



DISPATCHES

War Veterans Village (Narrabeen) RSL sub-Branch Newsletter

January-February 2026

Nurses



In this issue:

- ◆ *The selfless contribution of our Australian Military Nurses.*
- ◆ *A letter from the heart from a passionate advocate for Veteran welfare.*
- ◆ *A purple Poppy Day story.*

Address label

READ YOUR EDITION AND ENJOY



DISPATCHES

War Veterans Village
(Narrabeen) RSL sub-
Branch Newsletter

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Dispatches is published monthly by the
War Veterans Village RSL sub-Branch.

Opinions expressed are those of the
individual authors and not necessarily
those of the sub-Branch.

*Through an active membership we keep
the ANZAC spirit alive and growing.*

Cover: Sister Vivian Bullwinkel, pictured in
uniform after the war. She continued to serve
until 1947, when she left the army and enjoyed
a long career in nursing. Image courtesy of the
Australian Nurses Memorial Centre (ANMC)
Archive.

Dates for the diary:

Thursday February 12: Monthly meeting.
9.30am in the Lone Pine Room, with a
Guest speaker.

Tuesday March 3: Committee Meeting.

Thursday March 12: 9.00am AGM (*Breakfast
meeting - cost \$10*).

9.00am in the Lone Pine Room. AGM to
commence at 9.30am.

Saturday March 21: Navy Anniversary
Cruise - see opposite.

Thursday April 9: Monthly meeting.

Wednesday April 22: Village ANZAC March
and Service.

Saturday April 25: ANZAC Day Dawn Service
6.00am.

President's message

Welcome back, and a Happy new year to all.

There are a few things in the pipe-line this year; with
the AGM coming up we are looking for a vice-
president, secretary, an assistant secretary and a
fund-raising coordinator.



An event coming up soon is a lawn bowls day at Dee Why bowling club,
run through the Northern Beaches Veteran Wellbeing Centre. All are
welcome. *See page 3*).

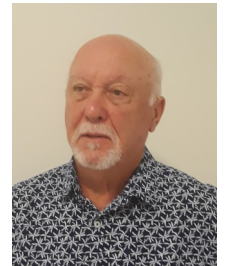
There is not a lot to report yet, but I hope to see you at the AGM.

Looking forward to a great year,

Geoff Seis, President

FROM THE TREASURER'S DESK

It was pleasing to achieve a positive result for the
financial year ended 31st December 2025. We
finished with a surplus of \$237 compared to a
budgeted deficit of \$7,600.



Notably the net result from Anzac Day and
Remembrance Day sales was nearly \$4,000 over
budget and the interest on our Fixed Term Deposit with Australian
Military Bank was \$1,700.

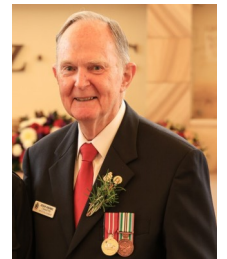
Our Account Reviewer has agreed to review the 2025 Accounts and this
will be completed in time for presentation at the March General Meeting.

I intend to nominate for the position of Treasurer at the March AGM.

Peter Cole, Honorary Treasurer

Fundraising Report

At the time of going to print, the sub-Branch is still
seeking a member to offer to fill the position of
Fundraising Coordinator. This has been a non-
executive position, but a member of the sub-
Branch Committee. It is not an onerous task and
full support and training will be provided.



It is intended to have a pop-up table at Warriewood Square on
Thursday 23 and Friday 24 April for ANZAC Day 2026. There is not a
lot of stock of pens, lapel pins and badges carried forward, but what
there is will make for an attractive display.

Leigh Haines, Fundraising Coordinator



125th Anniversary RAN International Fleet Review

Sydney Harbour, Saturday March 21

The sub-Branch has managed to secure 24 places on a
chartered vessel to witness this event.

The cost will be \$80 per head, which includes a buffet lunch.

We will be sharing the cruise with members of the HMAS Sydney
Association and the Naval Association of Australia.

Bookings to Secretary John Sowden - details above left.

This is sure to sell out, so book soon.

Secretary's Report

Well, another year has passed us by with many memories of events, activities and commemoration. The only item of correspondence for December was that the President and Secretary will be attending the 110th Anniversary Commemoration of the Withdrawal from Gallipoli on December 20, 2025 which we did.



The Village Market Day was very successful with \$800 raised for the sub-Branch – a great thank you to those who contributed with cakes, slices, biscuits and rocky road and the location of our stall was excellent – thank you Suzie Spencer, same spot next year please!! - and it meant it was close to the Dug Out so that much of the food on sale was in one location with passing traffic important to the good result.

Remembrance Day fundraising was marginally better than last year with thanks to Coordinator Leigh Haines and his team of volunteers who covered Warriewood Square, Augusta shops, St. Leonards Head Office and the Gallipoli building. It was pleasing to see the volunteers prepared to use the square terminal which is becoming more important each time we are selling products, as most people are carrying less cash.

With the AGM coming up in March, it's good to see members thinking seriously about assisting in some areas that will need covering when the Secretary and Fundraising Coordinator step down. Thanks to those who have indicated an interest in visitation, welfare, outings, sales volunteers. Many more offers of help are needed please.

Our Christmas Lunch was enjoyed by all who attended – thank you Juri and the catering team and it was nice to see Ruby back who is always so cheerful. At the short meeting before the lunch many members expressed their appreciation to *Dispatches* Editor Ralph Clark for the interesting editions he is producing.

Ralph made comment about future themes for upcoming issues and indicated the next issue will be February. More copies are being made available for Village residents near the entrance to the RLO Desk in the Gallipoli building.

