

Introduction: the First World War (1914-18)

More than 3,000 Australian civilian nurses volunteered for active service during the First World War. While enabling direct participation in the war effort, nursing 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 closer to the front line. They served in locations from Britain to India, taking in 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.

The four years of this war saw nurses taking on increasingly complex roles, where they often had to make split second decisions. They were indispensable team members in busy operating theatres, and kept entire

The First World War

The First World War began in later July–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.

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. A naval attempt to force the Straits of the Dardanelles had earlier failed. The Gallipoli landing was the beginning of an eight-month campaign to secure the Straits that ended in failure with the evacuation of troops in December 1915.

During 1916 and 1917 there were heavy losses on the Western Front with little success. Fortunately in August 1918 Australians reached the peak of their fighting performance in the battle of Hamel and a number of advances until 11 November when Germany surrendered.



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

The Western Front

After Gallipoli, the Australians went on to fight in campaigns on the Western Front and in the Middle East. During 1916 and 1917 there were heavy losses on the Western Front with little success.

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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 trying climates and environments. They were usually understaffed and lacking 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 those 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 proven to be essential to military medical service.

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.

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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 culminated with Germany’s surrender on 11 November.

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 sued for 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 over 60,000 were killed and 156,000 wounded, gassed, or taken prisoner.

For more information

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

Use the Memorial’s website to research ONE of the nurses who were awarded the Military Medal: You may wish to research Rachael Pratt, Alicia Kelly, Alice Ross King, Mary Jane Derrer, Pearl Corkhill or another of the eight Military Medal recipients.



Sick bay staff of HMAS *Grantala*, 1914. AWM [302802](http://www.awm.gov.au/education/resources/nurses)