Parliament of Victoria

‘We just did our best’: Victorian women during World War II

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List of abbreviations

Australian Army Nursing Service	AANS
Australian Army Medical Women’s Service	AAMWS
Australian Imperial Force	AIF
Australian Women’s Army Service	AWAS
Country Women’s Association	CWA
Department of Veterans’ Affairs	DVA
Royal Australian Air Force	RAAF
Royal Australian Air Force Nursing Service	RAAFNS
Royal Australian Navy	RAN
Royal Australian Naval Nursing Service	RANNS
Voluntary Aid Detachment	VAD
Women’s Australian Auxiliary Air Force	WAAAF
Women’s Australian National Service	WANS
Women’s Emergency Signalling Corps	WESC
Women’s Land Army	WLA
Women’s Royal Australian Naval Service	WRANS
Women’s Voluntary National Register	WVNR

World War I	WWI
World War II	WWII

Executive Summary

Victorian women had a variety of experiences during World War II. They dealt with the anxiety of having family members fighting overseas or captured as prisoners of war, the threat of invasion, rationing, and an upheaval to their everyday lives. To support the war effort, many women joined one of the armed services established specifically for women, or one of the voluntary organisations that raised money and provided comforts to service people.

As part of the Parliamentary Library’s offerings for the 80th Anniversary of Victory in the Pacific Day, this paper examines the experiences of the two women who were serving in the Victorian Parliament during the war—Fanny Brownbill and Ivy Weber—as well as some of the memories of other female parliamentarians who lived during the war. It also details Victorian women’s experiences of the Australian Women’s Army Service, the Women’s Australian Auxiliary Air Force and the Women’s Royal Australian Naval Service, as well as The Red Cross and the Australian Comforts Fund, which were predominately run by women.

Finally, the paper outlines some of the changes to Victorian women’s lives as they entered the workforce in record numbers and navigated a changing world.

Introduction

Victorian women had a variety of experiences during World War II. They dealt with the anxiety of having family members fighting overseas or captured as prisoners of war, rationing, the threat of invasion and an upheaval to their everyday lives. To support the war effort, many women joined one of the armed services established specifically for women, worked in previously male-dominated industries, or contributed to and managed one of the voluntary organisations that raised money and provided comforts to service people.

This paper will examine a number of these experiences, beginning with those of the two women who were serving in the Victorian Parliament during the war, Fanny Brownbill and Ivy Weber. Brownbill and Weber both spoke in support of women moving into a more active role in public life and the workforce, and they often led their fellow members in both charity work to support the war effort and in preparing for a potential air attack or invasion. The paper also discusses the memories of other female parliamentarians who lived through the war and have spoken of their war experiences and memories, often as children. Like Brownbill and Weber, these women managed the changing social landscape of the war years, raised funds and knitted socks to contribute to the war effort, and lived under the threat of attack and the constant anxieties over the fate of their loved ones fighting overseas.

Fundraising and support for the troops was mostly facilitated by the two largest philanthropic organisations in wartime Australia: the Red Cross and the Australian Comforts Fund. Through these organisations, mostly staffed by and often run by women, Victorian women provided considerable support to the war effort through their voluntary work and fundraising activities. The paper will examine the activities of these organisations in Victoria during the war years and show the massive amounts of work, money, and time Victorian women contributed to the war.

But Victorian women were also keen to serve and fight alongside their brothers and fathers, and the paper also considers the development of the Australian Women’s Army Service, the Women’s Australian Auxiliary Air Force and the Women’s Royal Australian Naval Service, along with Victorian women’s experience as enlisted members of these forces. As well as hard work and considerable sacrifice, life in these services often provided independence, adventure, skills, and a sense of belonging that many Victorian women had never experienced. The paper also introduces some key Victorian women from each service.

Women also moved into the Victorian workforce in unprecedented numbers during the war, and the paper concludes with an exploration of the work and conditions women undertook to support the huge logistical and production task of sustaining Australia’s war efforts.

Women’s experiences during the war were varied and complex, and this paper does not propose to cover every woman’s story. However, this paper will highlight how women stepped up to support the war effort and how the war affected their home lives.

1 | Women Members' experiences of the war

Women Members during the war

There were two women Members in Victoria's wartime Parliament: Ivy Weber and Fanny Brownbill.

Ivy Weber

> We are facing the greatest crisis in the history of Australia, and we must not place too much reliance on the services of school boys of sixteen years. It is to our women folk that we have to look for assistance.[1]

Ivy Weber was the first woman elected to the Victorian Parliament through a general election, when she won the Legislative Assembly seat of Nunawading as an independent in 1937.[2] Weber served three terms and retained her seat in the two wartime elections, before resigning in 1943 to contest the federal seat of Henty.

