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*Camberwell Girls' Grammar*



## *The Rose of No-Man's Land*

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Since the original Anzacs stormed the cliffs at Gallipoli, the resultant 'Anzac Legend' has been interpreted, popularised and masculinised in Australia. The characteristics of the 'Legend' include mateship, an antiauthoritarian attitude, initiative, independence, courage and the willingness 'to have a go'. However, Australian women who served during the First World War, in the wars that followed, and on the Home Front, also demonstrated many of these qualities. Whilst women's contributions to Australia's war efforts have been recognised, their roles in the popular understanding of the Anzac legend are little known to the average Australian today and have been described as 'missing in action'.<sup>1</sup>

The reputation of Australian soldiers was forged during the battles at Gallipoli in Turkey in 1915.<sup>2</sup> According to Ashmead-Bartlett, 'the courage displayed by the wounded Australians will never be forgotten.'<sup>3</sup> In former Prime Minister Keating's words, they demonstrated 'triumph against the odds ... courage and ingenuity in adversity.'<sup>4</sup> Australian women's roles in war, though often vital, were very much determined by the social expectations of the time.<sup>5</sup> Despite these limitations, women personified many of the qualities that are celebrated in the Anzac Legend. Olive Kelso King, for instance, was a heroic ambulance driver who risked her life in the First World War to save many wounded Serbs at Guevgueli.<sup>6</sup> Similar determination was demonstrated when Australian doctors Lilian Cooper and Agnes Bennett joined the Scottish Women's Hospital in order to serve, after being refused by the Australian Army.<sup>7</sup>

During the First World War, 2139 nurses (later known as the Anzacettes)<sup>8</sup>, provided essential medical aid on hospital ships in Greece and on the Western Front.<sup>9</sup> These remarkable women displayed the same

1 Oppenheimer, Meredith. (7 November 2007) 'Women missing in action: Why has ANZAC become a Boy's Own story?' *The Australian*. [Online, accessed 23/10/09]. Available. <http://www.theaustralian.news.com.au/story>

2 Australian war correspondent CEW Bean recorded the heroic acts of the soldiers and played a prominent role in establishing the Anzac Legend.

3 Ashmead-Bartlett, E. (8 May 1915) *Argus* in Anderson, M. and Low, A. *Jacaranda Essentials: History 2*, John Wiley and Sons Australia Ltd, QLD p.97.

4 Keating, Paul. Speech delivered on 11 November 1993 at the funeral of the Unknown Soldier in Anderson, M. and Low, A. (2007) *Jacaranda Essentials: History 2*, John Wiley and Sons Australia Ltd, QLD, p. 110.

5 Adam-Smith, Patsy. (1984) *Australian Women At War*. Thomas Nelson, Melbourne, p.374.

6 De Wies, Susanna. (2004). *Heroic Australian Women in War*. HarperCollins Publishers, Sydney, p.26.

7 De Vries, p.81.

8 Oppenheimer

9 1918: *Australians in France - Nurses - 'The roses of No Man's Land'* Australian War Memorial. [Online, accessed 5/11/09]. Available: <http://www.awm.gov.au/exhibitions/1918/medical/nurses.asp>

courage and commitment as the soldiers and their lives were endangered and sometimes lost. One nurse recalls that ‘I was awakened by the explosion of a bomb quite near and the noise of bursting shrapnel falling on the roofs.’<sup>10</sup> The nurses were resilient and resourceful; not only did they save thousands of lives, but provided comfort and support to the soldiers and frequently wrote to the families of those who died under their care.<sup>11</sup> The soldiers’ appreciation of the nurses is reflected in the lines of this song, ‘Mid the war’s great curse, Stands the Red Cross Nurse, She’s the Rose of No-Man’s Land.’<sup>12</sup>

The reputation of Australian army nurses was maintained in subsequent wars, with 3472 serving in the Second World War; 71 of whom died.<sup>13</sup> Second World War nurse Vivian Bullwinkel survived the Bangka Island Massacre and was held as a Japanese prisoner of war for three and a half years. The Anzac qualities of resourcefulness and mateship are illustrated in her recollection that the nurses ‘survived by helping each other.’<sup>14</sup> Bullwinkel carried on her selfless involvement in war by assisting with the later Australian evacuation of Vietnamese orphans.<sup>15</sup> Such commitment by Australian women continued into the Vietnam War where 43 Australian nurses were involved<sup>16</sup>, and to the present day, in peacekeeping operations and conflicts in East Timor, Afghanistan and Iraq.

At home, many women had to manage their households and farms alone, care for children and endure the anxiety of husbands, sons and brothers at war. Annie Whitelaw is a poignant example, losing five of her six sons in the First World War. Inscribed on her gravestone is ‘In the hour of her country’s greatest need she gave her utmost.’<sup>17</sup> Women were eager to support the War effort in everyday activities. Their enthusiasm and productivity was undeniable; ranging from knitting ‘huge quantities of socks’,<sup>18</sup> to packaging food and other items for the Red Cross. Traditional Anzac biscuits, significant still today, can be traced back to women’s concern to support our boys in Gallipoli with nutritious food that would survive the journey.<sup>19</sup>

Like the Anzacs, Australian women during wartime showed versatility and a willingness to step outside their stereotypical roles. The absence of men during the second world war resulted in the formation of the Women’s Land Army in 1942. Propaganda posters urged women to ‘Keep the farms going while the men are fighting.’<sup>20</sup> Their responsibilities included work on ‘piggeries and poultry farms ... vegetable farms, dairies ... and irrigated farms’.<sup>21</sup> ‘It was “absolutely necessary for the running of the country, that women should work ... and it couldn’t possibly be forgotten once the war was over.”’<sup>22</sup> Over time, however, a mythologised history has represented war as an exclusive male affair. This has been reinforced by films

10 Bassett, Jan (1992). *Guns and Brooches, Australian Army Nursing from the Boer War to the Gulf War*. Oxford University Press, Melbourne. p.57.

