above, servicewomen primarily described their work as in service to the men who were in the fighting forces. In this, servicewomen echoed the sentiments that we now critically assess as glorifying war and contributing to a masculine understanding of war and the military and at once devalued their own non-combatant service. Additionally, many servicewomen began to think of their duties as menial. In the foreword to the first published manuscript, *Our Kind of War*, former leader of the AAMWS May Douglas wrote, 'Much of the work was dull and tedious, with long hours and little pay'.<sup>16</sup> Emphasising this point, Douglas used the same line as part of the foreword she offered for Herring's publication.<sup>17</sup> Despite showing passion and pride for their military service, the memory of routine duty and the repetitive nature of war dominated the former servicewomen's recollections. While these publications highlighted the importance of these servicewomen's efforts, and emphatically reminds the reader that 'we were there', the narrative concludes in lament. It seems that as memory and understanding of VAs and AAMWS waned in the public consciousness, recollections of the service's former members were tarnished.

Not only do these accounts recall the routine nature of their work, but they also depict their service as only being for the duration of the war. Appreciating that their scope was the service's involvement in the Second World War, and some extend to the Commonwealth

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<sup>15</sup> Holbrook, *Anzac*, 179.

<sup>16</sup> Critch, *Our Kind of War*, np.

<sup>17</sup> Herring, *They Wanted to be Nightingales*, np.



Occupation Force immediately thereafter, these publications all seemingly start and end with the war alone. Being established during the war and then almost immediately dissolved once peace was declared, the story of this service ends abruptly and reads as such in the reflections of its members. Where typical unit histories may place itself within a longer narrative of a unit's esprit de corps or the military across time more broadly, the AAMWS could not. Created out of the VAD and then being incorporated as 'other ranks' in the Army Nursing Corps in 1951, the AAMWS does not have a longer unit history. Absorbed by the Nursing Corps, a more senior military service, the AAMWS were forced to adopt the more developed and more esteemed history of the Nursing Corps rather than identify with their previous service.

The fate of the AAMWS known by the 1980s clearly influenced former member's understanding of their work and how they described their wartime experience. Writing such accounts in the 1980s and 1990s, it is evident that time provided reflection for these women to feel that their history had no future. Yet, steadfast in creating a space within the public memory, these unit history type publications worked to offer anecdotes of the service's wartime record and largely do not describe the emotional experience of the servicewomen.

### **Poetry and Storytelling by AAMWS at War: Death and Disillusion**

Reflective in nature and emotive through its creativity, poetry is used as a tool for writers to articulate their thoughts and attempt to provide an understanding of the world around them. Poetry has been read as literary text for its capacity to illustrate and identify one's emotional response to their experiences, especially in war. For instance, studies of British First World War soldiers Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon's wartime writings have helped us understand

experiences of so-called ‘shell shock’ or war neurosis and disillusionment with war.<sup>18</sup> The significance of approaching these sources, and the methodological framework for the historian to do so was put by Paul Fussell in *The Great War and Modern Memory*. As Jay Winter wrote of Fussell’s use of literary text to understand war:

War, he knew, is simply too frightful, too chaotic, too arbitrary, too bizarre, too uncanny a set of events and images to grasp directly. We need blinkers, spectacles, shades to glimpse war even indirectly. Without filters, we are blinded by its searing light. Language is such a filter.<sup>19</sup>

As a filter for the historian, language also acts as a mediator for the author. In her study of the poems written by British First World War nurse, Mary Borden, Carol Acton argues that Borden’s poetry, ‘reflect[ed] her need to find a way of expressing and controlling the ‘obscenity’ that surround[ed] her’.<sup>20</sup> Although a different war, the servicewoman or man’s turn to poetry as a mediator for their thoughts and reflections was seen in the Second World War. And not only did service personnel turn to poetry to articulate their ideas, but the quality of the verse, Maclaren Gordon noted, also improved throughout the war.<sup>21</sup> This was brought by, as Gordon suggests, the authorised journal of the Australian Army Education Service, *SALT*. Within the pages of this journal first published on 29 September 1941 and then issued fortnightly until 22 April 1946, was original prose, poetry, and drawings contributed by Australian servicewomen and men. As Gordon states, *SALT* encouraged service personnel to turn to writing as they realised that ‘they had access

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<sup>18</sup> John E Talbott, ‘Soldiers, Psychiatrists, and Combat Trauma,’ *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 27, no.3 (1997), 437-454; Brian Bond, *The Unquiet Western Front: Britain’s Role in Literature and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Mark S Micale and Paul Lerner, eds., *Traumatic Pasts: History, Psychiatry, and Trauma in the Modern Age, 1870-1930* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001). See also, Robert Hemmings, *Modern Nostalgia: Siegfried Sassoon, Trauma and the Second World War* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008). This focus has not been limited to History, see also, Paul Saks, ‘Words Are Never Enough: The Processing of Traumatic Experience and the Creation of Narratives-The War Poetry of Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen’ (PhD thesis, Adelphi University, 2008); Jean Moorcroft Wilson, ‘Dr W. H. R. Rivers: Siegfried Sassoon and Robert Graves’ ‘Fathering Friend’, *Brain, A Journal of Neurology*, no.140 (2017), 3378–3383.

<sup>19</sup> Jay Winter, ‘Introduction,’ in *The Great War and Modern Memory*, by Paul Fussell Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), x.

<sup>20</sup> Carol Acton, ‘Obsessed by the Obscenity of War’: Emotional and Physical Wounds in Mary Borden’s Poetry and Lesley Smith’s *Four Years Out of Life*, *Journal of War & Culture Studies* 11, no.4 (2018), 336.

<sup>21</sup> Maclaren Gordon, ‘Introduction,’ in *Poets in Uniform* (Melbourne: Footprint, 1989), xiii.

to a journal that would publish their efforts'.<sup>22</sup> *SALT* gave space to servicewomen and men to contribute literary texts, and thus encouraged them to express their thoughts of and during war.

### *The Soldier (Man) and the AAMWS (Woman)*

The flourish and drama instilled in Sheila Sibley's writing saw her express a jovial reality of the AAMWS' work in many articles that the press published during the war. Her journalism, discussed throughout this thesis, brought attention to and publicity for the AAMWS throughout the war. Read by young women and their parents, such exciting narratives of Sibley's war service may have encouraged others to enlist – this was certainly the intention of the censored press at the time as discussed in Chapter 4. Alongside these published articles, Sibley also penned several poems while on service. Despite being creative works written for a public audience, these poems provide a unique insight into the topics that Sibley was grappling with during the war. Published in *SALT*, Sibley's poetry was written to appeal to others in the service; that being those who may have shared similar experiences and were perhaps contemplating similar ideas. *SALT* was not intended to be circulated to civilians—though it was—and writers often published only under their service number. Thus, anonymity and the contained audience offered a controlled space for authors to discuss their ideas during the war. However, it must be remembered that *SALT* was an official journal published under the Army's eye.

