

*Australian Women at War*

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**Abstract**

The centenary of World War I is coming to an end this year. It will culminate with the opening, on Anzac Day, of the Australian National Memorial and Sir John Monash Centre at Villers-Bretonneux in northern France. War has played a key role in the building of our national identity and for over one hundred years we have created strong and dynamic national narrative and rich history around the Anzac and the Anzac Legend. But how representative and reflective is our war history more broadly and what gaps remain to be filled, what stories are there that remain to be told?

This presentation will focus on ‘Australian Women at War’ and suggest that the roles of women in war, both on the war front and the home front have been downplayed or ignored, made invisible to history. It perhaps would not matter so much except that so much of our national identity is predicated on and around our military history, a history that has largely ignored or underplayed the roles undertaken by women through the twentieth century. Women have had an uneasy relationship with the Anzac tradition with women’s contributions marginalized as ‘watching and waiting’, passive supporters of the tradition, rather than as active participants, pushing the boundaries of history at every opportunity.

Using a range of personal narratives, this presentation will examine and explore the contributions and experiences of ordinary Australian women, both service and civilian, through wars and conflicts, and allow their stories to take centre stage in this centenary year.

Her Excellency Professor the Honourable Kate Warner AC and Mr Richard Warner; the Hon Elise Archer MP; Alec Young; distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen. It is a pleasure and privilege to have been invited by the Royal United Services Institute of Tasmania to deliver the Blamey Oration on “Australian women at War”. I would like to dedicate this lecture to all women who participated in war throughout the last

100 years – and on a personal level, acknowledge my maternal grandmother, Nancy Nivison. I am often asked how I got into this topic all those years ago – it was through her - she was a Red Cross Voluntary Aid Detachment (VAD) Commandant during WWII and one of the highlights of her ‘war’ was to serve on the British aircraft *HMS Glory* on a 3-month mercy voyage around the Pacific picking up ex-POWs at the end of WWII.

The centenary of World War I is coming to a climax this year. It has been a curious time in many ways and there will be much for historians to pick over and analyse in years to come. Was our national response adequate or excessive? Could we have done it better or differently? What lessons can we learn for other commemorative activities, WWII for example, which is a mere 20 years away? There have been murmurs of how much the Australian government has spent on commemorative activities [nudging half a billion dollars], far outspending any other nation. This includes the opening, on Anzac Day, of the Australian National Memorial and Sir John Monash Centre at Villers-Bretonneux in northern France. Whatever you think about this, there is no denying that war continues to play a key role in the building of our national identity and for over one hundred years we have created a strong and dynamic national narrative and a rich history around the Anzac, the Anzac Legend. But it isn't without contention and questions can and should be asked. How representative is this war history, what gaps remain to be filled, and what stories are there that remain to be told?

I think we all accept that war and its impact is not just about what happens in the front line – just look at Syria today – there is no front line - war is about people, women and children, communities, and the whole scale destruction of humanity.

What I would like to do this evening is to focus on the theme of ‘Australian Women at War’ and suggest that the roles of women in war, both on the war front and the home front continue to be downplayed, made less visible in our history. It perhaps would not matter so much except that, unlike other countries, so much of our national identity is predicated on and around our military history, and it is a history that largely ignores the roles undertaken by women through the twentieth century. Women have had an uneasy relationship with the Anzac tradition with women's contributions

largely perceived as ‘watching and waiting’, passive supporters of the tradition, always on the margins, rather than as active participants, their experiences interwoven into the history, rather than simply tacked onto the edges, almost as a ‘frilly afterthought’ for ‘light relief’.

It is terrific that a decision has been made for servicewomen to lead the Anzac Day marches this year – in Sydney and Tasmania at least. And although my talk is about Australia more broadly, I did want to include a couple of references to Tasmania – here are a couple of slides from the photograph album of Madge Payne (given to me by Rita Richards when I was researching the centenary Red Cross book, *The Power of Humanity*). Madge was a Red Cross VAD during WWI and volunteered, amongst other places, at Ellsmere, 50 klms north of Hobart – a Red Cross convalescent home for soldiers.

The story of Australian Women at War is about participation, breaking down barriers and receiving adequate recognition – all of which has not come easily. It is a unique and highly complex story because of our obsession with our war history. I think it has a lot to do with:

- 1) geography, the ‘tyranny of distance’ to use Geoffrey Blainey’s phrase (with the First World War occurring ‘over there’, on the other side of the world – that physical separation has had an impact);
- 2) timing (Australia had only Federated and become a nation 13 years before – we were still, in essence, a series of individual colonies with a very small and weak Federal government – the war changed all that); and
- 3) an innately masculine society (in spite of being one of the first nations to give women – white women the vote) the irony is that this has masked the essential deeply patriarchal nature of Australian society – something historians have long debated.