Weber's first husband, Thomas Mitchell, was killed in action in World War I (WWI) in France in 1917, which she said allowed her great sympathy with the wives of soldiers left behind during World War II (WWII).[3]

Weber worked as a volunteer on the home front. As early as March 1939, she was photographed at the National Emergency meeting at the Lower Town Hall, where several women's organisations sent representatives to organise their efforts in the face of impending war and to launch the Women's Voluntary National Register (see 'Women on the home front' section).[4] During the war, Weber acted as the government liaison officer for the Red Cross Council, was a member of the International Refugee Emergency Council, and was a member of the Committee for the Lady Mayoress' Comforts Fund (which would be drawn into the Australian Comforts Fund in 1940).[5]

Weber was broadly supportive of women joining the war effort 'so men may be released for national duty', but was concerned about women placing their children in childcare while they did war work: 'no one can care for children as their mothers can', she argued in Parliament.[6] Weber also opposed women working in munitions because of the risks to their health.[7] Weber supported the Women's Land Army (WLA) (see 'Women in the workforce' section), but suggested 'smaller bags of wheat should be provided if the women find the weight of the present bags too much for them'.[8]

Weber did not initially believe women should receive equal pay for their war work 'for at least a period', saying in 1941 'we shall have to make that experiment. Then it will be proved whether women can stand up to the strain physically and mentally'.[9] By 1943, Weber conceded 'women had proved they could work side by side with men and it was only equitable that they should be paid the same as men'.[10]

Weber was also one of the first parliamentarians to complete an air raid preparation course in 1941 and was disappointed that more Members hadn't joined her: 'If an air raid occurred in

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[1] I. Weber (1941) 'Budget', *Debates*, Victoria, Legislative Assembly, 10 September, p. 765.
[2] A. Wright (2024) *'Surely it would be a good thing': Women in the Victorian Parliament*, Parliamentary Library & Information Service, Melbourne, Parliament of Victoria.
[3] I. Weber (1941) 'Ministerial Statement: National War Effort Victoria's Contribution', *Debates*, Victoria, Legislative Assembly, 9 July, p. 186.
[4] V. Davies (1979) *Ivy Lavinia Weber: Victorian M.L.A. 1937-1943*, self published. p. 7.
[5] Weber (1941) 'Ministerial Statement: National War Effort Victoria's Contribution', op. cit., p. 186.
[6] I. Weber (1938) 'Second Reading: Agricultural Education Bill 1938', *Debates*, Victoria, Legislative Assembly, 24 November, p. 3120; Davies (1979) op. cit., p. 21.
[7] Davies (1979) op. cit., p. 22. This was not an unreasonable concern; see 'Munitions' section for detail on the health risks faced by women in munitions factories.
[8] Weber (1941) 'Budget', op. cit., pp. 764–5.
[9] I. Weber (1941) 'Marriage Loans', *Debates*, Victoria, Legislative Assembly, 16 October, p. 1324.
[10] (1943) 'Mrs. Weber Speaks', *The Sun-News Pictorial*, 28 July, p. 5.

Melbourne tonight', she said in the Chamber, 'what would honourable members generally do?'.[11]

Fanny Brownbill

Fanny Brownbill won a by-election for the seat of Geelong, triggered by the death of her husband William in 1938, who had held the seat since 1920. Brownbill served as the Member for Geelong throughout the war years, including retaining her seat at the two wartime elections, and was a Member until her death in 1948.

Brownbill's son Ron enlisted in the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) in 1941 and her grandson Leslie enlisted in the Army in 1942.[12] Ron eventually served with the British Royal Air Force (RAF), and Leslie served in New Guinea. Leslie witnessed the surrender of the Japanese Army at Morotai in 1945. Both survived and returned home safely.[13]

Like Weber, Brownbill was active on the home front during the war. She helped with the creation of the Geelong Red Cross Emergency Service and was Vice President of the Geelong Branch by 1943.[14] Brownbill worked at the sewing machines at the branch every Monday afternoon, and would take advantage of her commute to and from Melbourne to knit garments for the Australian Comforts Fund.[15] As the only two women Members in Parliament at the time, Brownbill and Weber had agreed not to knit during debates in the chamber, but Brownbill knitted in her office, often while reading Bills.[16]

One of Brownbill's main aims for opening the Red Cross Emergency Service in Geelong was to 'train members to help with larger disasters, render assistance, and give practical aid to those in need'.[17] In February 1945, Brownbill attended an annual meeting of the Red Cross Geelong Branch as a special guest, at which it was revealed they had raised £100,000 since the outbreak of war (equivalent to about $8.8 million in 2024).[18]

