Nursing during the Second World War

After the First World War, some nurses married and left the workforce; others took over the care of family members incapacitated by the war. Some retrained in jobs away from nursing, but many continued to work in hospitals, often in senior positions.

When the Second World War broke out, nurses again volunteered, motivated by a sense of duty and a desire to "do their bit". Eventually, some 5,000 Australian nurses served in a variety of locations, including the Middle East, the Mediterranean, Britain, Asia, the Pacific, and Australia. Seventy-eight died, some through accident or illness, but most as a result of enemy action or while prisoners of war.

At first, the AANS was the only women's service. The Royal Australian Air Force Nursing Service (RAAFNS) was formed in 1940, and the Royal Australian Navy Nursing Service (RANNS) in 1942. But the AANS remained by far the largest, and also made up the bulk of those who served overseas.

By the end of the war, nursing sisters had been commissioned as officers, although many were loath to give up their traditional titles of "sister" and "matron". They were yet to be given the same status and pay as male officers.
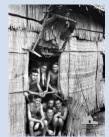
The changing role of women

The Second World War saw considerable change for women in Australia and overseas. During the early years of the war Australian women were generally not give the opportunity to make a significant contribution to the war. However, labour shortages soon forced the government to allow women a more active role. Women's divisions within the three services, army, navy and air force, were soon established, and the male-dominated spheres of farming and factory work were soon available to women on the home front. This opened up new opportunities for women.

The Second World War

Australia's involvement in the Second World War began on 3 September 1939. Almost one million Australians, both men and women, served in the Second World War in the three services, army, navy and air force. They fought against Germany and Italy in Europe, the Mediterranean and North Africa, as well as against Japan in south-east Asia and other parts of the Pacific.

During the war Australia came under attack for the first time, as Japanese aircraft bombed towns in north-west Australia and midget submarines attacked Sydney Harbour.

Germany surrendered in early May 1945, and on 2 September Japan formally surrendered. Over 30,000 Australian servicemen had been taken prisoner during the war and 39,000 Australians had given their lives. While those who had been prisoners of the Germans had a strong chance of returning home at the end of the war, around one in three prisoners of the Japanese died in captivity.

Members of the 2/18th Battalion AIF, who had been prisoners of war of the Japanese, shown here in Changi prison, Singapore, just after the end of the war. AWM 117022

For more information: http://www.awm.gov.au/atwar/ww2.asp