Over the last one hundred years, there have been many heartfelt battles, as women yearned and fought to be included and treated as equals to the task. ‘*My God, Australian Sisters, what shall we do?*’ groaned a male medical officer when Matron Nellie Gould presented her papers to him in Johannesburg in 1900 during the Boer War. In her long skirts and stays, leading a contingent of trained nurses, women

sought to actively participate – although roles for women at that time were limited. They were patriotic war fund workers, schoolteachers and nurses – all traditional women’s roles acceptable to society at the time. Over one hundred years later, Australian women can now be commanding officers and pilots in the RAAF; they can serve in submarines; and in combat related duties. From 1 January 2013, women could apply for all positions in the Australian military with the exception of special forces in the Army – in 2016, this final restriction was dropped. Around 30 women have joined combat roles and now serve in Afghanistan and elsewhere. This is in spite of ongoing sniping from some quarters including politicians currently sitting in our national parliament.

Women first became involved with the Australian armed forces with the creation of the Army Nursing Service in 1899. By 2023, the Australian Defence Forces hopes to have 25% of women in the Navy & Airforce (as of 2016, 19.1% and 19.2% respectively); and Army 15% (as of 2016, 12.1%).<sup>1</sup> In June 2017, Australian servicewomen make up 16.2% of permanent, full-time members of the ADF. And 96.6% of Army’s infantry officers are men.

In focusing on the theme ‘Australian Women at War’ this evening, it is not my intention to dismiss or denigrate the role of men (I acknowledge and honour my two grandfathers who both fought in WWI – one in the AIF, the other the German Army). But sometimes we need to provide women with the space to shine, for their experiences, in my opinion are no less brave, no less important. It wouldn’t matter so much except that we tend to privilege our war history over all else, and therefore unlike other countries, it does matter. There are many examples of this but one that caught my attention was a book (Les Carylson’s *The Great War*) published in 2006 that was hailed as the definitive Australian book on the First World War; it won the Prime Minister’s History Prize the following year. The author excluded any discussion of women’s roles, including that of nurses. There was little mention of women at all, apart from within the context of soldier’s experiences. I had an exchange on Radio National’s Saturday Extra program and the author suggested in his defence that in writing the book, he was led by the sources – and the sources only

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<sup>1</sup> *Women in the ADF Report, 2015-16*

took him into the trenches – thus that was what he wrote about - but my response to that is - take the blinkers off, find other sources, get out of the trenches - only then can we see the whole experience of war – the entirety/the totality of the war experience – which is where, I suggest, you will then find women and their roles and contributions.

Often we don't even think about it ... it has become normalized - can you recall in the early 2000s when it was realized that most of the generation of World War I diggers had past away, hardly any were participating in Anzac Day marches, that original Anzac generation was rapidly disappearing. So we (the nation, led by the Department of Veteran's Affairs and the media] counted them down, many became household names and some were given/offered State funerals – Charlie Mance (2001), Launceston born Alec Campbell (2002), Ted Smout (2004), and Marcel Caux (2004). In 2009 and at 110 years of age, Jack Ross, the last of the 416,000 Australian men to enlist for service in World War I died.

But what about the nurses who served in WWI – did we as a nation, count them down? Did we even remember that they had passed? Why were they treated differently to the men? We actually do not know who the last Australian nurse was to die – any of the 2,200 who served with the Australian Army Nursing Service or the hundreds of others who served with the British Queen Alexandra's Imperial Medical Service, the Red Cross, Elsie Inglis' Scottish Women's Hospital or other outfits – we simply don't know, as a nation we appear not to care.

I tried to find out...and it is possible that the last Australian WWI nurse to die was Mary Britt, née Marshall from Gippsland in Victoria, who died in Sydney in 1998, aged 103. Mary Marshall enlisted in 1917 and served in India and on hospital ships that sailed the Basra – Bombay run bringing sick and wounded soldiers from the Mesopotamia campaign. She was nicknamed the 'Babe' by her colleagues because she was so young. Mary met an officer in the Indian Army, and married him soon after the war. After living in India and England, the family returned to Australia in the 1930s and settled in Sydney. According to her daughter, her mother was allowed to have the Australian flag draped on her coffin but they were not offered a state funeral. Let's hope we do not make the same mistake with our WWII veterans.