Your committee thanks all members for your support in 2025 and trust the activities, speakers, etc., organized for 2026 will keep you interested and attending our monthly meetings.

NOTE – February Meeting on the 12th at 9.30 with a guest speaker and morning tea.

The March Meeting is the AGM. 9AM for breakfast, then the meeting at 9.30AM, including elections.

John Sowden, Honorary Secretary

Chaplain's message

Victory That Endures

"For everyone born of God overcomes the world. This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith." — 1 John 5:4.



Those who have served know that victory is rarely easy. It comes through discipline, endurance, sacrifice, and often unseen courage. Yet Scripture reminds us of a deeper kind of victory — one that does not depend on strength, rank, or circumstance.

John tells us that the victory which overcomes the world is faith. Not faith as wishful thinking, but trust anchored in God's faithfulness. Life brings its own battles: loss, uncertainty, ageing, and the weight of memory. These struggles are real. But faith reminds us that we are not facing them alone.

To be "born of God" is to belong — to be held by a purpose greater than ourselves. This faith does not erase hardship, but it steadies us through it. In quiet perseverance and daily trust, God grants a victory that endures long after the noise of conflict has faded.

Christ won a victory for us by sacrifice and service to us. We too can know His love and His victory.

Blessings, Keith

Northern Beaches Veteran Wellbeing Centre

Service members are invited to attend these February events:

Yoga with Invictus (free): Tuesdays from Feb 17th 10-11am.

Personal Story Telling: via Zoom, starting February 18.

Bowls fundraiser: Sun Feb 22 at Dee Why Bowling Club - a fun day (10-2) - Music; Family welcome. Cost \$10.

Allied Health and Wellbeing Expo (free): Fri Feb 27, 10-1pm; Dee Why RSL. See the resources available in the area.

Links for all events are available in the sub-Branch office.

Shirley McLaren

Our good friend Shirley will be leaving soon to be with her daughter in the ACT. Her final sub-Branch meeting will be on February 12, so this is our chance to farewell Shirley and wish her well.



And to thank her for the wonderful contribution she has made - to our sub-Branch; to the Village; to the War Widows Association, to Legacy and to so much more.

There will be a separate farewell at 3.00pm on the same day in the Vivian Bullwinkel Lounge, hosted by the

From the Editor

There was so much information for this issue that it grew to twelve pages. Even then some things had to miss out, including a significant letter to the Chief of the ADF forwarded to me by Arthur Skene.

It will be in the March edition, together with coverage on the early formative years of our Defence Force. In April we will look at the New Zealand contribution to the ANZAC. All contributions welcomed. *Ralph*

Australia's Military Nurses - a tribute

"Where there are men fighting, there are always nurses" - Lieutenant (Sister) Florence Trotter - Bangka Island survivor and POW.

Florence Nightingale led a team of 38 British nurses to the Crimea in 1854, but there is no evidence that any Australian was included in that number.

The work, and then-radical ideas of Nightingale and her team changed nursing practices for ever. The traditions which evolved from that mission had far-reaching tentacles, extending as far as the Australian Colonies.

The First Boer War (1880-81) lasted only three months and resulted in a humiliating loss for the British forces in the Transvaal. There was no Australian involvement.

That changed, however, in the Second **Boer War** (1899-1902), when the Australian Colonies sprang to the aid of the 'Motherland'.

That conflict overlapped Australian Federation: our initial contribution came from separate Colonies; after January 1 1901 from a united Nation.

A South African hospital ward, with bare earth floor, has been decorated with fans, vases full of flowers, and framed portraits in an attempt to brighten up the primitive conditions.



The NSW Army Nursing Service Reserve was formed in 1899 and sent 14 members to South Africa in June 1900. Most Australian nurses were attached to British military hospitals, although some served in 'Stationary hospitals' close to the front lines, or in hospital ships.



Nurses accompanied the 3rd Victorian Bushman's Contingent to Rhodesia in March 1900. Sister Fanny Hines is on the left, next to Sister Julia Anderson.
AWM image P04544.003

About 16,000 Australians, including around sixty nurses served in the conflict. 604 Australians died, approximately half either killed directly or as a result of their wounds, the balance from disease or accident.

The only Australian nurse known to have died was Nursing Sister Frances Emma Hines. (See story on page 10).

Following the end of the War and Federation the Australian Army Nursing Service (AANS) was formally established in July 1903.

World War One (1914–1918):

Some 2,861 women enlisted in the AANS during World War One, deployed nurses in countries such as England, Belgium, Egypt, France, India and Greece.

They worked in a variety of settings, such as hospitals behind the front line, and in Casualty Clearing Stations, which were up close to the front line, as well as on hospital transports such as ships and trains. Many more served in the AANS AMF on home service in Australia.

Nurses and patients in a Cairo military hospital, 1915.



AWM image.

Not all nurses were in the AANS - some served as Royal Australian Navy Nurses and some with allied organisations such as the Red Cross and Queen Alexandra's Imperial Military Nursing Service.

When the first contingent of 25 nurses, led by Matron Nellie Gould (See story page 9) embarked with the Australian Imperial Forces (AIF) in November 1914, both they and the AIF leadership were unclear about how the AANS would work together.

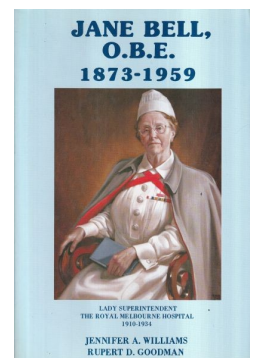
The nurses had no military ranks and it was a time when the military's senior medical staff were reluctant to enlist women in nursing roles, preferring to train male soldiers as nursing orderlies. Major General Neville Howse, the director of the medical services in the AIF stated:

"The female nurse (as a substitute for the fully trained male nursing orderly) did little toward the actual saving of life in war... although she might promote a more rapid and complete recovery."