11 Condolence letter to Mrs. Simpson found at 1918: *Australians in France – Nurses – ‘The roses of No Man’s Land’*. Australian War Memorial. [Online, accessed 5/11/09]. Available: <http://www.awm.gov.au/exhibitions/1918/medical/nurses.asp>

12 Brennan, James and Caddigan, Jack. (1918). Song: ‘The Rose of No-Man’s Land’. Leo Fest Inc. New York found in 1918: *Australians in France – Nurses – ‘The roses of No Man’s Land’*, Australian War Memorial. [Online, accessed 5/11/09]. Available: <http://www.awm.gov.au/exhibitions/1918/medical/nurses.asp>

13 Women in action – nurses and serving women. Australian Government Culture Portal. [Online, accessed 5/11/09]. Available: <http://www.cultureandrecreation.gov.au/articles/womeninaction/>

14 De Vries. p.228.

15 De Vries. p.250.

16 Women in action – nurses and serving women. Australian Government Culture Portal. [Online, accessed 5/11/09]. Available: <http://www.cultureandrecreation.gov.au/articles/womeninaction/>

17 Tippet, Gary. (8 November 2009), Stories of sacrifice carved in granite, *The Age*, p.8.

18 Women’s role and place. The Australian Home Front during World War I. [Online, accessed 22/11/09]. Available: <http://www.anzacday.org.au/history/ww1/homefront/women.html>

19 Supski, Sian. Anzac biscuits – A culinary memorial. Australia Research Institute Curtin University of Technology. [Online, accessed 30/11/09]. Available: [http://research.humanities.curtin.edu.au/centres/gallipoli/pdf/ANZAC\\_BISCUITS\\_G2015.pdf](http://research.humanities.curtin.edu.au/centres/gallipoli/pdf/ANZAC_BISCUITS_G2015.pdf)

20 The Land Army in WW2. Poster found [Online, accessed 25/11/09]. Available: <http://www.thefourservices.co.uk/LandArmy%20-%20Keep%20the%20Farms%20Poster.jpg>

21 The Australian Women’s Land Army or AWLA. Swan Hill Genealogical & Historical Society Inc. [Online, accessed 22/11/09]. Available: [http://www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~ausshghs/mr\\_imaqes/82/mallee\\_roots\\_82-1.pdf](http://www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~ausshghs/mr_imaqes/82/mallee_roots_82-1.pdf)

22 Penglase, Joanna and Horner, David (1992). When the War Came to Australia, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, p.242. [Online, accessed 21/12/09]. Available: [http://www.nma.gov.au/shared/libraries/attachments/schools/resources/women\\_and\\_equality\\_as\\_citizens/women\\_a\\_d\\_equality\\_as\\_citizens\\_part\\_3/files/19895/women\\_part3.pdf](http://www.nma.gov.au/shared/libraries/attachments/schools/resources/women_and_equality_as_citizens/women_a_d_equality_as_citizens_part_3/files/19895/women_part3.pdf)

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such as *Gallipoli*, which leaves viewers with the image of young, bronzed soldiers alone representing the Anzac legend.<sup>23</sup> *Gallipoli* is one of many films where women play a minor role, waltzing in one scene at the officers' ball in Cairo. Such films are effective in recreating some of the experiences during the First World War, but they largely neglect women's roles in the Anzac Legend.

Whether serving as nurses on hospital ships, baking biscuits or offering their skills as peacekeepers, 'Anzacettes' were, and remain, proud icons of Australian endeavour. This was especially apparent during the crisis of the 2009 Victorian bush fires when Christine Nixon<sup>24</sup> took control. She relieved the panic by showing initiative, determination, strength and leadership, inspiring Australians to support the devastated communities. While the Anzac Legend's progress through generations has effectively seen the marginalisation of women, it is undeniable that women's commitment and sacrifice wholly represents the characteristics of the Anzac Legend. Australians today should, alongside their male counterparts, commemorate the women involved in times of trial. Although the 'Anzacette' is just as worthy as the Anzac,<sup>25</sup> she has become a 'missing voice' of the Anzac Legend, and remains a 'rose' lost in 'no man's land'.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> *Gallipoli* (1981) film, 20th Century Fox, South Australia.

<sup>24</sup> Nixon is head of Victoria's Bushfire Reconstruction and Recovery Authority

<sup>25</sup> Oppenheimer

<sup>26</sup> 1918: *Australians in France – Nurses – 'The roses of No Man's Land'* Australian War Memorial. [Online, accessed 5/11/09]. Available: <http://www.awm.gov.au/exhibitions/1918/medical/nurses.asp>

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