We forget just how difficult it has been for women in years past. In World War II, for example, historians such as Kate Darian Smith and Marilyn Lake have reminded us that the formation of the auxiliary women's services and the opening up of the employment market through manpower shortages sowed the seeds for significant gender reform. Despite the fear of women invading the officer's mess, the threat of women taking men's jobs and the general threat to society, the pressures of the war meant that military leaders and politicians had to relent. But servicewomen were pilloried and undermined by the media for their willingness to don uniforms and 'play soldiers', they have never been taken seriously.

At the outbreak of WWII, the only women's service was the Australian Army Nursing Service (AANS); later a special nursing service for the RAAF was formed in July 1940 – the Royal Australian Air Force Nursing Service (RAAFNS); the Women's Auxiliary Australian Air Force (WAAAF) followed in February 1941; the Women's Royal Australian Naval Service (WRANS) in April 1941; the Australian Women's Army Service (AWAS) in August 1941; and the Australian Army Medical Women's Service (AAMWS) in December 1942. The Australian Women's Land Army was formed in July 1942, however, it was never officially designated as an enlisted auxiliary service – which meant that its members were discharged as a civilian body, not eligible for the same benefits as other women's services, nor were they allowed to march on Anzac Day until 1985.

More than 66,000 women enlisted in the auxiliary services during WWII and about 32% of women aged between 15 and 60 went into paid employment. But as I have argued consistently since my PhD studies on civilian volunteering on the Australian home front during WWII, completed in the mid-1990s, what were the other 68% of women doing? Sitting at home twiddling their thumbs? I don't think so – they were undertaking volunteer work, much of it war related – essential work to successfully prosecute a war.<sup>2</sup> As Ernest Scott, Professor of History at the University of Melbourne had observed for WWI the volume and type of war voluntary work was new and unprecedented

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<sup>2</sup> Melanie Oppenheimer, *All Work. No Pay. Australian Civilian Volunteers in War* (Ohio Productions, Walcha, 2002).

*The legion of our voluntary war workers ... represents not only good-will towards a cause as righteous as any in the annals of nations, but also an appreciation of the obligations of citizenship. The man who fights is the ultimate factor. But in the infinite complexity of modern war, the women who work for the men who are fighting are not less essential than they... ”<sup>3</sup>.*

It was the same during WWII. The war was a watershed for women in so many ways. The auxiliaries gave women access to what had been the preserve of men – and with 60,000 plus – they could not be ignored – and finally many served outside of Australia – in the Middle East and New Guinea – some were interned as POWs, some died in the line of duty – equal sacrifice to their male counterparts. Most importantly, the thousands of young women who flocked to the auxiliary services during WWII believed that their war service was equal to that of men and important to Australia.

But it was hard and always a struggle. Women’s voluntary war work has always been neglected but we forget the fights that women who served in the auxiliary services went through to gain recognition for their war contribution. They were marginalized after the war. The auxiliaries were demobilized as quickly as possible (far quicker than other countries) – women were told to go back to the laminate kitchen tables from whence they had come. The story of a group of WWII Australian ex-servicewomen, and their quest to create a memorial at the Melbourne Shrine, is one example of their struggles.

In the late 1940s and 1950s, there was considerable tension between the RSL and the women’s auxiliary services. After the war, few of the women were eligible for membership of the RSL, and few women marched on Anzac Day because they felt the RSL didn’t want them. So ex-WWII women’s leaders Sybil Irving, Kathleen Best and others sought to create an ex-servicewomen’s memorial in the Kings’ Domain in Melbourne. Ex-servicewomen felt the Shrine was predominantly a memorial to the men who died, and that women were not welcome – therefore they wanted to erect a

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<sup>3</sup> *Voluntary War Workers Record, compiled for ACF, 1918, “Voluntary Workers and the War” by Ernest Scott, Professor of History, University of Melbourne, pp. 6-7.*

memorial to servicewomen who had died as a way for women to pay tribute to the sacrifices made (71 nurses alone had died during WWII, many of them in the line of duty as POWs). The idea was thwarted by the male trustees of the shrine who believed that the erection of any memorial other than the Shrine in the King's Domain was inappropriate. In 2010 a Melbourne Shrine's Women's Garden was finally opened and I had the honour of being invited to speak about Sybil Irving.