Within her memoir published decades after the war, Patsy Adam-Smith claimed of servicewomen as well as those on the homefront that, 'we were ignorant of the great events affecting the war and our troops'.<sup>23</sup> The politics and military strategy of the war were naturally kept secret and the reality of the war's battles were equally restricted by censorship. But, appreciating that the true experience and emotions of a soldier cannot be understood by anyone who was not

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Patsy Adam-Smith, *Goodbye Girlie* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1994), 50.

also present in battle, Sheila Sibley's poetry shows that she was empathetic as a witness to the ongoing effects of war. Published in January 1944, *Sleeping Hospital* speaks of Sibley's work in a military hospital at night where, 'the searchlights pace the sky above' while 'the ward is white and quiet and still' below.<sup>24</sup> Here we see Sibley working to make sense of the impact war was having on men as soldiers. Showing her come to realise the horrors that her patients, that being the soldiers, had seen in the Middle East, Sibley wrote:

And all is peace, all is serene –  
Till someone shudders deeply in his dreaming  
And whispers softly: "God, El Alamein!"

Though Sibley could not have known, as Patsy Adam-Smith says, the truth of 'the great events' affecting the soldiers, she bore witness to their trauma and gained a sense of the fragility exasperated by conflict.

While men feature in her poems, Sheila Sibley writes from her position as a woman, not only an AAMWS. In doing so she does not neglect her own place within the war, instead offering insights into the servicewoman's experience of war. For example, Sibley highlights how war's impact on others is also the cause of her own distress. Written in June 1944, *Discovery* could easily be set within a hospital ward where Sibley nursed a war-devastated soldier:

I looked into your eyes  
To find you had forgotten me  
And nothing left to say,  
Except "I wonder what's the time,"  
And "Will it rain today?"<sup>25</sup>

The story of relationships straining because of people being separated by war, both physically and emotionally, is not unique. Yet, the space of Sibley actively caring at the bedside both at once as an AAMWS and a companion is a less common experience for Australian women during the war.

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<sup>24</sup> Republished in Gordon, *Poets in Uniform*, 72.

<sup>25</sup> Republished in Gordon, *Poets in Uniform*, 83.

For many women, both in the services and on the homefront, their experience as a mother, wife or lover during the war was for the most part, waiting – waiting for the next letter from their son, husband or beau, their return, or for dreaded news about their fate. As such, *Discovery* offers a moment where the two roles Sibley occupied—woman and AAMWS—crossed over, highlighting the duality experienced by servicewomen.

Furthermore, the emotional withdrawal caused by war's trauma as seen in *Discovery* is also emphasised in Sibley's writing as bringing an end to a hopeful future. This notion of war disrupting hope is also present in *Ballade of the Convict's Daughter*.<sup>26</sup> Paired with music in 1945 by composer Horace Keats, this poem written by Sibley in September 1944 is a sorrowful account of a woman losing her fiancé to his country and the war:

Yes, he said goodbye, and my heart grew colder  
For he wore her name upon his shoulder.  
He wore her name for the world to see . . .  
And little he thought or cared about me!

Whether it be death, incapacity, or trauma that was inflicted upon the male subject of Sibley's poems, these three examples all demonstrate that as an AAMWS and a woman, Sibley was present and experienced pain brought by war. Expressed during the war, the themes in Sibley's writings such as loss, empathy, and sorrow are not topics discussed in the service's histories. These issues experienced, often privately, by an individual, although possibly experienced by many, are not given space in a typical unit history. Where the narratives framed by the likes of Critch, Herring, and Mount-Batten include the experience of individuals, they remain focussed on the tangible; recollections of duties have their place, but the emotional impact of their work does not. In these poems by Sibley, her experience is expressed in literature but without the tyranny of time or historiographical interference. Although the depictions of the narrator in her poems are gendered

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 88.

in nature as a carer and a lover, Sibley's works provide an understanding of how women experienced war.

### *The Routine Nature of War and Death*

As a women's service working directly with soldiers, AAMWS entered a unique space during the war. Posted to the wards of military hospitals around Australia and abroad, they moved with trained nurses closer to the front than Australian servicewomen had ever been during a war. Here they were so near the conflict zone that there was little moderation, if any at all, of the traumatic scenes of the wounds inflicted upon soldiers. As such, AAMWS were confronted with the direct aftermath of conflict and were firsthand witnesses to the raw pain and suffering of patients. They were by the bedside as men agonised and as they died. Appearing only under her service number in the Australian forces' publication, *Jungle Warfare* in 1944, AAMWS Everil Murray confronted this theme in a short story titled, *Yet Death Gave Me This*.<sup>27</sup> As the story tells, 'Ann' nursed a wounded soldier who she knew, keeping their relationship secret. But her patient and friend, John, died and Ann was forced to face the concept of mortality and war:

It seemed that I had no feelings as I saw him die. I had stood there because it was my duty.

I was part of the routine of the hospital.

Quoted in *The Longreach Leader* in 1944, Everil Murray stated that she had joined the AAMWS as it was 'the service which undertakes to save life rather than destroy it'.<sup>28</sup> But within her story, 'Ann' was confronted with the realisation that death comes and not all life can be saved. In fact, Ann realised, 'My presence had no more significance than the white pillow under his head'. Both as a woman and an AAMWS, Murray expressed through Ann that her humanitarian aim could not always be sustained; Ann could not prevent or ease John's suffering. Being exposed to

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<sup>27</sup> 'Yet Death Gave Me This,' by QFX53583, in *Jungle Warfare: With the Australian Army in the South-West Pacific* (Canberra: Australian War Memorial, 1944), 57-8.

<sup>28</sup> *The Longreach Leader*, 27 May 1944, 21.

the traumatic scenes of hospital wards in forward areas, AAMWS were forced to confront mortality, both that of the troops and themselves. For Murray, *Yet Death Gave Me This* facilitates an articulation of how an AAMWS, whose duty was to care, became helpless.

Serving in forward operational areas and becoming part of the 'routine' of a hospital and the military, AAMWS thoughts turned to their own mortality as they witnessed death and war's destructive nature. Published anonymously as 'VFX92860', the poem *Searchlights* very softly and slowly recalls the event of searchlights tracing the sky above a military hospital for an unidentified plane.<sup>29</sup> Portraying a sense of helplessness, the author that we now know was AAMWS Mary Hamilton Herring writes calmly about a situation that could have brought her death. 'Flying alone from star to shining star/Climbing and diving blindly to avoid/The lights that ever follow cruel and cold'. As a spectator to a situation that could bring devastation, Herring instils a feeling of uncontrollability as the poem recounts the event almost in a matter-of-fact manner.

Further showing a sense of powerlessness, Herring brings an end to the narrative of the poem by writing, '(“It's one of ours,” we say, and breathe again)'. The authorial choice to use brackets for this line of the poem that breaks the tension and brings resolution should be noted. It suggests that the feeling of relief experienced by the reader was perhaps not experienced in the same way by the author at the time of the event. Perhaps Herring had held her breath while watching the searchlights, hoping harm would not come. But as soon as the threat passed, she at once recommenced her duties as a servicewoman without a second's break. There was no time to reflect on a near miss as the work of a hospital continued, calling upon servicewomen to resume their position within its operations. Approaching this source as a moment of reflection, it suggests that Herring was not trying to be stoic, but rather saw herself as a servicewoman in the military at the disposal of the war and conflict.

