

Introduction: the Boer War (1899-1902)

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 harshly undervalued at the end of the nineteenth century. Members of the British Army suggested that nurses should be restricted to established hospitals far away from the front line, believing that they would otherwise be immoral influences on fighting men.

Nevertheless, Queen Victoria, a good friend of Florence Nightingale, forged ahead, developing a Nursing Service by 1861 and instituting the Royal Red Cross in 1883, the first order exclusively for women. By 1897 a British Army Nursing Service Reserve was established and put under the care of the War Office, which gave nurses immediate status.

In Australia

In 1899, inspired by the formation of the British Army Nursing Service Reserve for nurses, Major General George French supported the development of the NSW Army Nursing Service Reserve (NSWANSR) based on its British counterpart. 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. NSWANSR was the first of its kind in Australia.

The Boer War

The Boer War, which began in October 1899, and raged for three years, was fought between Britain and her Empire (including Australia) and the Boers (white farmers). It 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.

Who were the Boers?

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



Surrendered Boers, c1902
AWM [P00093.009](http://www.awm.gov.au/awm/P00093.009)

Information taken from Wilcox, Craig, *Origins of the Boer War*:
http://www.awm.gov.au/wartime/8/articles/origins_boer.pdf

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The war begins ...

When the Boer War broke out, 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” in warfare owing to their having little or no experience with the treatment of battle wounds. This attitude was soon silenced with the early defeats for the British Army and the recognition of the need for good healthcare. The War Office soon indicated its support for the recruitment of nurses and their deployment to South Africa.

Sixty nurses, drawn from across Australia, went to the Boer War. In accordance with military regulations, these nurses were all 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, stationary hospitals, hospital trains or hospital ships, which transported convalescent 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, dying of disease while in South Africa.

By war’s end, 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.

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Australia’s contribution

The six Australian colonies had not yet federated when the Boer War broke out. Each colony sent troops to fight alongside the British forces in South Africa. In all, 16,000 Australian troops were sent to South Africa, some arriving as early as December 1899 and the last contingents arriving in 1902, too late for any action.

The conditions in which they fought were difficult, and by the end of the war, 282 Australian soldiers had died in action or from wounds, 286 had died from illness or disease, and 38 had died as a result of an accident or other cause.

Six Australians were awarded the Victoria Cross in South Africa, and many more received other decorations.

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?