Jane Bell departed Australia in December 1914 as Principal Matron on the hospital ship *Kyarra*. She pressured the Army Medical Service to clarify the roles of AANS staff, and to allow them autonomy over the control and discipline of their own members.

In July 1915 she again submitted staffing recommendations, which were rejected, so she requested a transfer or to be returned to Australia.

Acknowledged as "The Nurses' Statesman" Matron Jane Bell's influence benefited the Australian nursing profession over a lengthy span of years.



(WWI ctd):

In early 1916 there was a restructure of the AANS, and the members were given military ranks equivalent to Army officers. Matrons wore two crowns on their shoulders, as did Majors, Sisters wore two stars like 1st Lieutenants. However, they were still paid only half what the men received, and often required financial support from their families back home.

They worked in often difficult conditions, exposed to the physical and mental strain of dealing with the huge number of casualties. And once a nurse enlisted, they had no choice but to serve for the duration of the war unless they got badly injured or married.

Twenty-five Australian nurses died during their service in the Great War. The only Australian nurse killed as a result of enemy action was Edith Blake. (See story on page 10).

The award-winning 2014 ABC six-part series ANZAC Girls is still available on iview and is recommended.

The **Second World War** (1939-45), brought a number of changes in war-time nursing practices, partly through necessity and partly with more enlightened attitudes.

But there were differences in how the three Services operated.

The Australian Army Nursing Service had been formed in 1902 and at the outbreak of WW2 was one of two Army women's services (the other being Voluntary Aid Detachments) that were active as an adjunct to the Army at the outbreak of war in 1939. At that time they had their own rank structure and were separate to all intents and purposes from the Medical Corps.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

P03725.008

Nurses of the 2/5th AGH on parade in Palestine, awaiting inspection by Matron (later Lieutenant Colonel) Kathleen Best. AWM accession no P03725.00

This created issues that were eventually resolved by absorption into the broader Army with the application of Army ranks (for example a 'Sister' in the AANS was a Captain equivalent, and a 'Matron' was a Major equivalent) and rates of pay. This process was not without some controversy, as many of the nurses preferred their traditional titles.

Enlisted nurses were initially the only women to serve outside Australia. They served in England, Egypt, Palestine, Libya, Greece, Syria, Ceylon, Malaya, Singapore, Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands as well as staffing General Hospitals and Casualty Clearing Stations throughout Australia. They served on hospital ships, troop transports, base and camp hospitals and infamously, some spent time in Prisoner of War camps after the collapse of Malaya/Singapore and the loss of the 8th Division.



Before and after:

Australian Army nurses embark for the Middle East in February 1940, ironically aboard the Empress of Japan. AWM 000407

*Ex-POW Australian nurses return home to Perth in 1945 after being 'fatted-up'.
(See note page 11)*

In July 1947 members of the Australian Army Nursing Service were transferred to the Interim Army, and in November 1948 the Service was awarded the 'Royal' appellation.

In July 1949 the RANS was absorbed into the Australian Regular Army and in February 1951 it was re-designated as the Royal Australian Army Nursing Corps (RAANC).

Formed on 26 July 1940, the RAAF Nursing Service was a branch of the RAAF, as distinct to the Women's Auxiliary Australian Air Force which was a separate organisation.

Nurses held commissioned rank and wore RAAF badges of rank along with the RAAF medical badge on their tunic lapels and capes, but did not use Air Force rank titles. A sister was the equivalent of a Flying Officer, while a Matron in Charge of a hospital was a Group Officer.

Prior 1942, RAAF personnel were usually nursed at sick quarters by male orderlies or by civilian nurses. Extra civilian nurses were brought in to assist with surgical procedures at RAAF stations as required.

The outbreak of the Second World War had led to a rapid rise in RAAF personnel and outbreaks of minor infectious diseases at RAAF units in early 1940 resulted in an increased demand for civilian nurses.

It had become clear that the services of civilian nurses were inadequate and that a permanent nursing service was required within the force. Ctd page 6



In flight between New Guinea and Australia, RAAF and AIF members care for patients in 1944.

RAAF (Continued from page 5): In June 1940, Air Commodore Victor Hurley, the newly appointed Director General Medical Services (DGMS), acting on a recommendation from Group Captain Daley, suggested to the Air Member for Personnel that the RAAF should have its own nursing service; shortly after the recommendation was approved by the Minister for Air, James Fairbairn.

The new service was to be structured along the same lines as Britain's Princess Mary's Royal Air Force Nursing Service (PMRAFNS) and a similar uniform was adopted. The conditions and rates of pay were to be the same as the Australian Army Nursing Service (AANS).

Miss Margaret Lang, an ex-Army sister who had served in the First World War in Greece and later at the Victorian Police Hospital was appointed Matron-in-Chief on 27 July 1940. She was attached to RAAF Headquarters in the Directorate of Medical Services and later given the status of a director.



Her role was to supervise the Service and to advise the DGMS on all matters concerning nurses in hospitals, medical rehabilitation and sick quarters. She was also responsible for the appointment, posting and discharge of RAAF nursing sisters.

At the end of the war, Lang was discharged from the RAAF and returned to the Victoria Police Hospital. She was appointed an Officer of the Order of the British Empire in 1950, and died in Melbourne on 14 February 1983.

Membership of the Service expanded from 45 in December 1940 to 616 in December 1945. RAAF nursing sisters served in RAAF hospitals and station sick quarters throughout Australia. By the end of 1943 they were also working in operational areas in New Guinea and the Pacific islands.

