

## Introduction to the First World

### War (1914–18)

The First World War began in late July and early August 1914. For Australia, it began with the British declaration of war on Germany and its allies on 4 August. Australian Prime Minister Andrew Fisher pledged full support for Britain, and the nation appeared to welcome this decision with enthusiasm.

#### Nursing in the First World War

More than 3,000 Australian civilian nurses volunteered for active service during the First World War. Nursing allowed them to take part in the war effort, and also provided opportunities for independence and travel, sometimes with the hope of being closer to loved ones serving overseas.

The Australian Army Nursing Service (AANS) had been formed in July 1903 as part of the Australian Army Medical Corps. During the war more than 2,000 of its members served overseas alongside Australian nurses working with other organisations, such as Queen Alexandra's Imperial Military Nursing Service (QAIMNS), the Red Cross, or privately sponsored facilities.

The women worked in hospitals, on hospital ships and trains, or in casualty clearing stations

This document is available on the Australian War Memorial's website at <http://www.awm.gov.au/education/resources/nurses>

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#### The Gallipoli landing

On 25 April 1915, Australian troops, along with troops from New Zealand, Britain and France, landed on the Gallipoli peninsula in Turkey. An attempt by the navy to force their way through the Straits of the Dardanelles had earlier failed. The Gallipoli landing was the beginning of an eight-month campaign to secure the Straits; it ended in failure with the evacuation of troops in December 1915.



An Australian digger uses a periscope in a trench captured during the attack on Lone Pine, Gallipoli, 1915. AWM A03771

closer to the front line. They served in places from Britain to India, including France and Belgium, the Mediterranean, and the Middle East. Many of them were decorated, with eight receiving the Military Medal for bravery. Twenty-five died during their service.

During the four years of this war, nurses took on increasingly complex roles, and often had to make split-second decisions. As indispensable team members in busy operating theatres, they kept entire operations running smoothly. They had a unique role in the war. On the one hand, they cleaned and dressed wounds, performed minor surgery and administered treatment – often in squalid conditions, in difficult climates and environments. They were usually understaffed and short of supplies, sometimes under threat of attack, and constantly fighting off exhaustion and sickness themselves. On the other hand, they were also expected to be feminine and cheerful, a “sweetheart and mother” to every patient. Patients and nurses often became friends, and nurses frequently wrote to the families of the men who died while under their care.

By war’s end, having faced the dangers and demands of wartime nursing and taken on new responsibilities and practices, nurses had proved to be essential to military medical service.

### **The Western Front**

After Gallipoli, the Australians went on to fight in campaigns on the Western Front and in the Middle East. The Western Front was two opposing lines of trenches where the Australians, New Zealanders, British and French dug in to block the advance of the German army into France. During 1916 and 1917 there were heavy losses on the Western Front and little success.

In July 1918, however, the Australians reached the peak of their fighting performance in the battle of Hamel and the series of decisive advances that resulted in Germany’s surrender on 11 November.

## The first Australian hospital ship

Just days after war was declared in August 1914, the Royal Australian Navy requisitioned the passenger ship *Grantala*. Following its conversion into a hospital ship, seven nurses from Sydney's Royal Prince Alfred Hospital joined its medical team. For four months the *Grantala* accompanied the Australian Naval and Military Expeditionary Force, and its nurses treated a small number of patients from action with the Germans at Rabaul and Suva.



Sick bay staff of HMAS *Grantala*, 1914.

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## Activity

Use the Memorial's website to research ONE of the nurses who were awarded the Military Medal. You may wish to research Alicia Kelly, Alice Ross King, Mary Jane Derrer, Pearl Corkhill or another of the eight Military Medal recipients. Use PowerPoint to tell your nurse's story to the class.

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## Middle East

Beginning in 1916, the Middle East campaign centred on the defence of the Suez Canal and the reconquest of the Sinai peninsula. In 1917 Australian and other allied troops advanced into Palestine and captured Gaza and Jerusalem. By 1918 they had occupied Lebanon and Syria. On 30 October 1918 Turkey offered to make peace.

The First World War remains the most costly conflict for Australia. From a population of fewer than 5 million, 416,809 enlisted, of whom more than 60,000 were killed and 156,000 wounded, gassed, or taken prisoner.

For more information <http://www.awm.gov.au/atwar/ww1.asp>