

**ANZAC DAY 2017 SERVICE
SPEECH BY HER EXCELLENCY PROFESSOR
THE HONOURABLE KATE WARNER AC
GOVERNOR OF TASMANIA
HOBART CENOTAPH, TUESDAY 25 APRIL 2017**

Good morning.

As Tasmania's first female Governor to address the ANZAC Day Service at the Hobart Cenotaph, I thought it would be appropriate for me to focus today on the role of Australian women in the two world wars.

Anzac Day presents an opportunity for Australians to reflect on the contribution of all servicemen and servicewomen including those men and women who were involved in the war on the home front. It has not always been the case that role of women has been fully included in this reflection.

Anzac Day has been primarily a male story, and women's contributions have been inadvertently marginalised,¹ – a situation which historians, commentators, and film and television producers are now beginning to address.

The story of women in World War One and World War Two is a complex one. It covers military service, nursing and voluntary aids – known as VADs – who carried out a wide range of duties: in hospitals, as clerks, ambulance drivers, seamstresses, radiographers, dental orderlies and laundry staff. From October 1941 the VADs began to serve overseas.² At home women formed Red Cross branches and worked tirelessly fundraising and in making items to send to servicemen and women. The Australian Women's Land Army had over three thousand members enrolled in December 1943 working a 48-hour week.³

¹ Peter Henning explains how Australian nurses have been effectively written out of most of the general histories of WWII: Peter Henning, *Veils and Tin Hats: Tasmanian Nurses in the Second World War*, [Exeter, Tasmania], 2013, pp. 7-8.

² 'Voluntary Aid Detachments (VAD)', The Australian Women's Register.

³ The Australian Women's Land Army, Australian War Memorial, https://www.awm.gov.au/encyclopedia/homefront/land_army/

During World War One, some Australian women contributed to the war effort through military service. But they were very much the exception to the rule and it was not until 1942 that war services other than nursing were opened up for women. Tens of thousands joined the Australian Women's Army Service, the Women's Auxiliary Australian Air Force and the Women's Royal Australian Navy Service during World War Two.

So the contributions of women were diverse, but in terms of service abroad, this primarily involved medical support.

The Australian Army Nursing Service was formed in 1902, when sixty nurses served in the Boer War. During World War One some 2,500 AANS nurses joined active service, most of them overseas. They worked behind the lines in field hospitals and on medical ships anchored off shore near battlefields that were inaccessible by land. It was the first time women had made a major contribution to the war effort outside home and country.

The nurses served in Egypt and Lemnos during the Gallipoli campaign, in England, France and Belgium in support of the fighting on the western Front, and in Greece, Palestine, Mesopotamia and India. Twenty-nine died on active service.⁴

The first bravery awards for Australian women were given to four nurses. They, including Alice Ross-King, received the Military Medal for risking their lives to rescue patients trapped in burning buildings after a German raid on the Western Front in France in 1917.⁵

Of the 2,500 or so women who served as AANS nurses, 388 were awarded medals.

What about women doctors in World War One? In 1915, the War Office announced that it could not utilise the services of women doctors. Undaunted, 25 Australian women doctors went abroad privately and served in other units overseas.

⁴ *The Oxford Companion to Australian Military History*, page 62.

⁵ Women in action – nurses and serving women,
<http://www.australia.gov.au/about-australia/australian-story/women-in-action>
accessed 29 March 2017.

Dr Phoebe Chapple is a good example. One hundred years ago in February 1917, she travelled to England to enlist in the Royal Army Medical Corps. She was given the honorary rank of captain and was one of the first two women doctors to be sent to the front. She was at a camp in France when three bombs were dropped on the compound. One of the huts exploded on a covered trench used by the women as shelter. Eight women were killed and seven wounded. Phoebe Chapple worked through the night in the destroyed trench tending to the dead and wounded. She was awarded a Military Medal for gallantry and devotion to duty during and after the air raid. As a non-commissioned officer she was not eligible for a Military Cross.

The women doctors were not allowed to wear the Royal Army Medical Corps uniform or badges until nearly the end of the war and they were not permitted to wear the badges of rank.⁶ And because they did not serve under an Australian Army unit, Australian doctors have never been recognised here in Australia for their service in World War One.⁷

For most of World War Two, Australian nurses were the only females to serve overseas in any capacity. Over three thousand AANS nurses served and 71 lost their lives during active service. Some were taken prisoner of war by the Japanese forces; 32 on Bangka Island and Sumatra and others in Rabaul. The horrific story of the massacre of Bangka Island, in the Dutch East Indies, now Indonesia, is well known.

