

First World War conditions

Washing day at the nurses' quarters at the 60th Australian General Hospital, near Salonica, Greece, 1917. AWM [C04337](#)



Salonica

[Sister Gertrude Munro] was ... put straight into hospital for sick sisters ... she had a bad combination, neumonia [sic] and M.T. Malaria which is very hard to fight. Being a strong healthy woman we hoped against hope she might win through, but alas it was not to be.

Jessie MacHardie White, 2 December 1918, Red Cross Wounded and Missing Enquiry files, AWM 1 DRL 42



“Bluebird” nurses in a slit trench in the grounds of a French military hospital at Essay they visited in 1917. Called “Bluebirds” because of their blue uniform, these nurses had volunteered for service in French hospitals. They were sent to the Western Front by the NSW Branch of the Australian Red Cross. AWM [P01790.002](#)

Hospital Train, France

Patients lying everywhere in the grounds of the clearing station, the walking wounded were in hundreds and were fighting to get on the train, they had to be kept back by a Guard to enable the bearers to get the more serious cases on the train.

Sister Leila Smith speaks of her experience on No. 15 Ambulance Train, 1916. AWM 41 6/49

A nurse with the 1st Australian Auxiliary Hospital in the carriage of a hospital train, Denham, Buckinghamshire, 1916. AWM [P02402.004](#)



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Lemnos

Had a desperately hard time at Lemnos with food, tents, mud and sickness, as well as great troubles with Colonel Fiaschi, who treated Nurses shamefully – No consideration whatever ... I believe the Hospital would have collapsed but for the Nurses. They all worked like demons.

Lieutenant General R.H.J. Fetherston, AWM 3DRL 251



Matron Margaret Grace Wilson
“does a round” in Lemnos, Greece,
1915. AWM [A05332](#)

Hospital ship off Gallipoli, Sunday 25 April 1915

About 9 am my first patients from battlefield commenced to pour in ... They came in an endless stream, some walking holding arms, hands covered with blood, some on stretchers with broken legs, some shivering and collapsed through loss of blood and some with faces streaming with blood ... we went for the worst cases first and worked like fury while all the sound of firing was going on...we took on board 570 wounded ... we filled every space ... in my ward I had 118 patients ... we got to bed between 3 and 3.30 am.

Elsie Gibson, quoted in Melanie Oppenheimer,
Australian women and war, Department of
Veterans’ Affairs, Canberra, 2008, p. 26

A flat-bottomed barge transporting wounded soldiers from ANZAC Cove alongside the Hospital Ship *Gascon*. AWM [A02740](#)



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Patients and nurses at Colaba War Hospital make Christmas decorations on the verandah of the ward. Members of the AANS served at the hospital mainly treating patients from the British garrisons in Bombay, India, 1917. AWM [P07133.006](#)

India

Here I am on duty, and Sister-in-Charge of two wards. Oh, these poor men from Mesopotamia! They are ... only skin and bone ... most of the poor men are not long for this world ... Why are men allowed to suffer like this? ... I suppose stone monuments ... will be erected to their

memory “of our glorious dead”. What about the living? The blind, crippled, disfigured and those poor mad men and women.

Matron “Babs” Moberly speaking of her work in the dysentery and malaria wards in Cumballa hospital in Bombay (quoted in Oppenheimer, *Australian women and war*, p. 30)

Sister Mary Jane Derrer of the 2nd Australian Casualty Clearing Station, France, 1917. She was one of eight Australian nurses awarded the Military Medal during the war. AWM [P00156.071](#)



France

*I arrived at the C.C.S. about **10** am...The next few days was a continuous stream of wounded each one seemingly **as** bad as could be. Eight theatre teams working day and night yet it seemed impossible to cope with things; and the men were such bricks, lying on their stretchers waiting for their turn on the operating table. One realised this was war indeed. If one had time to think we would have just been weeping hysterical women **but** we’d only time **to do**.*

Sister Belstead in A.G. Butler (ed.) *The Australian Army Nursing Service*, Vol. 3: Official History of the Australian Army Medical Services, 1914–1918, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 1940, p. 557

Activity

Using the above as evidence, list some of the challenges faced by Australian nurses in the First World War. What qualities would be needed by these nurses to cope with these conditions?

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