

## Sister Rachael Pratt MM

*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*



Sister Rachael Pratt MM, 1918. AWM P05664.001

### Rachael Pratt

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, in 1909 Pratt decided to begin nursing training at Ballarat Hospital. To be accepted into the course, she said she was 31, not 35. She received her certificate in August 1912 and just two months later was employed at the Royal Women's Hospital in Melbourne.

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## Nurse Pratt

With the onset of the First World War, Rachael decided 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 poured into the hospital, she described a complete “state of chaos” there. Dysentery, gangrene and frostbite were common ailments. Pratt recalled an early experience in which she was forced to dress the wounds of Turkish prisoners while they were all under armed guard. The nurses nevertheless organised the hospital so that it was operating effectively. Only two per cent of their patients died.

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 she went on 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

### **Sister Pratt MM**

For “conspicuous gallantry displayed in the performance of her duties” Pratt was promoted to the rank of sister and was awarded the Military Medal. This award had only just 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.

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.

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### For more information:

Australian War Memorial: [www.awm.gov.au](http://www.awm.gov.au).

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.nla.gov.au/>.

### Activities

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 Pratt'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?

Use the websites below to find out more about Rachael Pratt's life. Write a letter, poem or script describing her early life, her experiences during the air raid, or her life once she returned home to Australia after the war.