

Rachael Pratt

A most charming lady, well-spoken and highly regarded by all those who came under her care.

Merrilyn Lincoln, "Pratt, Rachel (1874–1954)",
Australian dictionary of biography

Rachael Pratt

Sister Rachael Pratt MM,
1918. AWM [P05664.001](https://www.awm.gov.au/record/P05664.001)



Born near Heywood, Victoria, on 18 July 1874, Rachael Pratt was the ninth child of farmers William and Phoebe, both originally from England. She attended Mumbannar State School, then after the death of both her parents, she moved in with one of her brothers, living with him for many years.

Always an independent spirit, Pratt decided, in 1909, to begin nursing training at Ballarat Hospital. She lowered her age from 35 to 31. She received her certificate of competency in August 1912 and just two months later was employed at the Royal Women's Hospital in Melbourne.

Nurse Pratt

With the onset of the First World War, Rachael made the decision to serve her country. Aged 41 at the time, she enlisted as a staff nurse in the AANS in May 1915 and was posted to the 3rd Australian General Hospital; she embarked for Britain aboard RMS *Moolton*.

Three months later, Rachael was transferred to the Greek island of Lemnos, where equipment was in short supply. As the wounded soldiers from Gallipoli descended upon the hospital, she described a complete "state of chaos" there. Dysentery, gangrene and frost bite were common ailments, and Pratt recalled an early experience where she was forced to dress the wounds of Turkish prisoners while under armed guard. The nurses

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nevertheless organised the hospital so that it was operating effectively and managing to maintain a mortality rate of just 2 per cent.

Pratt went on to work, for a short time, in Egypt, before being posted to the 1st Australian Casualty Clearing Station (1ACCS) in France.

In the early hours of 4 July 1915, 1ACCS was attacked from the air. Pratt was busy nursing a patient when the shrapnel from a bomb burst through the tent, puncturing her lung and tearing through her back and shoulder. Despite her injuries, she remained calm, and when the attack ended resumed treating her patients. Soon, however, the pain of her injuries and the loss of blood caught up with her, and she collapsed. She was evacuated to Britain for treatment and convalescence.

Pratt's experience was detailed in a number of Australian newspapers at the time, including *The West Australian*, which reported on Tuesday 14 August 1917:

[To] Rachael Pratt ... belongs the distinction of having been the first and only Australian nurse to be wounded in the present war. It was while ministering to wounded soldiers in an advanced casualty clearing station in France that Sister Pratt was herself struck by a German bullet ... she is progressing favourably.

Sister Pratt's medal group (left to right): Military Medal, 1914-15 Star, British War medal, and Victory Medal. AWM [REL/05769.001](http://www.awm.gov.au/education/resources/nurses)



Sister Pratt MM

For “conspicuous gallantry displayed in the performance of her duties” Pratt was promoted to sister and was awarded the Military Medal. This award had only been extended to include women in June 1916, and Pratt was one of only eight Australian nurses to receive it during the First World War.

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After spending time in a hospital in England, Rachael returned to duty and nursed until the end of the war. In October 1918, she returned home to Melbourne and was discharged from the AIF in April 1919. With shrapnel still in her lung, Rachael suffered from chronic bronchitis until her death on 23 March 1954, aged 79. She never married.

Activities

What does the above newspaper report detailing Sister Pratt's experiences tell you about how women were viewed during the early twentieth century? What is the focus of the article? What is the purpose? Is it propaganda? Why/why not?

Why is it significant that Rachael was awarded the Military Medal?

What do Sister Pratt's experiences tell you about the nature of nursing during the First World War? Would this have changed over time? How/why?

What does Rachael's response to the bombing attack tell you about the qualities of many nurses who served during the First World War? How does this compare to the soldiers who served? Are the same qualities required? How/why?

Why is the ANZAC legend so focused on the male story of the First World War? What part do women have in this story? Is this a realistic representation of the experiences for nurses in the First World War?

For more information:

Merrilyn, Lincoln, "Pratt, Rachel (1874–1954)", *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University: <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/pratt-rachel-8099/text14137> (accessed 8 November, 2011)

National Library of Australia: <http://trove.gov.au>.

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