Fifty two of them were attached to the RAAF Medical Staff escorting groups of trainee aircrew to Canada, the United Kingdom and the United States under the Empire Air Training Scheme (EATS).



With the establishment of Medical Air Evacuation Transport Units (MAETU) in 1944 they assisted in the aerial evacuation of casualties from forward areas.

Time off between shifts

At the end of the war they assisted in the repatriation of prisoners of war from South East Asia. Following the disbandment of the Nursing Service in 1946 a small number of volunteers went to Japan to serve with the British Commonwealth Occupation Force (BCOF).

In September 1948 a permanent RAAF Nursing Service was formed.

Over the next three decades RAAF nurses saw service in the Korean War, the Malayan Emergency and the Vietnam War.

On 1 May 1977 the RAAF Nursing Service was integrated into the RAAF Medical Branch. Policies formerly relating specifically to women's services were now rescinded and a uniform code for both males and females was introduced with equal status in powers of command.

With this integration the sisters became known as nursing officers. Male trained nurses were now eligible for appointment to the RAAF. From 1 January 1978 female nursing officers received equal pay to that of their male counterparts.

Since this time, RAAF nursing officers have been involved in various conflicts and peacekeeping forces. They are also frequently called upon to accompany mercy flights throughout Australia, the Pacific islands and other neighbouring countries as well as attending to their normal duties in the RAAF.

The RAN Nursing Service (RANNS) was inaugurated in October 1942, when 23 qualified nursing sisters began duty in RAN hospitals. Superintendent Sister Annie Laidlaw commanded the RANNS from its formation until 1946 - at its peak there were 56 nursing sisters in the RANNS working in RAN hospitals across Australia, as well as at Milne Bay in Papua New Guinea.

The first group of Royal Australian Naval Nursing Service (RANNS) officers on the balcony of Canonbury Naval Hospital, then in Darling Point.



Nurses entering the RANNS were registered with at least 12 months of nursing experience. They undertook familiarisation at the RAN Medical Training School at HMAS Cerberus.

Upon completion of training they were initially posted to billets in RAN Hospitals in either HMAS Penguin in Sydney, or Cerberus in Victoria. In 1948, the RANNS were disbanded, however, the demand for nurses was too great, and the RANNS was subsequently re-formed in November 1964.

In June 1984, the Naval Forces (Women's Services) Regulations were repealed, and the designation RANNS was abolished, leading to the nurses being incorporated within the Nursing Branch of the RAN.

By this stage qualified nurses wanting to join the RAN as nursing officers were enlisted with the rank of Sub-Lieutenant on probation, while undergoing training as officers at HMAS Creswell.

The Korean War (1950-53)

A total of 153 Australian nurses served in Commonwealth hospital units during the Korean War. While based mainly in Japan, they also served in Korea.

These trained civilian nurses joined the Australian Army and the Royal Australian Air Force for a four-year period, tending to battle-casualties, health problems and the transportation of patients.

Nurses of the Royal Australian Air Force Nursing Service (RAAFNS) and the Royal Australian Army Nursing Service (RAANS) worked at the British Commonwealth Medical Zone Mobile Surgical Hospital in Seoul.

Apart from the wounded, nurses also treated ailments brought on by intense summer heat and harsh winters, remote and mountainous fighting, and trench warfare. Trench foot, known in Korea as "rice-paddy feet", incapacitated many front-line troops. Nurses placed strong emphasis on patient hygiene, and obtaining fresh food and water supplies.

Nathalie Oldham (RAAFNS), Betty Croker (RAANC), and Marjorie Haynes (RAANC) were responsible for the evacuation of British Commonwealth patients.

Patients were transported to the British Commonwealth Communications Zone Medical Unit in Seoul before being collected by the Transport Division of the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) staffed by the RAAFNS, and transported to Iwakuni, Japan. From there they were transported to the Ambulance-Train Hospital, staffed by nurses rostered from the British Commonwealth Hospital.

Sister Croker directed the wounded to Sister Oldham at Kimpo Airport, Seoul, who in turn handed them to Sister Haynes at Iwakuni, Japan, for the train journey to Kure, where a medical evacuation unit, staffed by the RAAFNS, prepared patients for air transportation and accompanied them on flights to Iwakuni.

From 1950 to 1953, 12,762 Commonwealth wounded and sick flew this route. Other nurses based at Iwakuni served in hospital trains taking casualties to the British Commonwealth General Hospital in Kure, where the majority of Australian nurses worked. No. 1 Ward there was staffed entirely by Australians. In Iwakuni, six Australian nurses were attached to the RAAF hospital, assisting aeromedical evacuations.



Sister Marjorie Haynes (L) and Sister Betty Croker in their winter uniforms. Seoul, February 1953. AWM P02044.008. Inset Sister Nathalie Croker.

Nurses were subjected to flying hazards in operational areas. RAAF nurse Sister Patricia Oliver recalled: "There were certain dangers in transporting wounded in freezing conditions in unpressurised aeroplanes ... The condition of the patients was never ideal for evacuation but it was considered preferable to return them to Japan rather than have them remain in Korea any longer ... On one occasion, we had to fly so high because of the weather that I became semi-conscious from lack of oxygen."



During a flight from Korea to Japan, RAAF nursing sister Helen Blair tends to an exchanged Japanese POW after the cease-fire, August 6 1953.

Sister Oldham served with the United States Air Force Medical Service for several months during the summer of

1952. During that time she observed many differences between the services – the most notable being that, unlike American flight nurses, Australians did not receive flight pay and were not allowed to eat in the officer's mess.