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<sup>29</sup> 'Searchlights' by VFX92860, in *Stand Easy: After the Defeat of Japan, 1945* (Canberra: Australian War Memorial, 1945), 201.

In these literary accounts, both Everil Murray and Mary Hamilton Herring write of specific events and experiences. While the reader does not have the ability to identify the works as factual, their origin is likely to have been from lived experience. Irrespective of this, the writings of Murray and Herring offer an insight into how they understood themselves and their place as servicewomen within the conflict. Furthermore, they are specific examples that demonstrate how their response to death and mortality was shaped by the spaces that they occupied during war. For both Murray and Herring, they became desensitised to death as just another routine aspect of working in hospital wards. Their own mortality, while realised, was not a concept to be feared as it, too, became part of their experience of the futility of war.

A corporal in the AAMWS, Susan Scot Skirving employed the theme of death and one's own mortality to frame her poem, *For Alice*.<sup>30</sup> Unlike Murray and Herring, Scot Skirving did not describe a specific event perhaps experienced at war, but instead questioned the effect of death from the perspective of disrupted futures. That is, Scot Skirving does not consider in this poem how the war evoked thoughts of mortality, but shows the thought was present by using it as her starting point. Here instead, Scot Skirving questions how friendship may be separated by the different journeys two may take. 'If I should leave this earthly life to-morrow/And you should live to four score years and ten', positions the text where two friends meet again in death, writing:

You might know me...  
Blue dress, brown plait,  
Aged twenty-five...and fat.  
Would I know your grey hair, dark frock,  
Aged gently with the quietly ticking clock?

Through this fictional interaction Scot Skirving draws into discussion thoughts and debates being considered by servicewomen during the war. For instance, the poem's subject, Alice, who has 'lived a normal life' is seen to have become a 'contented mother and happy wife'. This reflects the

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<sup>30</sup> AWM: PR85/335.



push that gained strength as the war progressed for servicewomen to return to domestic life rather than remain in the workforce. Furthermore, other topics current to the time are weaved in by Scot Skirving, including in the following lines:

Could you bear talk about this present nation  
With all its long forgotten, silly discontents?  
What would I know of rehabilitation,  
Of future war and peace and international events?

By framing the poem around death, Scot Skirving reflects upon the future and more specifically, the future that was being considered for and by servicewomen during the war. While this work does not show the depths of the author's thoughts on such matters, it does, however, help to uncover the topics that were at the forefront of their minds. That said, there is great subtly written into the lines of this poem, including in the line quoted above; 'With all its long forgotten, silly discontents'. This remark seems to suggest that by the time Scot Skirving wrote this poem, she was beginning to feel disillusioned by the war. Perhaps owing to the ease of which death comes during war, or perhaps a greater intervention with the politics of the war, nevertheless Scot Skirving's disheartened attitude to events is expressed.

### *Emotions of War: Disruption and Despair*

When her untimely death brought by polio came in 1948, not even 30 years of age, Susan Scot Skirving's poem, *For Alice* gained new meaning; or at least was made more poignant in its commentary on death, especially to Alice Penman (nee Burns) for whom the poem was written. As recalled by Penman, Scot Skirving penned, *For Alice* one evening after a 'rather amusing afternoon' the two spent together in camp during their service where they had 'talked about all kinds of silly things'.<sup>31</sup> Speaking almost sixty years after the war, the poem became a reminder for Penman about the despair she felt for the experiences that Scot Skirving did not have, both because

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<sup>31</sup> Transcript of AWFA interview with Alice Penman.

of her early death, and because of the disruption brought by the war. When war broke out, Susan Scot Skirving was studying a Bachelor of Arts at the University of Sydney. Deferring her study, she joined the Army in 1941, enlisting in the VAD. She, along with her sister Ann, were among the first 200 VAs sent to the Middle East. Upon her return, she became an AAMWS and obtained the rank of corporal, continuing her service until her discharge on 7 February 1946. According to Alice Penman, who at the time of the war had wanted to be a nurse, Scot Skirving had been hoping to return to her own chosen path, which was her incomplete Arts degree. Scot Skirving's wartime poetry and prose is perhaps evidence of her longing to return to her degree that was disrupted by war. It is now a rich historical source created by a VA/AAMWS.

As products of her wartime experience, Scot Skirving's works not only highlight the thoughts that she as a servicewoman confronted during the war, but they also illustrate her emotions. While embellishment may be present in her literary writing, Scot Skirving's poetry produces a depiction of the events that she faced during the war. Her works also represent how she reacted to such events and offer a characterisation of how she experienced these moments emotionally. For instance, approaching her third Christmas spent in the Army, Scot Skirving turned to poetry to express her sadness. The poem titled, *Christmas 1943* speaks of the disruption caused by the war with Scot Skirving reminiscing that she would otherwise be celebrating the holiday with her family or community.<sup>32</sup> Instead, Scot Skirving laments that it will be another spent at war, writing:

But this will be another Xmas (sic) in the Army[...]  
Last year we shivered in Palestine[...]  
This year, tropical heat blanketing the feaster,  
Somewhere in Australia, somewhere in the islands...

Within this poem, Scot Skirving predominantly conveys a nostalgic longing for peace. The words are sorrowful for the peacetime festivities once experienced and now only imagined. That said, the

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<sup>32</sup> AWM: PR85/335.

penultimate line of the final verse reads, 'Gaiety, with home in sight but intangible'. Here Scot Skirving highlights the excitement of the services returning to the Pacific from a distant theatre of war in 1943. Yet, this begins to show her disillusion with war. Despite the gaiety, Scot Skirving at once expresses the pain of being near her home, the shores of her country 'in sight' but 'intangible' as the war and her military assignment continued.

For Scot Skirving, her dissatisfaction with the war grew as the conflict was prolonged. As argued by historian Joan Beaumont, this sentiment was common among Australian troops from late 1944. According to Beaumont, the actions of the Australian forces in the SPWA in the final year of the war were at the time and later 'the source of bitter controversy'.<sup>33</sup> Uninterested in any political incentive, the campaigns in the SWPA were seen by the troops as futile.<sup>34</sup> As argued by Beaumont, 'none made any difference to the outcome of the war or the time it took to defeat the [enemy]'.<sup>35</sup> This frustration felt by the servicewomen and men in the SWPA was characterised by Scot Skirving in the poem titled, *Evening...Tuesday, 8<sup>th</sup> May 1945*.<sup>36</sup>

The unpublished poem, *Evening...Tuesday, 8<sup>th</sup> May 1945* was uninhibited by censorship of the time and not shaped by the politics of historical narrative. It is a characterisation by a servicewoman who was serving in a forward area of the SWPA tropics when peace was declared in Europe. Written privately, it details a personal experience of a public event. Taking the poem as Scot Skirving's experience, reactions to Victory in Europe (VE) Day from the camp hospital where she was posted were 'a hushed excitement, slightly forced'. While victory against the enemy in Europe was cause for celebration, to Australians it was a reminder that the conflict for them was not yet over. Portrayed by Scot Skirving, the forced celebrations were unbearable, and she chose instead to go into the grounds and sit alone. As Scot Skirving wrote, 'I was waiting'. The notion of waiting reappears in the lines, 'Far out at sea, upon a raft, some four/Slowly freezing, waiting,

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<sup>33</sup> Beaumont, *Australia's War*, 45.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid*, 46.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid*, 45.