But as this is the 75th anniversary of the massacre, the story is worth repeating. There were 65 Australian nurses on board the *Vyner Brooke* when it was bombed and sunk by Japanese aircraft during the fall of Singapore. Some were killed, 12 probably drowned and the survivors were scattered. Some made it to shore and were taken prisoner by the Japanese. A group of 22 surviving nurses, some civilians and wounded men made land on a sandy beach. The nurses set up a shelter with a large Red Cross sign on it to care for the wounded who were unable to walk to Muntok to surrender.

⁶ Alison Caldwell, The World Today, ABC News, <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-04-24/women-surgeons-battle-exclusion-too-serve-in-ww1/6419214> accessed 5 April 2017.

⁷ Baker, Jennifer: The Forgotten Service of Australian Women during WW1[:] A Summary of Units in which Australian Women Served in during WW1. See: <https://sites.google.com/site/archoevidence/home/ww1australianwomen>,

What happened then would have been unknown but for survival of Sister Vivian Bullwinkel. When the Japanese arrived at Radji Beach they separated the men and took them along the beach and out of sight. When the Japanese soldiers arrived back a short time later wiping their bayonets, the nurses realised what had happened. They were then ordered by Japanese soldiers to form a line and walk into the surf. When they were waist deep they were shot.

All but Sister Vivian Bullwinkel were killed. Despite being shot in the diaphragm, she managed to float in the water until the soldiers left and then crawl out of the water and into the jungle. Some 12 days later she surrendered to the Japanese. Bullwinkel then spent three years in a POW camp and survived the war along with two Tasmanian nurses who had survived the sinking of the *Vyner Brooke*.

Another ship, the *Empire Star*, carrying Australian nurses from Singapore, left the day before the *Vyner Brooke*, and despite being bombed and machine gunned and set on fire and losing 17 men who were killed on the deck, it limped into Java and safety.

As I have indicated, the recognition of Australian women's war efforts has been somewhat meagre. In fact the right to march with servicemen on Anzac Day and Remembrance Day has not always been recognised. Servicewomen were paid two thirds of the pay men received. Land Army women did not receive the same benefits as members of the other services. Even some of the 24 *Vyner Brooke* nurses who survived and became POWs struggled after the war to obtain full pension rights.⁸

It was only in the late 1990s that Australian Service Nurses were honoured with a national memorial on Anzac Parade in Canberra. There is ample evidence that Australian soldiers deeply appreciated nurses in war and their contribution to the war effort. But the nation has been slow to make official recognition of that.⁹

⁸ Henning, n 1, 256.

⁹ Dr Madeleine Turner, 'Lest we forget the bravery and the service of our nurses', *The Mercury*, 17 February 2017. Dr Turner wrote her history honours thesis on the Australian Services Nurses National Memorial.

The Australian Services Nurses National Memorial was established to honour the collective efforts and sacrifices made by Australian nurses in all areas of combat and service life since the Boer War. It acknowledges the harsh truth that, although nurses were guaranteed protection under the Geneva Convention, many experienced physical danger and, like the nurses on Bangka Island, were killed. In academic historian Madeleine Turner's words:¹⁰

“By articulating the danger and deplorable conditions in which nurses worked, the [National Memorial] effectively dismantles the myths of their ‘safe’ wartime experience that have trivialised their significant role in war. It is a version of history where the activities of men are not more important than those of women. Nor are horrific war experience memories exclusive to men. Women have shared a part and their memories allow the definition of hero to be reworked.”

We need to honour the distinctive contribution nurses made. When the nurses on Radji Beach knew death was coming they did not scream or whimper. As they walked into the sea Matron Irene Drummond called out, “Chins up girls, I’m proud of you and love you all.”

In conclusion: alongside our remembrance of the brave male soldiers, sailors and airmen of the war, let us diligently remember their women colleagues, the nurses in particular who lost their lives, and let us also remember the contributions made by women in the services, in the Red Cross, the land army and in the factories.

Lest We Forget.

¹⁰ Turner n 19.