Oldham was also impressed with the Americans' larger medical aircraft and abundance of supplies.

The Korean War was a period of both change and continuity in the culture of military nursing. The RAAFNS and RAANC developed as more career-orientated organisations, while strong connections with past military nursing traditions remained. The last nurses returned home to Australia in 1956.

The Vietnam War (1962-75)

Australia sent over 50,000 defence personnel to serve in South Vietnam and its surrounding waters between 1962 and 1973. It was a controversial politico-military commitment which led to 519 Australian deaths and over 3,000 men were evacuated home with wounds, injuries or illnesses.

A largely forgotten part of those personnel were the female nurses who served during the conflict; some went overseas to treat casualties on the frontline, whilst many dealt with the wounded who were later sent back home.

The first group of Royal Australian Army Nursing Corps (RAANC) nursing sisters deployed to Vietnam in May 1967 were led by Captain Amy Pittendreich.

In total forty-three women volunteered to serve their country as army nursing sisters between May 1967 and November 1971. Before leaving, the nurses did not receive any specific training or practical information to prepare them for their daunting task; to perform nursing duties in a primitive, tropical war zone that until then had been carried out by male Army medical assistants and orderlies.

Vietnam (Continued from page 7): Undertaking a tour of twelve months, the first four nurses arrived in Vietnam in May 1967. They were first posted to the 8th Australian Field Ambulance then to the Australian Logistic Support Group compound at Vung Tau, a coastal resort 60 miles south-east of Saigon. Shortly after they arrived, a New Zealand army nurse, Margaret Torrey joined them. (*The story of the 'Fab Four' appears on page 9*).

In April the following year, the 8th Australian Field Ambulance transitioned into the 1st Australian Field Hospital which remained operational until late in 1971. The hospital specialised in fast treatment for Australian casualties and was connected to the Nui Dat task force by US ambulance helicopters.

Countless lives were saved in Vietnam by the ability to evacuate casualties from forward areas quickly, often within an hour of men being wounded or injured. The nursing work was very demanding, however, and the hours long; on a routine week the nurses worked twelve-hour shifts, six days a week, earning two-thirds of what a male officer of similar rank earned.

Photo: The landing area known as Vampire Pad and the covered walkway to the Triage area of the 1st Australian Field Hospital. AWM P05104.042.



'Most people see amputated limbs as nice rounded finished-off stumps. We didn't get that. We had the ragged ends.'

— Fay Lewis, Australian Army Nurse.

With regular dust-offs coming in, the ill-equipped and understaffed theatre at Vung Tau was always busy. The medical team stationed there dealt with gunshot, grenade and shrapnel wounds, bomb-blast wounds and burns, but some of the most horrifying damage, what the nurses referred to as 'traumatic amputations' were caused by land mines. As author Paul Ham explains:

'...mines were the curse of Australia's last years in Vietnam. The wounds horrified the medical teams; M16 jumping jacks – most of them lifted from the Australian minefield – caused more than 50 per cent of Australian casualties between September 1968 and May 1970, the height of the mine war... Mines were invisible, hidden, loathsome killers; they disabled, disembowelled and emasculated...'

Working near a war zone was a far cry from the sanitised civilian wards and well-equipped military hospitals the women were familiar with at home. Clean water was scarce, power outages were common and facilities for medical incineration almost non-existent.

Caring for horrifically injured soldiers straight from the frontline, understaffed, and with only very basic resources, the conditions were like nothing they had ever experienced before.

As well as the deployment of RAANC nursing sisters, more than 200 civilian nurses from around Australia were members of the South-East Asia Treaty Organisation (SEATO) surgical medical team that operated in Vietnam between 1964 and 1972. They worked in provincial hospitals supporting and assisting local hospital staff and they deployed for three to twelve months; some of them went more than once.

Twenty-two Australian Red Cross volunteers also worked with the medical staff in Australian and American hospitals in Vietnam; nineteen of them were women.

Between 1965 and 1972, an additional 106 nursing officers from the Royal Australian Air Force Nursing Service (RAAFNS) were deployed to the No. 4 Hospital at Butterworth Air Force Base in Malaysia to care for the military personnel based there. They also flew medevacs into Saigon, Bien Hoa and Vung Tau, transporting wounded Australian soldiers back to Butterworth and then on to Sydney, via Darwin.

These evacuations played a crucial role in increasing battlefield casualty survival. Indeed, the Vietnam War, with its dust offs and rapid helicopter evacuations marked the medical treatment of casualties as uniquely distinct from previous wars; during the Second World War for example, 8.5 per cent of casualties died after reaching hospital yet in Vietnam, by contrast, the figure was less than 3 per cent. Sadly, on occasion however, the flag draped coffins of fallen Australians were also transported home with the injured men.

Vietnam, 1966. The bearer party stands beside the flag-draped coffin at the funeral of an unidentified Australian soldier.



Many Army nurses at home were kept equally busy by Australia's involvement in Vietnam. By 1 January 1966, some 112 casualties, both sick and wounded had been flown out of Vietnam by the RAAF and brought home on C-130 Hercules transport planes.

For the rest of the conflict, this became a weekly practise. Accompanied by nursing sisters and medical orderlies, the aeromedical evacuated casualties were off-loaded at Richmond RAAF Base in NSW via Butterworth, Malaysia. From here, they were transferred by ambulance to the care of Army medical authorities, notably to the Repatriation General Hospital at Concord and to the Army base hospital at Ingleburn in NSW.