<sup>36</sup> AWM: PR85/335.

still at war'. Along with all Australians, Scot Skirving was waiting for her peace to come. She was disillusioned by the war, its futile nature, and the celebrations for a 'semi-peace' and a war half done. The sombre emotions towards VE Day portrayed by Scot Skirving demonstrates that Australian servicewomen did not support the war effort unquestioningly. While Scot Skirving, coming from a patriotic family with strong connection to the military medical service, volunteered to join the Army early in the war, how she saw the war and understood her place in it did change.

### **Memory and Reconstruction: The Memoir and Oral History**

Discussed above, as the war progressed Susan Scot Skirving began to explore in her poetry questions of post-war life for servicewomen. Peace, demobilisation, and post-war reconstruction all gained greater attention in the later years of the conflict. In the January 1944 issue of *SALT*, the Army Education Service journal, Sheila Sibley presented an article based on a survey of servicewomen's attitudes regarding their post-war life. Overtly, this article echoes the government and military position at this time that began to drive women back into historically constructed gender normative roles of a wife and mother; 'Many in war work sing of a postwar home sweet home', reads the title.<sup>37</sup> But showing the complexity of women's attitudes and reflecting the space that the war had given to the value of women's labour, alongside those wishing to return to a domestic life Sibley found that, 'feminine interest in engineering, as much an acquired taste as oysters, is booming'.<sup>38</sup>

However, despite the future being considered during the war and the complexity of attitudes being appreciated at the time, reflection upon how these topics were considered at the time is largely absent from the service histories published in the 1980s. These works do highlight a frustration brought after the war whereby the AAMWS ceased to exist but give little attention to

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<sup>37</sup> Sheila Sibley, 'Future of Females? Many in War Work Sing of a Postwar Home Sweet Home,' *SALT* 7, no.10 (17 January 1944).

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

the post-war lives of the former servicewomen. It is within accounts of a more individual nature, such as oral histories and memoir where evidence of regret can be found for the post-war experience of these women. That is, for many of the women, the skills and experience that they gained and used in the VAD/AAMWS was not employed again as they took up unrelated post-war occupations or left the workforce completely. As shown in Damousi and Lake's, *Gender and War*, the Second World War offered Australian women new opportunities, but any gains for women were at once lost in the post-war period as historical societal expectations for certain classes of women were again reinforced.<sup>39</sup> Where peace set the AAMWS on a path to disillusion, the end of the war also brought an abrupt end to the working opportunities for the service's members.

Employing oral history in his ground-breaking work, *Anzac Memories*, Alistair Thompson found that the post-war experiences of First World War Australian servicemen shaped how they thought about and remembered their wartime experiences.<sup>40</sup> The treatment of these men in the post-war years, as well as the nation's public narrative about the war and their service impacted upon how these former servicemen reflected and understood their own wartime experiences. The end of the war, returning to civilian life, and the impact that the post-war period had on their lives are significant topics in the oral histories and memoirs of VA/AAMWS. Using the framework offered by Thompson, this section explores how former VAs and AAMWS remembered the end of the war and the post-war period, and how these experiences and memories may have influenced their broader characterisation of their war service.

It must be noted that memory, or the act of remembering, is a contested source. As historian Jay Winter notes, a more appropriate term that better reflects the social process of constructing memory is remembrance.<sup>41</sup> This, Winter suggests, illustrates that memory, as the product of remembrance, is an active process that is continually shaped and reshaped.

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<sup>39</sup> Lake, 'Female Desires,' 61.

<sup>40</sup> Thomson, *Anzac Memories*, 11.

<sup>41</sup> Jay Winter, *Remembering War: The Great War Between Memory and History in the Twentieth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 138.

Remembering, therefore, is a product of the time and space in which it is recalled. For the oral histories of VAs/AAMWS collected by the University of New South Wales (Canberra), these remembrances were intersected with the strong political control of Australia's understanding of war and commemoration. Recorded in the early 2000s, these oral histories followed the Keating prime ministership which gave significance to the Pacific campaigns of the Second World War, while reinforcing nationalism that relied on notions of sacrifice and (masculine) mateship.<sup>42</sup> This included the Keating Government allocating \$12 million to the Department of Veterans' Affairs as part of the *Australia Remembers, 1939-1945* program to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the end of the war.<sup>43</sup> Following Keating as Prime Minister, John Howard returned the narrative to the First World War and Gallipoli, still reinforcing a dominant heroic, again masculine, militaristic nationalism in the public consciousness. As historians Amanda Laugesen and Catherine Fisher stated, 'Like it or not, Anzac has a powerful hold on the Australian political and cultural imagination'.<sup>44</sup>

### *Oral History Memories of Life After the War and the Army*

Marking victory in the Pacific and the end of the war, Australian Prime Minister Ben Chifley declared 15 and 16 August 1945 would be public holidays across the nation. As historian Michael McKernan explained, the first day was full of celebration – dancing, two-up and gaiety was seen in the streets of every town and city in Australia, and then victory marches in the capital cities were cheered on by crowds on the second day.<sup>45</sup> But, captured in oral history interviews in the 2000s, this was not the experience for every Australian. For Jean Parry, the end of the war only evoked memories of those who would not be returning. Parry had been a VA in the Middle East where she met an Army Sergeant, Lloyd Fiske. Parry and Fiske had become engaged in the Middle East,

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<sup>42</sup> Holbrook, *Anzac*, 179-80.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid, 189.

<sup>44</sup> Laugesen and Fisher, *Expressions of War in Australia and the Pacific*, 9.

<sup>45</sup> McKernan, *All in!*, 267-8.

eventually marrying before Fiske was posted to New Guinea. When Parry, now an AAMWS, farewelled Fiske for New Guinea, she was pregnant and did not know this was the last time she would see her husband. On 17 August 1943, before Fiske left Australia for New Guinea, he was a passenger in a Catalina aircraft that crashed into the ocean off the coast of Bowen, Queensland. Parry had been discharged from the AAMWS when peace was declared as she was now a mother of a young boy. Watching a film when the announcement of peace was made, all she wanted to do was to get away and be on her own, recalling, 'We were happy the war was over knowing that that people were coming home, but the ones we wanted to come home...weren't'.<sup>46</sup>

For others who were still in the Army at the end of the war, it was a moment of contemplation for them, too. Recalled by Jean Oddie, she was 'deeply grateful' for the war being over, 'but I wasn't as the crowds were: sort of over the moon'.<sup>47</sup> The experience of peace being declared was remembered by Oddie as being a 'cold disembodied feeling'.<sup>48</sup> The war had ravaged for six years and her part in it had become all-encompassing. As Oddie stated, 'We had been in the Army a long time by then...and it had become part of your life – and suddenly it is not'.<sup>49</sup> The expectation, which Oddie stated was felt by others she spoke to, was that with the advent of peace she was at once being asked to suddenly be a different person. It was clear that the end of the war was a historical marker and would be a turning point for many, yet it was a complex and confusing experience for many whose lives had become so entangled with the course of the war. As summarised by Edith Matthews, 'We just sort of accepted that that was the end of it' and thoughts turned immediately to discharge and post-war civilian life.<sup>50</sup>

However, discharge from the Army was not a present next step for many servicewomen. Matthews had to wait for over a year for her discharge from the Army, eventually returning to

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<sup>46</sup> Transcript of interview with Jean Parry, 6 May 2003, Australians at War Film Archive, no.77.