We know so little about our women leaders such as Lieutenant Colonel Sybil Irving, Controller, Australian Women's Army Service (AWAS). She was a VAD during World War I and Secretary of the Girl Guides Association of Victoria throughout the interwar period. Sybil became Assistant Secretary of the Victorian Division of the Red Cross in 1940 but resigned to take up the position of Controller of the newly formed AWAS. From 1941 to 1947, she led the AWAS with great distinction. From 1951 to 1961 Sybil was an Honorary Colonel, Women's Royal Australian Army Corps (WRAAC), with her best friend Kathleen Best.

It was not until 1973, on Sybil Irving's death, that a National Memorial Committee was formed, led by individuals such as Patsy Adam Smith (well known VAD, AAMWS and author), for subscriptions for a chain of memorials across Australia – one in each capital city – to commemorate Irving's contribution to the community including the ex-servicewomen. A variety of trees were planted. Here in Hobart, a flowering Cherry Tree (*Prunus Serrulata*) and seat with plaque on Alexandra Battery Point overlooking Hobart Harbour was planted – unveiled by the Governor's wife, Lady Burbury, on 19 April 1978. (Alec and his wife, Marg, kindly drove me there yesterday and we found this plaque attached to a new bench).

Because this is the centenary year of World War I, I will conclude with two stories of Australian nurses. The view that nurses were not impacted to the same degree as front line soldiers, that therefore somehow they are not part of the real Anzac Story (as Les Carylton and others would have it) belittles their experiences and obfuscates their contribution to our war history. I actually think it goes back to the disaster of the Gallipoli campaign (where the Anzac Legend took root) – because the men did not/could not advance into the hinterland of the Dardanelles peninsula, and got bogged down on the shore, so no hospitals were established (as originally intended).

Therefore, no Australian nurses were ever physically stationed there, rather they were operating on hospital ships just off shore and then within the 'red triangle' of Alexandria, Malta and Lemnos where the wounded and sick were taken.

**Sister Elsie Grant.** Many Australian nurses saw active service in the casualty clearing stations of the western front. Positioned just behind the front lines in France and Flanders, these portable hospitals provided a wide range of surgical treatment. The Australian nurses joined their British and Canadian counterparts but initially at least there was resistance from sections of the AAMC to women being so close to the front. But the nurses soon made themselves indispensable in helping to save lives even though their own lives were sometimes in great danger due to shelling, bombs and gas attacks. The AANS nurse Elsie Grant, from a close-knit Catholic family in Clermont, Queensland, was one of many to describe the shelling and evacuation of the 3rd Australian Casualty Clearing Station near Ypres in July 1917. She was there with a number of Australian nurses, including May Tilton who wrote the book *The Grey Battalion*. Elsie and others were 'shelled out' as Elsie described it many times.

At 24, Elsie had enlisted in Brisbane in August 1915 with her brother Allan Grant. She had trained at the Mackay District Hospital and, on the outbreak of war, was Matron of Emerald Hospital. Elsie and Allan were 18 months apart in age and were devoted to each other. But by mid-1917, Elsie had had enough of the war '*I want ever so badly to come home on Transport*', she wrote '*but I really can't bring myself to leave Allan behind*'. After a chance meeting with Allan shortly after being evacuated from the CCS, Elsie was grief stricken to learn of his death on 12 October 1917. Mentioned by Australia's official war historian, Charles Bean, in his history, Lieutenant Grant, of the 40<sup>th</sup> Battalion, was killed in action near Passchendale. His body was never recovered and his name appears on the Menin Gate at Ypres along with the more than 54,000 other British and Empire soldiers whose bodies were never found in Flanders fields. Elsie returned home to Queensland to learn that her elderly mother had died, an all too common coincidence of mothers dying within a year of the deaths of their young sons. Elsie went on to marry Carl Hoch, a childhood friend of her brothers and bear four children. But a combination of post-natal depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (all undiagnosed) and the loss of her beloved brother

ten years before almost to the day was too much for her. Elsie committed suicide in September 1927 when her youngest child was 6 months old.

**Sister Narrelle Hobbes:** The story of Narrelle Hobbes, too, touches on and illustrates the points I've been making this evening in regard to Australian women and war. I published *Oceans of Love*<sup>4</sup> back in 2006 but I'm still drawn to her story (of nursing in WWI in Malta, Sicily, India & Mesopotamia, all areas not generally associated with Australia and WWI), another example that if you take the blinkers off, and follow Australian nurses and women, you get a very different type of war).