Vivian Bullwinkel



Lieutenant Colonel (Rtd) Vivian Bullwinkel beside her portrait in the Australian War Memorial, 1992

In the evening of February 12, 1942, as the Japanese were rapidly closing in on Singapore, the evacuation vessel *SS Vyner Brooke* was able to get away. Those onboard included 65 Australian nursing sisters who had been ordered to leave immediately, very reluctantly leaving their patients behind. Among them was Sister Vivian Bullwinkel.

Vivian Bullwinkel was born on December 18, 1915 at Kapunda, about fifty miles north of Adelaide. She did her nursing and midwifery training in Broken Hill, before beginning her career in Hamilton, Victoria, and then Melbourne.

In 1941 she volunteered as a nurse with the RAAF but was rejected for having flat feet. She was, however, able to join the Australian Army Nursing Service; assigned to the 2/13th Australian General Hospital (2/13th AGH), in September 1941 she sailed for Singapore.

The *Vyner Brooke* was one of the last ships to get away. Her normal complement was twelve passengers and 47 crew; this time there at least 181 passengers crammed onboard, possibly up to 300, such was the chaos. (See *Note 1 below*).

The area was swarming with Japanese ships and aircraft. The ship hid in the lee of an island during the day and sailed at night. A late-afternoon raid by a single Jap plane did little damage. At sunset she made a run for the Banka Strait, hoping to reach Sumatra.

Having to evade enemy shipping slowed her progress, such that on the 14th she was dangerously exposed, just inside the strait. Soon after 2pm several Japanese planes attacked; within half an hour the *Vyner Brooke* rolled over and sank.

The nurses quickly treated the wounded as best they could, before abandoning ship with the others - some into lifeboats, others clinging to rafts or even debris. Twelve Australian nurses died, from the bombs or drowning at sea.

Note 1: I have found differing reports on these numbers and even different photos allegedly of the ship. More research is needed.

Around 150 made it ashore on nearby Banka Island after hours in the water. The place was already occupied by the Japanese, so most of the survivors were captured.

Many had landed on Radji Beach, joining a number of civilians and as many as sixty Commonwealth servicemen and merchant sailors from other sunken ships. After being refused help by - no doubt terrified - local villagers a group set off to negotiate surrender to the Japanese. All of the civilian women except one Briton were in this party.

A party of Japanese troops arrived at Radji Beach a few hours later. They shot and bayoneted the males and then forced the 22 Australian nurses, and the British civilian woman, to wade into the sea. The Japanese then shot them from behind. (See *Note 2 below...Ed*).

From the whole party, there were only four survivors: Sister Vivian Bullwinkel; Eric Germann, an American civilian; Ernest Lloyd, a British sailor; and Private Cecil Kinsley, a British soldier. Bullwinkel had been wounded in the diaphragm and lay on the beach for several hours after the massacre before making contact with Kinsley, who was also wounded. The pair hid in the jungle for several days, during which time Bullwinkel tended Kinsley's wounds. However, starvation eventually prompted their surrender, and they gave themselves up to the Japanese. Kinsley died soon after their capture, and Bullwinkel spent the rest of the war as an internee.

Thirty-two nurses, including Vivian Bullwinkel, became prisoners of war, held with civilian internees in camps on and around Palembang, in Sumatra. Conditions were grim; over three and a half years of captivity the women suffered from tropical diseases and the effects of malnutrition. Eight nurses died while prisoners of war.

Vivian Bullwinkel left the Army in 1947 to become Director of Nursing at the Fairfield (Vic) Infectious Diseases Hospital. In 1975 the hospital was selected to receive the second group of Vietnamese orphans under *Operation Babylift*. She and a team of nurses flew to Vietnam to care for them during and after the flight.

In September of 1977 Vivian Bullwinkel married Colonel Francis Statham OBE and adopted his surname. The couple lived in Perth, where she died of a heart attack on 3.7.2000, aged 84.

She was awarded the AO, the MBE, the Florence Nightingale medal, and the ARRC by the Red Cross. She was the first female member of the Council of the AWM, outside which was erected her statue in 2022. In 2024 a WA Federal electorate was named in her honour. As, of course, was the Vivian Bullwinkel Lounge in the Dardanelles, here in the Anzac Village.

Note 2: This is a controversial story, for more about it see the piece at the end of page 11.

Nursing Sister Frances Emma (Fanny) Hines

Frances Hines was one of ten Victorian nurses who accompanied the Victorian 3rd Bushmen's Contingent to Rhodesia in March 1900.

Hospitals were primitive and usually overcrowded; as well as the wounded many were suffering from fever, dysentery or pneumonia.

Overworked and sick, Fanny died alone on August 7 1900. Her friend Sister Julia Anderson wrote: "She died of an attack of pneumonia contracted in devotion to duty. She was quite alone, with as many as twenty-six patients at one time, no possibility of assistance or relief and without sufficient nourishment."



After her burial with full military honours, a marble cross was erected on her grave in Bulawayo cemetery by the Victorian Nurses and Bushmen's Contingent.

She was the only Australian nurse to die in the Boer War.

Staff Nurse Edith Blake

Twenty-five Australian nurses died during their service in the Great War, but Edith was the only one killed as a result of enemy action.

Born in the Sydney inner suburb of Darlington on September 22, 1885 and known affectionately as Edie, she was the eldest of the three daughters born to Charles and Catherine Blake.

Edie graduated as a Junior Sister in 1912 after doing her training at the Coast Hospital in Little Bay and continued her nursing there. Following the outbreak of WWI she tried to volunteer twice but was rejected both times.

She was, however, selected in a group of Australian nurses for service with the British Queen Alexandra's Imperial Military Nursing Service. Appointed a Staff Nurse on April 4, 1915, she set sail for England on HMAT *Malwa* two days later.

