

We served too ...

During the First World War, not all Australian nurses served with the formally established AANS; many worked with other organisations, such as Queen Alexandra's Imperial Military Nursing Service (QAIMNS), the Red Cross, or privately sponsored facilities in France.



QAIMNS qualification badge that belonged to Annie Maria Locke, a First World War nurse; it would have been worn pinned to the shoulder cape of her uniform. AWM REL35881

Florence Narelle Hobbes

Florence Narelle Hobbes grew up as part of a large family in a busy, noisy household. As each of her sisters married and left home, Hobbes became determined to maintain her independence, so she took up nursing as a career. After her training, she became matron at the remote Brewarrina District Hospital in north-western New South Wales.

When the First World War broke out, Hobbes decided that rather than wait to enlist with the AANS she would travel to London, where she was quickly accepted in QAIMNS. With them, she headed to Malta, where she saw first-hand the devastation of the Gallipoli campaign. As she treated the long line of casualties, she would often think of their families at home: "Every boy is somebody's boy." (Melanie Oppenheimer, "Narelle: nursing for empire", ABC Radio National, 28 March 2004).

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The following nine months were spent nursing non-stop in Sicily, India, and Mesopotamia, but by mid-1917, Hobbes had become ill. Her concerned family back home sent her youngest sister, Elsie, to India to bring her home. As they made their way to Australia on board the hospital ship *Kanowna* in 1918, Hobbes died with her sister by her side. She was buried at sea.

Tell us a story

Helen Madge Gill was born in Townsville, Queensland, on 10 January 1919, just two months after the end of the First World War. Before the Second World War broke out, she met a young man by the name of Bruce Strange. Given his quirky sense of humour, she may have thought, “strange by name, strange by nature”, but there was something about him she liked. When the war started, she became a VAD; she received medical training and worked in local hospitals. For his part, Strange joined the 2/25th Battalion, AIF, and was soon posted to North Africa.



A group of VAD nurses marching along George Street after attending a Christmas service, 1944. AWM P02526.007

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Did you know?

Voluntary Aid Detachment (VAD)

The Voluntary Aid Detachment (VAD) was run by the Red Cross during the First World War as an auxiliary to the Medical Corps. It was revived during the Second World War, and many VADs went on to join the Australian Army Medical Women's Service (AAMWS).

VADs were employed without pay and were trained in nursing and first aid. They worked alongside the nursing sisters in hospitals, both in Australia and overseas. In Red Cross wartime publicity, the VAD became the face of Australian womanhood, patriotically caring for the sick and needy.



William Dargie, *Group of VADs*, 1942, oil on canvas, 92 x 76.2 cm. AWM ART22349.

For two years the couple wrote to each other, telling of their experiences and their hopes for the future. On 5 December 1941 Helen was one of 30 Queensland VADs chosen for overseas service. It didn't matter where they were, whether Bruce was lying in a slit trench or cramped in a ship at sea, whether Helen was at home or away – they would still write to each other in an increasingly playful, teasing tone. By 1943, Bruce's letters would refer to Helen as the "delight of his heart" and often mentioned the "promise" he had made her when they had last met. Towards the end of that year however, Bruce began to sense some doubt in Helen's letters. Having not seen each other in four years, Helen had begun to spend time with another man. With the distance between them, Helen wondered whether she should wait for Bruce. In a letter he sent her towards the end of 1943, Bruce wondered whom she would choose. It was the last letter he ever sent her.



Major Bruce Strange of the 2/5th Battalion (left) and his driver. Strange was awarded the Distinguished Service Order on 28 October 1942 for "utmost vigour, aggressive spirit and initiative". AWM P04602

So what happened?

What do you think happened to Bruce? To Helen? Can you find out whether Bruce returned home? Whom do you think Helen is most likely to have married: Bruce or her other beau?

Activities

Write your own ending to this story. What factors would influence the result? What conclusion would you like to see? Which is more likely? To discover the real ending to the story go to: http://www.awm.gov.au/research/people/roll_of_honour/person.asp?p=539610