<sup>47</sup> Transcript of AWFA interview with Jean Oddie.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Transcript of AWFA interview with Edith Matthews.

civilian life on 26 October 1946.<sup>51</sup> But remembered by Eileen Fisher, victory in the Pacific did change the way in which AAMWS experienced their work in the Army from that point onwards. According to Fisher, serving in Borneo at the end of the war was a new experience:

The trauma of being in a war had been lifted. We could throw our hats in the air and say, the war is over, and we could actually enjoy our service more because we knew that we were cleaning up.<sup>52</sup>

For those in the medical services, their work continued after peace was declared as existing patients recovered or were sent to repatriate, and as new patients were admitted, significantly Australian POWs. Although Fisher characterises the end of the war as lifting trauma, she at once recalls the difficulties of nursing at the end of the war. For example, she offered an account of a POW being admitted to hospital:

One patient came into my ward on a stretcher, and he was forty-eight pounds. He had been found on a heap of bodies. He had been thought dead... Ants had started to eat his flesh and he was unconscious for three weeks and was fed by a tube.<sup>53</sup>

This event, clearly distressing, remained as a significant memory for Eileen Fisher almost 60 years later. As she stated, nursing POWs in Borneo was, 'the most important thing I feel that I ever did, and the most emotional thing'.<sup>54</sup> For her, this memory was not an example of the trauma of war, rather it was an anecdote to express the power of nursing, the worth of her service, and the belief that with the war over, 'it must get better'.<sup>55</sup> However, Fisher's sentiments reflect the sympathetic narrative surrounding veterans that emerged in the 1970s and held dominance as the cohort aged and gained 'celebrity' as discussed above.

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<sup>51</sup> NAA: B884, QF271004 [Matthews, Edith].

<sup>52</sup> Transcript of interview with Eileen Fisher, 8 May 2003, Australians at War Film Archive, no.29.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.



Recollections of the end of hostilities bringing new hope for improved conditions were not only directed to the work environment as Eileen Fisher had recounted. As Edith Matthews remembered, the thought of peace and discharge from the Army also instilled a confidence and an expectation that ‘we’d probably be a lot happier off afterwards’.<sup>56</sup> The notion, as Matthews recalled, was that returning to civilian life in peacetime would offer better prospects that would be free from conflict and trauma. However, what was not expected by many was the difficulty that came in the immediate period after their discharge. A resounding sentiment expressed by AAMWS when remembering their return to civilian life was the hardship of saying goodbye to their colleagues who had become friends and the instant loss of their companionship and camaraderie. ‘You sort of severed ties, but they’d been me family for four years you see and it’s a different life altogether’, Bernice Dimmock (nee Jones) remembered.<sup>57</sup> Staunch in her attitude, Dimmock characterised this period by describing it as a necessity to adjust, ‘you knew you had to settle in’ and so that is what she set out to achieve.<sup>58</sup>

Once out of uniform, official records and historical narratives often cease to recount the experiences of former servicewomen and men. Yet, the period of adjustment following their discharge adds to our understanding of war’s impact on those who served. Exiting the Army, Jill Linton was forced to confront a new life. Changes caused by the war were far reaching; Linton had lost her partner and twin brother to the conflict, the nation and her home now looked different, and her work as an AAMWS had broadened how she viewed the world. When her discharge came, Linton, like many AAMWS, was ready to leave the Army after her years of service away from home. But this did not mean that she was able to transition swiftly back to civilian life. ‘It was hard to settle down’, she remembered, ‘everything was wrong’.<sup>59</sup> As soon as she could, Linton returned to England where she had been born. For Linton, she attributed this decision to

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<sup>56</sup> Transcript of AWFA interview with Edith Matthews.

<sup>57</sup> Transcript of AWFA interview with Bernice Dimmock.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Transcript of AWM interview with Jill Linton.

her feeling of restlessness that she experienced after her discharge, recalling, 'I just felt if I could get out of Australia, I might feel better'.<sup>60</sup> Unfortunately for Linton, she was unable to find comfort in England and after six years she returned to Australia still working towards her re-adjustment to life after the war.

### *Personal Reflection in Memoir*

The feeling of uncertainty and confusion about how to recreate stability and determine what to do after her discharge was not unique to Jill Linton. Linton understood this was an experience many former servicewomen faced after the war. Patsy Adam-Smith and Jean Waddell (nee Wallace) are just two other ex-AAMWS who had similar experiences. Both Adam-Smith and Waddell explore this period in detail in their published memoirs. These two memoirs appeared in the 1980s, following the trend mentioned above where women were creating space in the narrative. They also sit within the period noted by historian Carolyn Holbrook when family history boomed and there was a 'sudden surge' of memoirs and family history publications.<sup>61</sup> This surge, Holbrook notes, observed the emotive and sympathetic narrative found in personal stories that had been exemplified by Gammage as discussed above. Importantly, Patsy Adam-Smith had already contributed to this literature before penning her own memoir. Following Gammage, Adam-Smith's, *The Anzacs* 'steered a course between hostility towards the war itself and admiration for the men who fought'.<sup>62</sup> According to Holbrook, the success of *The Anzacs* demonstrated the public interest in the war.<sup>63</sup> It also confirmed support for the new way in which the story was told and gave Adam-Smith a platform to explore her critique of war and sympathy for those whose lives it impacted.

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Holbrook, *Anzac*, 5; 145.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid, 136.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

In 1984, Patsy Adam-Smith contributed to the momentum of feminist historians contributing new works with women at their core in her publication, *Australian Women at War*. Among the chapters that trace Australian women's experiences from Boer War nurses to members of the Land Army and on the homefront during the Second World War, Adam-Smith slips briefly into self-reflection recalling her work as a VA and then an AAMWS during the Second World War. A decade later, Adam-Smith expanded on this in her memoir, *Goodbye Girlie*. This is only the second memoir penned by a former VA/AAMWS that has been found, the first being published in 1989 by Jean Waddell and titled, *Shut the Gate*. While both memoirs focus on a greater portion of the author's lives than just the war, neither diminish their wartime contribution by overlooking its significance, nor do they revert to placing their patients at the centre of their account. Yet, like the service accounts compiled by Critch, Herring, and Mount-Batten discussed above, these memoirs also recall a story of lament. Flirtations with servicemen, friendship, the bending of rules and disregard for military discipline and regulation, brief moments of exposure to wartime horrors, and waiting all form common narratives for women in the services. These themes feature in the memoirs of AAMWS as depictions of their wartime service and are largely recalled with a sense of humour and adventurous youthfulness. Yet, the moments of reflection within the memoirs penned by both Waddell and Adam-Smith that offer an insight into how these former servicewomen understood their wartime service show a sense of despair.