Narrelle is a real character. She is funny, witty, and a formidable woman. '*Thank God I'm Australian*' she said as she came up against her British counterparts. Narrelle worked non-stop, railing against the 'bally' rule of the British military nursing service. She is an observer of Empire; a voice of Australia let loose on the world. She travels to the four corners of the British world, feeling and experiencing first-hand the exhilaration and tragedy of war. Like Elsie Grant, she's a girl from the bush, an adventurer, a traveller, and a woman on her own. She displays all the qualities we give to the Australian soldier.

Born at Tilba Tilba on the south coast of NSW, Narrelle came from a large family, with one brother and six sisters. In 1914, at the outbreak of the Great War, she was Matron of the hospital at Brewarrina in north-western NSW. She was 36 and unmarried. She couldn't join the Australian Army Nursing Service so she headed off with funds cobbled together by her family, to nurse for the Empire.

When Narrelle arrived in London in April 1915, it was spring. She was accepted into the Queen Alexandra's Imperial Medical Services Reserve QAIMNS (R). By May 22, she was headed for Malta and the wounded of Gallipoli. Narrelle begins her war service at the Military Hospital at Valetta, Malta (one of about 8 hospitals on the small island) and later she was promoted to Matron at St Davids Tent Hospital. She vividly describes the heat of a Maltese summer, and has some wonderful words to say about the British male orderlies..."...but some of them are *awful* fools, look I'd rather

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<sup>4</sup> ABC Books, Sydney, 2006.

*be born a woman 5 times over than be a man like some of the men I've come across out here, blithering idiots with as many brains as a cabbage, tell an ordinary pro [nurse] the same thing for two mornings running & she remembers it, tell the average Tommy orderlie the same thing two mornings running, - & you keep right on telling him...."*

Her early letters in Malta also speak of the horrors of the war, as she is dealing first hand with men with indescribable wounds and disfigurements. But she loves 'her boys'. When Gallipoli was evacuated in December 1915, Narrelle was posted to Sicily, then to India and Mesopotamia. Narrelle spent nine months nursing in hospitals in what is now Iraq, at Basra and Amara (on the Tigris river). She has some wonderful and evocative descriptions of sailing up the Tigris River from Basra to Amara. The scale of disease was most confronting – dysentery usually spread by flies (which were everywhere); enteric fever (really typhoid or paratyphoid – highly infectious disease caused by contaminated water or food; and perhaps the most dangerous of all – cholera. Other minor diseases and illnesses included sunstroke, malaria, sandfly fever, jaundice, scurvy (especially in Indian troops) and septic sores.

By mid-1917, after two and a half years working without respite, Narrelle fell ill. Sent back to Bombay she then went to the Himalayas to recuperate. But she didn't get any better. Her close knit family back in Australia were desperately worried. Despite the huge financial costs involved, the youngest daughter, Narrelle's beloved sister Elsie, was dispatched to India. Her mission – to bring Narrelle back home. Eventually Narrelle was transferred back to Bombay – where she was reunited with her sister Elsie and where she was operated on. It was not a success. She & Elsie were put on the next hospital ship, *SS Kanowna*, to return home to Australia. It was a full ship, full of seriously wounded men – four of whom died on the journey home.

Narrelle Hobbes died on 10 May 1918 and was buried at sea. According to a niece of Narrelle's, who was very young at the time, the grief experienced by Elsie was so profound that she could never speak of the death, or refer to it in any way afterwards. Elsie felt responsible for Narrelle's death, and felt that she had failed her family and her dying sister for not being able to return her safely home. Narrelle's death cast a shadow over the Hobbes family for years afterwards.

This is a story of an Australian nurse at war. A story of a woman on her own, a woman with amazing courage and belief in herself, often overworked, who sacrifices her life for empire. The story of Narrelle reminds us that Australian women did quite extraordinary things during WWI often at a huge personal cost.

As I wrote at the conclusion of *Oceans of Love* in 2006:

*“90 years on, the legacy of World War I is as important as ever to Australians. We owe it to the men and their memory, but we also owe it to the women – the nurses, including those like Narrelle Hobbes, who served and paid the ultimate price – to remember their war service alongside that of the boys, for their stories are just as interesting, just as moving, and just as important.”* (p. 261).

I would like to think that today, as we near the end of our 4-year centenary commemorations of that war, and almost 100 years to the day that Narrelle Hobbes died, that once and for all, we can shift our focus, not only on the trenches but also out of the trenches - permanently – we take all take off our blinkers and move to a more inclusive war history that truly reflects the war experiences of all who were involved; a history that includes the after effects of war – that is the impact and longstanding effects on individuals, on communities, on nations.

Lest we forget.