On February 25, 1918, Edie was on the hospital ship *Glenart Castle* when it sailed from Newport Harbour, in the south of Wales, down the Bristol Channel heading for Brest, in France, to pick up wounded troops.

At 4.00am the following morning the German U-boat UC-56 fired a torpedo at the well-lit hospital ship, which sank within seven minutes. Of the 182 on board only 29 survived; no nurses were among the survivors.

In 2021 Edith's great-niece Krista Vane-Tempest's book *Edith Blake's War* was published by UNSW Press.



The first Australian Army Nurse killed in WWII was **Sister Margaret Augusta de Mestre**, from Bellingen, NSW. She died on February 19, 1942, during a Japanese raid on Darwin, when the hospital ship *Manunga* was damaged.



Group Officer Helen Agnes Cleary

A RAAF Nurse in three Wars, Helen was born on 28 March 1914 at Peterborough, in South Australia's mid north. She trained at the Broken Hill District Hospital, graduating as a general nurse in 1941 and an obstetric nurse in 1942.

On 15 November 1943 she enlisted in the Royal Australian Air Force Nursing Service as a Sister (Flying Officer equivalent). Posted first to No 2 RAAF Hospital, Melbourne, Helen went on to serve on evacuation flights taking wounded personnel from the Dutch East Indies to Australia, via New Guinea.

After filling peacetime training roles she was posted to Iwakuni, Japan, as the Sister-in-Charge of the 50-bed RAAF Hospital there during the Korean War.

She was Matron of 4 RAAF Hospital in Butterworth during the Vietnam War, but also nursed on evacuation flights.

In 1967, Cleary was promoted to Group Officer and appointed Matron-in-chief of the RAAF Nursing Service. She was also appointed an honorary nursing sister to Queen Elizabeth II. Having resigned from the RAAF in 1969, she died in 1987.

Lieutenant Colleen Ann Mealy

Colleen Mealy was one of the first group of nurses to serve in Vietnam. The others were Lieutenants Margaret Ahern and Terrie Roche and Captain Amy Pittendreigh. Together, they were laughingly known as the 'Fab Four' after the Beatles.



L-R: Amy, Terrie, Margaret,

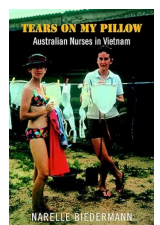


L-R: Mealy, Ahern, Pittendreigh, Roche (AWM) Colleen.

The AWM website has two oral history interviews recorded with Lt Mealy, available as recordings or PDFs. They can be accessed at: <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C235297>

For more on the 'Fab Four' see the YouTube story *The Fab Four Nurses: Stories of Service at* https://youtu.be/qt_9kbFjnyY

Tears on My Pillow (Penguin Books) describes the experiences of nurses in the Vietnam War using the words, voices and photographs of servicewomen





AUSTRALIAN NURSES MEMORIAL CENTRE

In November 1947, just two years after returning from the POW camp, Vivian Bullwinkel and Betty Jeffrey set out in Betty's little Austin car to promote a fundraising appeal for the establishment of a War Nurses Memorial Centre in Melbourne.

They visited every hospital in Victoria with more than 20 beds to present their vision of an educational and social centre for the nursing profession that would also function as a living memorial to their fallen colleagues.

Betty and Vivian encouraged their fellow nurses to compete in a statewide Queen of Nurses quest in aid of the project. Altogether the fundraising appeal raised £121,000, of which £78,000 was raised by the 'Queens'. At the time it was the most successful appeal in Victoria's history.

With that, and other fundraising, they were able to purchase a Melbourne mansion *Oban* (sometimes called *Madowla*). The centre is now located at Fawkner Towers, in St Kilda Road.

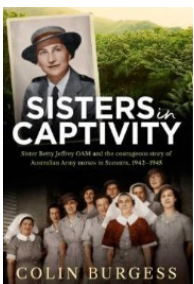
In 2025 the ANMC marked its 75th anniversary, a month after the September celebration of the 80th anniversary of the Bangka Island POWs.

It currently supports nurses and midwives through scholarships, commemorative events and educational initiatives, while continuing to honour nurses past and present while fostering the future of the profession.

Vivian and Betty are recognised as the Founders of ANMC.

ANMC has produced a six-part podcast series about the Australian Army Nursing Service sisters who were murdered at Bangka Island.

Presented and produced by Australian remembrance podcast maker Megan Spencer, it can be found at: <https://australiannursesmemorialcentre.org.au/index.php/2023/02/19/the-sudden-storm/>



During those perilous years surviving in squalid conditions, Sister Jeffrey kept a secret diary, at great risk. After the war, this was turned into a hugely successful book and radio serial: *White Coolies*, which inspired the 1997 film *Paradise Road*.

This book by Colin Burgess was released by Simon and Shuster last year.



Sisters Betty Jeffrey (L) and Jenny Greer with an Australian soldier in a hospital in Malasia in 1945, recuperating from malnutrition.

A small town with a Big memorial

The town of Devenish (population 208) lies twenty miles north of Benalla, in north-east Victoria. It punches above its size, featuring huge 20m high grain silos showing extraordinary images of a WWI nurse, a modern female military medic and an Australian Light Horseman, towering above an ANMC Memorial Plaque.

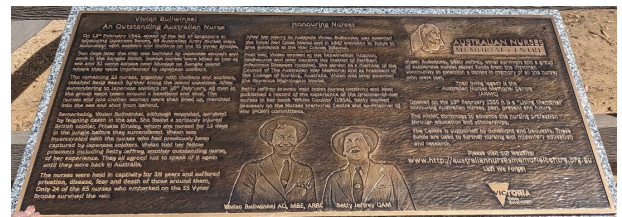


A bronze plaque (pictured below) commemorates the bravery and sacrifice of Royal Australian Army Nurses who died or were prisoners of-war in WWII.

