

What was it like in the Second World War?



Four nursing sisters of the 2/11th AGH (Australian General Hospital), standing knee-deep in water outside a tent, New Guinea, 1945. The Aitape River had flooded during the night while the women slept, and they awoke to discover deep water running through their tents. AWM P02749.001

Gaza Ridge, Palestine

When equipment was first opened, I am told many hearts sank. It was obvious that many instruments were out of date and certainly not serviceable. For a time there was NO water connected to the tents (wards). So we, sisters, orderlies, and up patients [who could walk] carried buckets of water from a central tap – Primus stoves were used to heat water, or some “quaint” sterilizers called fish kettles were placed on two primus stoves to boil or sterilize instruments.

Sister Joan Paige, Nurse 2/1st AGH; quoted in Bassett, *Guns and brooches*, pp. 115–16.

Papua New Guinea

The sisters’ lines were tents pitched in a paddock opposite the hospital and we had to dig ditches on all four sides to prevent us from being washed out as the rain was so continuous. Our treks from quarters to ward were made wearing ground sheets and gum boots.

Sister Frances Aldom; quoted in Bassett, *Guns and brooches*, p. 160.



Amber Bushell, VAD (Voluntary Aid Detachment) in the wet weather at Kilo 89 camp, Gaza, Palestine, 1942. AWM P02480.008

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Singapore

Last night just after midnight the hospital was bombed. I was standing beside the bed of one of my patients giving him a dose of pain-killing mixture. All the glass doors and windows were blown inwards showering the patients in broken glass. My first job was to do a quick round of all the patients to make sure that no one was cut, then cleared the beds of broken glass and got the men back in bed.

Sister Sara Baldwin-Wiseman; quoted in Bassett, *Guns and brooches*, p. 137.



Three nurses avoid air raids in a cemetery in Greece, 1941.
AWM 087663



Australian nurses and their patients at a military hospital in Singapore after a bombing, 1942. AWM 012451

Athens, Greece

All was a total shambles! The corridors were lined each side with patients on mobile stretchers, and the wards were crammed. Many of the patients were still clad in their soggy battle dress, from action in snow country in the North. Supplies of all sorts desperately short – no linen – very little medication of any sort, and even food in short supply. One ward with at least twenty amputation patients, and not a tourniquet anywhere. At least every second night a convoy of 300 would come in, and often the same number of fatalities would go out.

Sister Margaret Barnard of the 26th British General Hospital; quoted in Bassett, *Guns and brooches*, p. 122.

Lae, New Guinea

The workload on only 15 sisters was heavy, with each Sister flying approximately 75 hours per month.

Sister Nancy Read; quoted in Gay Halstead, *Story of the RAAF Nursing Service 1940–1990*, Nungurner Press, Metung, Vic., 1994, p. 211.



Sister Elizabeth Bray and a nursing orderly, members of the RAAF Nursing Service, attached to No. 1 Medical Air Evacuation Transport Unit (MAETU), RAAF, attend to patients during a flight from New Guinea to Australia, c. 1944. AWM OG3345



Interior of a tent ward at the 2/9th AGH, Port Moresby, Papua, 1943. AWM 107160

Activity

Imagine you are one of the nurses in these images. Write a journal entry or a letter describing your experiences. If you are writing a letter, what would you want your family to know? What couldn't you tell them? Why?

Port Moresby

Nursing in the tropics was a whole new ball game. We had been taught very little during our training about how to cope with tropical diseases. The bedside nursing was a real challenge – malaria with its frequent rigors and the comatose conditions of the patients with scrub typhus, for which there was no specific treatment beyond constant attention, the sparing of exertion, and intake of copious fluids.

Sister Mollie Nalder of 2/9th AGH; quoted in Innes Brodziak, *Proudly we served*, Australian Military History Publications, Loftus NSW, 1988, p. 173.

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