With the distance of time, Patsy Adam-Smith reflected upon the wartime years as an upheaval, not only to women's role in the workforce, but also in an individual's connection to place and time, writing:

From the time you put on uniform until the day you are ordered to remove it, you are a person so removed from anything that came before, a new persona has enveloped you.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Adam-Smith, *Goodbye Girlie*, 45.

For Adam-Smith, her years in the Army with war front of mind created a moment that suspended itself unattached to her past. 'Both my grandmothers died while I was away and it was strange', Adam-Smith remembered when she reflected upon this in her memoir.<sup>65</sup> Thinking about her reaction to her grandmothers' deaths decades later, Adam-Smith found that despite her family being close before the war, 'their deaths meant no more to me, and indeed, meant less to me, than did those of the men who died in our hospital'.<sup>66</sup> Through Adam-Smith's words it is seen that this was an inadvertent consequence of adopting the new persona that she felt consumed her when she donned her service uniform. Identifying the effect that the new sphere which she and other servicewomen had entered, Adam-Smith wrote:

The life of the hospital and the comings and goings of sick and wounded men were the whole of our life, and our families were in retreat, left behind us emotionally as well as physically.<sup>67</sup>

Adam-Smith states that she did not see outbreak of war as Vera Brittain had in 1914. Where Brittain had seen war as an 'interruption of the most exasperating kind to personal plans', Adam-Smith saw it as an escape. However, through the pages of her memoir, Adam-Smith comes to realise that while the war did offer her a chance to change her trajectory, it was at once a disruption. Her emotional and physical connection to her family was severed, and although she made light where she could in the Army, Adam-Smith found, 'You were under the total control of a machine that owned and operated you'.<sup>68</sup> As her memoir tells, Patsy Adam-Smith's wartime experience was one that was suspended, a moment that hangs where she was at once disconnected from her past, but with hindsight also sees it as a time disconnected from her future. While the war impacted her post-war life, her experiences afforded her no new opportunities.

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid, 47.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid, 48.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid, 33.

For Jean Waddell, her story traces her upbringing on a dairy farm where she had learnt the importance of hard work and tireless devotion, which she then carried into the Army. Within the pages of her memoir, published decades after the war had ended and she had left her post-war career, Waddell speaks freely about her experiences and reflects upon the challenges she faced. This includes the trials that came in the post-war years of reconstruction where servicewomen had to reidentify themselves as civilians, having changed during their time spent in uniform. As Waddell wrote, ‘Once home, I had to face up to the fact that my experiences during the war had enlarged my world’.<sup>69</sup> For Waddell, this adjustment period saw her hide her AAMWS past. ‘I sensed a resentment towards ex-service personnel’, she wrote, ‘Or was it a resentment toward women working? Were they expected to go back to the kitchen after the war?’ she asked.<sup>70</sup> Not satisfied to join the ranks of women who were ‘in the pram brigade’, Waddell sought work. But not seeking to follow the post-war return to gendered roles for women, she ‘found it was better not to mention’ her military service.<sup>71</sup> Although modest, Waddell portrays this event as a tragedy. ‘The war effort had been shared by all Australians’, Waddell wrote, ‘and while I could understand that ex-service people should not expect more than anyone else, I did not expect rejection [or] animosity’.<sup>72</sup>

Patsy Adam-Smith was one who did join the ‘pram brigade’, being discharged before the end of the war to become a wife and mother. But although this may have followed the expected route for servicewomen after the war, it cannot be considered an easier path. To Adam-Smith, the war offered an escape from the Depression and ‘provided the greatest escape route in history for women and girls’.<sup>73</sup> Suddenly in 1941, women were called to join the military in newly formed auxiliaries with every branch of the forces. But within five years as men began to return to civilian life, the expectation for women was at once reverted from supporting men at the front, to

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<sup>69</sup> Waddell, *Shut the Gate*, 162.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid*, 163.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid*, 163.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>73</sup> Adam-Smith, *Goodbye Girlie*, 28-9.

supporting men in the home. Reflecting upon this moment decades later, Adam-Smith retells of her experience as one of agony where she lost agency. Adam-Smith recalls that by late 1944, servicewomen ‘could get a discharge with very little trouble’ and married servicewomen, which included her, were being encouraged to demobilise.<sup>74</sup> But this was not something that she wanted, ‘I didn’t want to leave, I wanted to stay in the best company I ever knew’, her memoir states.<sup>75</sup> Yet, her husband in Tasmania, already discharged from the war, called for his wife with the support of a medical certificate that stated that he ‘had neurasthenia which was being exacerbated by the absence of his wife’.<sup>76</sup> ‘Was that me? I had never thought of myself as being a wife’, Adam-Smith contemplated.<sup>77</sup> Discharged and feeling forced to join her husband in Tasmania, Adam-Smith recalls:

I cried all the way to Tasmania...it was as if I was exchanging paradise for perdition. I wasn’t even embarrassed by my tears, they were only the outward symbol of my total distress.<sup>78</sup>

Much like the narrative of the published service histories and the tone of the recorded oral histories discussed above, the reflection contained within these memoirs is that their service started and ended with the war and offered no future. For both Jean Waddell and Patsy Adam-Smith, the war had offered them new hope and opportunities after their family had spent years struggling through the Depression. But as it has been argued, the post-war period did not afford these women the ability to affect change for women in the civilian sphere. Although Jean Waddell became a trained nurse after the war, she had had to commence her training in a civil hospital with no credit for her years already spent working in the wards. While this event appears in the pages of the AAMWS’ recollections as a missed opportunity, this only echoes the sentiments emerging in the

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid, 89.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid, 90.

1980s of the former servicewomen towards their service. Bearing witness to the forgetting by others of their efforts, Patsy Adam-Smith wrote hopelessly:

We VADs did nothing courageous, left no mark showing that we had even been there, had worked so hard for such long hours and days and years but no, nothing marks where we had been. But like many other groups in that war and all other stupid wars, we were there.<sup>79</sup>

## Conclusion

The reflective practices of creative writing, compiling histories, penning memoirs, and participating in oral history interviews all offer rich evidence of how AAMWS saw themselves and understood their place within the war as they experienced it and how they remembered it over time. Considering when they were created and their historical and political context, these sources all highlight the themes that were prevalent in these women's minds, including where public consciousness is a factor. On duty in active service areas with busy hospital organisation and care of patients their main concern, turning to literary writing offered VAs/AAMWS a space where they could express in their own words their service experience. Through language and their creative expression, these women characterised their place as VA/AAMWS, as women, lovers, and as witness to war, trauma, and key moments within the history of the Second World War. Seizing a similar space decades later, memoirs and oral histories also afforded these women the opportunity to have their thoughts and experiences known. Generally, the oral histories of VAs/AAMWS evoke a sense of pride in their association with the war effort as typical of the political narrative that dominated public discourse. They are also often sorrowful, recounting the trauma of war, but not only offering sympathies to the soldiers, rather remembering the impacts of war on their own lives. While this may echo dominant public memories of the war, they are unique in that women's

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid, 34.

experiences are still seldom heard in this way. As these female veterans state, while they were glad to have served, they wish that they had not needed to.