It was unveiled on 22 April 2023 as part of the Devenish Anzac Commemorative Service.

The GrainCorp Silos were painted by Cam Scale, with stage one officially unveiled on Anzac Day 2018 to mark the centenary of the end of the First World War.

Thanks to Fundraising Coordinator Leigh Haines.



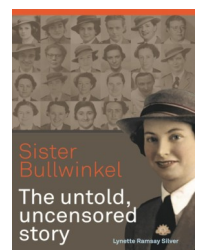
Notes:

On an earlier page reference was made to the "Fattening - up of ex-POW nurses. At the end of the War those who had spent up to 3.5 years in captivity were in an emaciated state. The authorities decreed that the Australian public was not ready for such a sight, even fearing attacks on Japanese POWs held in Australia. So the nurses spent time in rehabilitation before coming home. The term used above was used in official documents at the time. A couple of examples appeared in the left-hand column.

Similarly and even more shocking, after her release from captivity Vivian Bullwinkel was forbidden by the Australian Government and the Army to tell the full story of her ordeal, hence the story of the nurses calmly walking into the sea. In fact things were far from calm. The nurses were physically and sexually abused by their captors before they met their death. Some tried to run from the beach, but were mown down. Some screamed, some prayed. All but one died.

Vivian Bullwinkel kept the story to herself until towards the end of her life. Even then it did not receive wide attention, even in recent publications.

A book by Lynette Ramsay Silver *Sister Bullwinkel: The untold, uncensored story* came out in 2025.



The National Day for War Animals, often called *Purple Poppy Day*, is observed on February 24 in Australia to honour the service, bravery, and sacrifice of animals in conflict. It commemorates the over 11 million animals - horses, donkeys, dogs, pigeons and others - that served and died in various conflicts.

In both World Wars and other conflicts animals played a vital role in transport, carrying supplies, and messenger duties.

Readers will remember the impressive service arranged by the sub-Branch last year, attended by the Turkish Ambassador. It has been decided that this will be a biennial event.

Sub-Branch member Valerie Hapke has submitted a fascinating story of her father's service in the Burma Campaign, which appears below. It first appeared in *The Iron Duke*, the magazine of the Duke of Wellington's Regiment.

"COWBOY"

Captain D. C. Deyes

Douglas Clive Deyes died at his home in Buenos Aires on 11 February 1990. He was commissioned into the King's Regiment and was posted to 2 Duke of Wellington Regiment as a reinforcement in 1942.

He was a BLAV – British Latin American Volunteer. These were ex-patriots in Argentina and elsewhere who immediately

volunteered to return "home" to help fight the war.

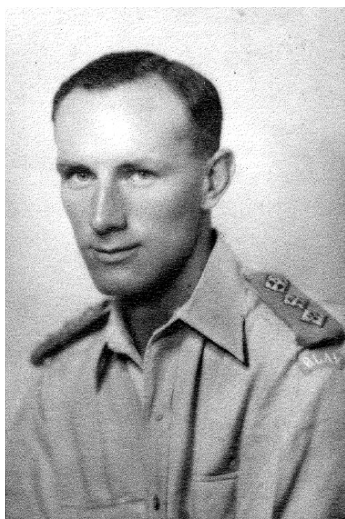
After the 1942 retreat from Burma, 2DWR were reformed as a support battalion, heavily mechanized and heavily armed. However when he heard that the Chindits were being formed the CO, Lt Col "Bull" Faithful, went to Delhi and persuaded the staff to include the Dukes in this Special Force.

So it was back to a full scale of animal transport. Very high mobility was still the aim. The new key to it all was the mule: fit and properly cared for, within a strictly disciplined and knowledgeable routine. There were still a few Animal Team regulars left.

It was a daunting task to switch from wheels to fetlock but, as so often happens, the hour produced the man and that was Douglas Deyes who knew about horses and was promptly nicknamed "Cowboy".

Dougie was a little older than the rest of us and he had seen the wide world. This gave him an extra wisdom and authority. He took a firm grip on all problems connected with the battalion animal pack transport. 140 mules, 24 horses and 24 bullocks divided equally between 33 and 76 Columns. The Animal Team Officer of 33 Column was Lieutenant Eric Hayes.

Thanks in large measure to Dougie, the "Dukes" had a high reputation for good animal management throughout the operation in the Naga Hills, March to July 1944.



Dougie worked closely with Lieutenant Donal Gunn RAMC, another outstanding figure in the battalion, and the successful use of penicillin powder for treating saddle sores was believed to be a "first".

A Chindit's life was often dominated by fear, fatigue, thirst and hunger and in such circumstances it was all too easy to let the animals take second place. Dougie kept a constant and tireless vigil to make sure this did not happen.

I shall always remember Dougie for his dry sense of humour, wise comments and deep insight into all aspects of the lives of "Chindits" and their "mules".

Written by Major Edward Emmett and published in the August 1990 edition of The Iron Duke.

The Chindits badge features a yellow or gold embroidered Chinthe (a mythical Burmese dragon-lion guardian) standing beside a small pagoda, typically set on a blue or black circular cloth patch. The emblem signifies the unit's role in behind-the-lines operations in Burma and represents the Chinthe guarding temples.



2DWR at the Battle of Sittang Bridge, February 1942

The Chindits, officially known as Long Range Penetration Groups, were special operations units of the British and Indian armies which saw action in 1943–1944.

Operating behind the Japanese lines in atrocious conditions, they suffered heavy casualties. Many who did return were unfit for further service.