Brownbill 'was greatly impressed by … descriptions of women's part in the war in Britain' and was of the opinion 'that Australian women have been fortunate in many ways'.[19] Brownbill worked with the Geelong Branch of the Australian Comforts Fund as a committee member, and was influenced by British MP Dr Edith Summerskill and her work with women in Britain.[20] While Brownbill felt 'the proper place of the mother with a young family is in her home' and 'could not support any proposal to take her away from it', she nonetheless advocated for married women to be employed to help face the workforce shortages caused by men enlisting.[21] She was also an advocate for women to be allowed to continue working after they were married (particularly as teachers).[22]

In the housing shortage that faced Victoria at the end of the war, Brownbill drew attention to how this was disproportionately affecting women:

> They have done a magnificant job, but Victoria Crosses have not been awarded to them. Every mother who had reared a family deserves the best that we can bestow on her.[23]

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[11] Weber (1941) 'Ministerial Statement: National War Effort Victoria's Contribution', op. cit., p. 186.
[12] K. Trotter (2025) *The Forgotten Pollie*, unpublished materials.
[13] ibid.
[14] (1943) 'Geelong Branch Red Cross', *The Sun News-Pictorial*, 13 February, p. 13; Trotter (2025) op. cit.
[15] Trotter (2025) op. cit.
[16] ibid.
[17] ibid., p. 3.
[18] (1943) 'Geelong Branch Red Cross', op. cit.; Reserve Bank of Australia (2024) 'Pre-Decimal Inflation Calculator', RBA website.
[19] The Sun Parliamentary Reporter (1944) 'The Woman in the House', *The Sun News-Pictorial*, 29 July, p. 11.
[20] Trotter (2025) op. cit.; Brownbill met Summerskill when she visited the Victorian Parliament as part of the Empire Parliamentary Delegation in 1944.
[21] F. Brownbill (1943) 'Welfare services', *Debates*, Victoria, Legislative Assembly, 27 July, p. 211; Trotter (2025) op. cit.
[22] Trotter (2025) op. cit.
[23] F. Brownbill, (1945) 'Second reading: Local Government (Emergency Housing Accomodation) Bill 1945', *Debates*, Victoria, Legislative Assembly, p. 3767.

Other women Members with wartime memories

While many former and current Members have relatives who fought during the war, this section concerns those former women Members who were alive during the war years, and so have memories of contributing to the war effort, the changing face of wartime Victoria, and of missing relatives fighting overseas.

For many former Members who were alive during the war, the impact of the war was felt most keenly through the impact it had on their male relatives who were allowed to fight overseas:

- **Joan Coxsedge** (Member for Melbourne West 1979–92): Coxsedge's brother served in the Airforce and her uncle in the Middle East[24]
- **Jeannette Patrick** (Member for Brighton 1976–85): Patrick's husband served in the RAAF and won the 1939–45 Star for service in the Pacific[25]
- **Helen Shardey** (Member for Caulfield 1996–2010): Shardey's father served in the war[26]
- **Gracia Baylor** (Member for Boronia 1979–85): Baylor's father was in the RAAF, which caused her to move from Queensland to Victoria when she was young[27]
- **Joan Kirner** (Member for Melbourne West 1982–88, Williamstown 1988–94, Premier 1990–92): Kirner had an aunt in the Australian Army Nursing Service and an uncle in the Army.[28]

Christine Fyffe (Member for Evelyn 1999–2002 and 2006–18) was born in Staffordshire in the UK, and when the report from the Royal Commission into family violence was released, Fyffe spoke about the impact the war in Europe had on her father:

> … [my father] was amongst the first British soldiers to go into Germany. He saw horrific things, and his way of coping was perhaps not the way we would have liked or wanted, as it made him a very difficult man. There was no physical violence, but the mental violence was very, very difficult to live with and was probably why I left home at 16.[29]

Joan Coxsedge was a child when the war began, and remembers it as 'the only day I ever saw my father cry'.[30] Her memories of the home front in Victoria were of 'brownouts, rationing, elderly schoolteachers, trenches in the school ground and feelings of anxiety and detachment', and both her brother and her uncle served overseas.[31] Margaret Ray's (Box Hill 1982–92) father was a Methodist minister during the war, who married a woman from Camberwell to a visiting US Marine in 1944.[32]

Like most women, many former Members were active volunteers during the war. Millie Peacock, Victoria's first female Member (Allandale 1933–35), was the President and foundational member of the Creswick Red Cross branch during the war and a member of the Victorian Division General Committee.[33] Dorothy Goble (Member for Mitcham 1967–1976) was the President of the Hartwell branch of the Australian Comforts Fund.[34] Coxsedge also