Significantly, though, the conclusion is made across many of the reflective sources explored in this chapter that the story of the VAD/AAMWS is one of lament. Whether it was frustration for the war and the trauma that it inflicted, disappointment for the demise of the AAMWS as a military service, or regret for the opportunities that were lost to women in the post-war period, the narrative of the VAs/AAMWS seemingly returns to the theme of having been forgotten. Given the space in 2003 to reflect publicly on her wartime service in the AAMWS, Jean Oddie said:

I guess I would like the [Australian War] Memorial to focus more on the women's services and what they had done... You wouldn't know we even existed.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Transcript of AWFA interview with Jean Oddie.



## Conclusion

At the conclusion of the war, Major-General Roy Burston, the Army Director-General of Medical Services and Chair of the national VAD Council, wrote, 'The past seven years have brought about a complete change in our attitude towards the employment of women in the armed forces'.<sup>1</sup> Throughout the war, Burston had supported the employment and development of VAs and then the AAMWS in the military. Their indispensability had been recognised. Yet, with the end of the war, AAMWS were discharged and Burston's suggested approach to maintain a cohort of women ready to serve in the event of a future war was, as he wrote:

...that the [civilian] VADs provide an organisation under which this training could be most effectively carried out in peace time. In addition, it is felt that there would be many advantages in maintaining the [civilian] VADs with their tradition of service which has been built up over the past 30 years or more.<sup>2</sup>

The war had provided an environment for women to expand their job opportunities and it gave servicewomen space in the military to demonstrate the value not only of historically female-dominated duties but of women's labour generally. But the end of the war effectively erased this recognition. Women were again expected to contribute their labour through voluntary endeavours, diminishing the value that had been assigned to their work during wartime. Further complicating this sentiment expressed by Burston, the strength of the civilian VAD movement had been devastated by the decisions made by the government and the military throughout the course of the war. The traditions of the VAD which Burston referred to had been significantly impacted by the enlistment of VAs in the Army and the creation of the AAMWS. Furthermore, the skill and identity built by the Army VAD and then the AAMWS was in this instant, dismissed. By 1946, the majority of AAMWS had been discharged and in 1951, they would become 'other

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<sup>1</sup> 'VAD Post-War Organisation', *VAD News Sheet*, no.15 (15 November 1946), 1-2.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

ranks' within the Army Nursing Corps. So, although Burston stated that the military authorities' position regarding servicewomen had changed, the place of the AAMWS within the military medical system, and the military more broadly, was erased. The position of the Army, which returned to a reliance on the voluntary efforts of the civilian VAD, demonstrates that there was little recognition after the war for the role of the AAMWS within the military medical system, or an awareness of how their work had developed. Furthermore, the incorporation of the remaining AAMWS into the Army Nursing Corps signifies the ongoing confusion surrounding the VA/AAMWS and invites the question to be asked again, nurse or not?

This study has traced the changing organisational environment and the work experience of the VAD/AAMWS in the military during the Second World War, and it has explored the influencing factors on the responsibilities, the identity, and the shifting place of women's work in the military and Australia more broadly. It began with the myth that VAs/AAMWS either identified as or had ambitions to become a nurse. The myth arose from the presence of the VAD in hospitals during the First World War, reinforced by the stereotype of the Red Cross 'nurse' as portrayed by Vera Brittain. The resurgence of the VA, who then became the AAMWS in Australia, gave space for the myth to continue in the next war. However, this thesis has challenged this myth and acutely interrogated the question of whether the VA/AAMWS was in fact a nurse or not. And where the sources show the VA or AAMWS working within the bounds of nursing and assuming the space like that filled by nurse trainees in civil hospitals, I have argued that the idea of the VA/AAMWS as nurse was at odds with their desire to identify as a VA or an AAMWS.

From its voluntary origins as a civilian organisation, the VAD was inextricably linked with the nursing profession. The interwar period strengthened this connection, not only between the VAD and nursing, but also particularly with military nursing. As the work of the VA and then the AAMWS moved into greater operational areas of military medical establishments, firstly in the Middle East and then later in northern Australia and the SWPA, this connection only got stronger.

Yet, for the VAs/AAMWS, they were not nurses – they were VAs and AAMWS and were working to gain the respect of others and create an identity of their own. However, Army nurses were fundamental in determining the space and scope of work that VAs/AAMWS were permitted. In some cases, the trained nurses exerted their power over the VAs/AAMWS. But despite the military hierarchy, the VAD/AAMWS gained the respect of most nursing professionals that worked alongside them in the military. But this did create other problems for the service. From their duty and commitment as shown in the AGHs, VAs/AAMWS came to be used by the Army nursing service as nurse trainees in all but name. Here, the stereotype of VA/AAMWS identified as a nurse was placed on them by nurses themselves.

Furthermore, placed at the junction of two male-dominated spheres—the hospital system that gave power to male doctors, and the military—the understanding of VAs/AAMWS was foremost as women and only secondarily as workers. Military and government depictions of VAs/AAMWS was understood primarily through gendered stereotypes of women as gentle nurturers, adoring of men. Characterisations of the work of the VA/AAMWS was, furthermore, only understood in ways previously used to describe nurses. There was little consideration of women enlisting for their own career development, and less discussion about their skilled work. That was despite the focus of the Army to offer training and new opportunities for women. Consequently, the public consumed such understandings of VAs/AAMWS and perpetuated the myth that they were nurses.

Indeed, some VAs/AAMWS had considered pursuing a career as a nurse before enlisting. However, given the number of job opportunities available to women before the war, and any influence they may have felt to choose a job that was considered ‘feminine’, it is unsurprising that they would have had ideas about nursing. As personal considerations, it is ambiguous as to how this may have contributed to any such public stereotype. Furthermore, even when the AAMWS were afforded the opportunity to formally train as nurses in the Army, it was assumed by military

and government officials that the servicewomen would be interested. In fact, any interest in the scheme may be argued as an appreciation that the nursing profession may offer a post-war career. Moreover, it would be contentious to suggest that the dedication and eagerness of VAs/AAMWS in the wards showed their desire to be a nurse. As this thesis has shown, VAs/AAMWS demonstrated their interest and ability in the varied and numerous roles and tasks undertaken by the breadth of their service, not just as nursing orderlies.

Although VAs/AAMWS were understood primarily in relation to the nursing profession, and frequently seen only in gendered terms, their contribution to Australia's war effort was secondary to their role in shaping women's work and its place in the military. As a case study, the organisational and individual experience offers rich content that challenges widely accepted notions about women's work and the labour of Australian women during the Second World War. Although the VAD/AAMWS can be seen as an auxiliary that primarily contained women to occupations already open to them, this does not lessen the story that they can tell, nor does it adequately represent the skilled and technical work that these servicewomen did in an efficient and organised manner.

