

## Introduction to the Boer War (1899–1902)

### The Boer War begins ...

When the Boer War broke out, the NSWANSR was still the only nursing service in Australia. Many were sceptical about the use of military nurses, who were criticised for being “in the way” during warfare because they had little or no experience in treating battle wounds. This criticism was soon silenced with early defeats for the British Army and the recognition of the need for good health care. The War Office soon decided to recruit nurses and send them to South Africa.

Sixty nurses, drawn from across Australia, went to the Boer War. Military regulations required these nurses to be between the ages of 25 and 40, unmarried and from middle-class families. They were not all paid for by the government. Many were sponsored by privately raised funds, while others paid their own way.

Once the nurses reached South Africa, they worked in general hospitals, smaller “stationary hospitals” near the front line, hospital trains or hospital ships, which transported recovering troops to Britain. They nursed the wounded and treated diseases such as typhoid, often becoming ill themselves. One nurse, Sister Frances “Fanny” Hines, did not return home; she died of disease in South Africa.

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The Boer War, which began in October 1899, was fought between Britain and her Empire (including Australia) and the Boers (white farmers). The war arose out of opposition to British administration of the Cape Colony, and was technically the Second Boer War, the first having been fought in 1880–81.

Information taken from Craig Wilcox, “Origins of the Boer War” in *Wartime*, Issue 8.

[http://www.awm.gov.au/wartime/8/articles/origins\\_boer.pdf](http://www.awm.gov.au/wartime/8/articles/origins_boer.pdf)

### Who were the Boers?

The Boers were descendants of Dutch, French Huguenot, and English colonists who settled in South Africa. Today South Africans of Dutch descent are usually called Afrikaners.



Surrendered Boers, c. 1902. AWM P00093.009

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By the end of the war, the contribution of nurses was beginning to be acknowledged. Even General Sir George White, who had earlier rejected offers of assistance from civilian nurses, eventually praised them.

### **Nursing in the Boer War**

Despite the need for good health care in the Crimean War and the success of Florence Nightingale and others, the contribution of nurses in war was still seriously undervalued at the end of the nineteenth century.

Nevertheless, Queen Victoria, a good friend of Florence Nightingale, supported the development a Nursing Service by 1861. In 1883, she established the Royal Red Cross, the first honour medal exclusively for women. By 1897 a British Army Nursing Service Reserve was established, with the War Office in charge, which gave nurses immediate recognition.

### **In Australia**

In 1899, inspired by the formation of the British Army Nursing Service Reserve, Major General George French supported the development of the New South Wales Army Nursing Service Reserve (NSWANSR). Twenty-four nurses, each with over seven years' nursing experience, were selected by Matron Nellie Gould. They undertook military training and were given uniforms and an annual allowance. The NSWANSR was the first army nursing service in Australia.

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#### **Activity**

Three Australian nurses were awarded the Royal Red Cross for their service in the Boer War. Who were these nurses and why were they awarded the Royal Red Cross?



Royal Red Cross medal. This one belonged to Matron Alice Cooper who served on board the Hospital Ship *Karoola*. AWM REL29121.

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