The dedication of the service's members and its leaders saw the organisation grow throughout the war and this aided them to change perspectives of who was or could be a VA/AAMWS, including the highly trained. Yet, these perspectives were largely internal. Where the technical abilities and roles of VAs/AAMWS developed in accordance with wartime needs, the military, particularly the Army Medical Corps remained an encouraging advocate. Struggling to shift their gendered prejudices, the government, however, only hesitantly accepted the labour efforts of VAs/AAMWS as the needs of war demanded. Given the opportunity though, servicewomen worked tirelessly to redefine the idea of women's work. Domestic duties in the military gained new meaning with the significance of their work, particularly regarding diet and hygiene being understood and appreciated on a large scale, including publicly. But despite the

recognition and high value assigned to this work, these gains were not lasting and both the military and government's appreciation for women's work largely ended with the coming of peace in 1945.

### *A Continuing Study of AAMWS*

In the 1918 report that analysed the efficiency of Australian medical services on the Western Front, Major Robert Scot Skirving recommended that VAs should be employed to ease the burden placed on trained nurses. Given his senior officers were fundamentally opposed to any such recommendation, it is perhaps unlikely that awareness of Scot Skirving's report remained during the interwar period. However, early into the Second World War, government and military leaders called upon VAs to join the forces overseas, as Scot Skirving had once suggested. Although the extent to which Scot Skirving's advocacy had reach is unknown, his granddaughters were part of the beneficiaries. Ann and Susan Scot Skirving sailed to the Middle East as VAs with the Australian Army in 1941. Both raised to the rank of corporal within the AAMWS as the service developed into an enlisted women's military auxiliary, and they were discharged just a week apart in February 1946.

As the granddaughters also of Australia's first Prime Minister, Ann and Susan Scot Skirving represent the middle-class women who disrupted their place in society events at home to form part of the nation's mobilisation of women's labour for the war effort. It has been suggested that women with connections to society, such as the Scot Skirvings, were given preferential consideration for enlistment early in the war, instead of recruitment of VAs by merit. Yet, this thesis has limited its consideration of class as a methodological approach to understanding the women of the VAD/AAMWS and their experiences. The information required to use class as an analysis is lacking, but for many of the young women who became a VA/AAMWS, their class or social standing did not influence their identity within the military. The Army provided a space where opportunities were available to those who were willing to pursue them. And the war

disrupted any preconceived notions of work and career possibilities for many Australian women. For Ann Scot Skirving, this meant that her thoughts of pursuing medicine, a career possibility that was shaped by her upbringing, was by the end of the war to her, unappealing. Ann Scot Skirving felt after the war that, 'I wanted to get a job and so on, and I didn't want to turn around and do a six-year medical course'.<sup>3</sup> No longer considering a career in medicine, Ann undertook a Commonwealth Reconstruction Training Scheme course and became a secretary.

Where the war ended the career pursuits of some women, like Ann Scot Skirving, for others, their service stirred new thoughts for their post-war lives. For example, Connie and Jean Wallace had been encouraged by their mother before the war to pursue nursing, a prospect which they sought to avoid. Yet, for Connie and Jean, their exposure to the profession as AAMWS during the war enabled them to identify the contribution that they could make through becoming a trained nurse. For other women who were members of the AAMWS, the opportunities that they were afforded in the Army certainly provided new notions of occupations. For instance, Thelma Powell learnt the craft of painting artificial eyes as part of the continuing developing plastic surgery and medical reconstruction field. A highly technical role, it may be assumed that Powell's skilled services would continue to be relied upon by the military long after the war as the shattered bodies of soldiers returned home. But Powell's discharge from the Army came on 13 August 1946, only a year after the end of hostilities in the Pacific.

Select examples of the post-war lives of women who served as VAs and AAMWS during the Second World War have been examined in this study. Yet, their numbers are few. The close analysis of the skill, training, and adoption of women's work in various fields as has been presented in this thesis is hoped to be the basis for further work to trace and examine the post-war lives of VAs/AAMWS. While I have suggested that the war disrupted plans held before the war, and then

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<sup>3</sup> Transcript of interview with (NX76498) Macintosh née Scot Skirving, Ann Margaret (Corporal), 28 February 1990, The Keith Murdoch Sound Archive of Australia in the War of 1939-45, AWM: S00776.

re-directed notions and expectations after the hostilities, it is hoped that the skill and expertise of these women was not lost completely. Where Alice Appleford found an avenue as a civilian to employ her skill and expertise following her nursing career in the First World War, are there women of the AAMWS who pursue similar endeavours leading women? Alongside the civilian lives of these women after the Second World War, some AAMWS remained in the service, joining the Occupation forces in Japan. The ongoing relationship of the women who served in the AAMWS with the military has not been traced, nor is any return to military service of AAMWS, including those who became registered nurses and may have joined the Army Nursing Corps. The extent of AAMWS' participation in the Commonwealth Reconstruction Training Scheme has also remained unexamined, and it is hoped this thesis provides the foundation for such to follow.

The scholarship presented in this thesis also seeks a re-examination of Second World War servicewomen and the way that they and their labour efforts are understood. The forensic categorisation of the labour of servicewomen during the war, their background and work experience that they brought from their civilian lives, and the way that these statistics changed over the course of the war is presented throughout this thesis for the first time. This approach to understanding the complex categorisation of servicewomen reconceptualises our existing narrative of women's involvement in the Second World War. Studies of war, particularly those exploring the role of women in conflict, will be enriched by the detailed assessment of servicewomen's experiences that brings into consideration their pre-war lives and the skill and experience that they offered to the war effort. Further research will be required to continue this exploration of Australian women in wartime that seeks to build a more comprehensive and accurate depiction of the women and the value of their labour.

This research has also developed a thorough study of Australia's approach to mobilising the nursing profession to its most skilful extent during the medical emergency of the Second World War, that being by mobilising an auxiliary force. With this understanding, a comparative

international examination of programs employing nursing assistants or developments in nurse training as brought by the effects of war can now be undertaken. As the Australian Government shifted its ties from Britain to the United States, it may be an interesting comparison as to the approach taken to mobilising nurses over the course of the war. For instance, Australia did not follow the British model in the interwar years of registering nursing assistants and sought to eliminate their existence. Whereas during the Second World War, the United States developed a nurse cadet corps which offered nurse training through the military, an approach Australia also trialled, although structured differently. Nevertheless, the links, or the lack thereof, between Australia's approaches and that of their international counterparts may further highlight the wider implications of government ties hastened by the war.

With the history of the AAMWS largely beginning and ending with their service in the Second World War, their story has disappeared from public view. Their identity and place in the war was also constantly shifting and being imposed on them. To some extent members of the VAD/AAMWS accepted this, in other instances they challenged it. This thesis has attempted to uncover these stories and place the VA/AAMWS back into the narrative of Australia and the Second World War.



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