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[24] J. Coxsedge (2007) *Cold tea for brandy: a tale of protest and politics*, Balwyn North, Vulcan Press, p. 40.
[25] Vernon Ronald Patrick (service record), NAA: 143619, 143619.
[26] H. Shardey (2009) 'Second reading: Tobacco Amendment (Protection of Children) Bill 2009', *Debates*, Victoria, Legislative Assembly, 28 July, pp. 2268-2269.
[27] Victorian Government (2022) 'Gracia Baylor AM', Victorian Honour Roll of Women inductees website.
[28] J. Kirner (1995) 'Afterword', in A. Bolt (ed) *Our home front 1939-1945*, Melbourne, Wilkinson Books, p. 287.
[29] C. Fyffe (2016) 'Royal Commission into Family Violence', *Debates*, Victoria, Legislative Assembly, 13 April, p. 1444.
[30] Coxsedge (2007) op. cit., p. 38.
[31] ibid., p. 40.
[32] (1944) 'Few New Year Weddings', *The Age*, 3 January, p. 3.
[33] Australian Red Cross Society Victorian Division (1939) *Twenty Fifth Annual Report and Financial Statements: 1938-39*, Melbourne, Australian Red Cross Society; Australian Red Cross Society Victorian Division (1942) *Twenty-Eighth Annual Report and Financial Statements: 1941-42*, Melbourne, Australian Red Cross Society.
[34] P. Johnston (2018) *Extraordinary ordinary women: Pioneering women in the Parliament of Victoria*, Melbourne, Parliamentary Library & Information Service.

knitted for the troops, but limited herself to scarves 'because they were straight. I never quite got the hang of "turning" heels [for socks]'.[35]

Kirner has rich memories as a child on the home front:

> Why, I asked again, do I have to eat those horrible preserved eggs? And why couldn't I have a China doll instead of those silly old wooden toys, especially when I'd been so good when I got scarlet fever? ... And no, no, no, I would not enter that wet old backyard air raid shelter and share it with the spiders. I'd rather brave the bombs.[36]

Kirner's father worked at the Government ordnance factory in Maribyrnong managing the large numbers of female workers, recalling that 'sometimes he thought he was on the battle front, coping with a new culture of women doing men's jobs. And doing them well, as well as looking after the family. And they wore slacks!'.[37] And on Victory in Europe Day, Kirner remembers watching the parade and fireworks at Albert Park 'on my Dad's shoulders', and welcoming the troops home at Station Pier.[38]

2 | Women in the armed forces

While throughout the Boer War and WWI Australian women had served as part of the Australian Army Nursing Service, WWII saw women working in non-medical roles in the Army, Navy and Air Force for the first time.[39] The path to establishing women's services was not without its hiccups, though. All three services eventually accepted that, to allow men to serve in more front-line roles, women would have to take their place back home. This included women filling roles such as clerks, typists, cooks, drivers and signals staff.[40]

The Women's Australian Auxiliary Air Force (WAAAF), the Women's Royal Australian Naval Service (WRANS) and the Australian Women's Army Service (AWAS) were all established in the early 1940s. The Australian Army Nursing Service (AANS) was remobilised and replicated by the Air Force (the Royal Australian Air Force Nursing Service (RAAFNS)) and navy (Royal Australian Naval Nursing Service (RANNS)). The Australian Army Medical Women's Service (AAMWS) was also established, following in the footsteps of the Voluntary Aid Detachments (VADs). In all, over 66,000 Australian women served in one of the armed forces between 1941 and 1946.[41] These women supported men on the front lines and, for many, it was a time of newfound independence and friendships.

Of these women, it is estimated that 34 First Nations women enlisted in the services nationally, although this number may be much higher.[42] The federal government excluded 'those not substantially of European descent' from serving in the military, but these rules were relaxed somewhat in 1942.[43] In Victoria, Aircraftwoman Alice Lovett was a Gunditjmara woman from Hamilton who enlisted in the WAAAF in 1942, at the age of 19.[44] Lovett was posted at Melbourne, Somers, Nhill and Ascot Vale, and received the War Medal 1939–45 and the General Service Badge.[45]

This section will provide a brief outline on the formation of these services, the roles they played and some of the issues that the women faced. It will also highlight some important Victorian women who played a role in establishing the women's services.

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[35] Coxsedge (2007) op. cit., p. 41.
[36] Kirner (1995) op. cit., p. 287.
[37] Australian Government (1948) *Commonwealth of Australia Gazette*, Commonwealth of Australia, p. 1862; Kirner (1995) op. cit., p. 287.
[38] Kirner (1995) op. cit., p. 287.
[39] J. Bomford (2001) *Soldiers of the Queen: Women in the Australian Army*, Melbourne, OUP Australia & New Zealand, p. 5.
[40] Bomford (2001) op. cit., p. 7.
[41] Old Treasury Building (2020) 'Women in the armed forces', Old Treasury Building website.
[42] J. Beaumont (2018) *Serving our Country: Indigenous Australians, war, defence and citizenship,* Sydney, NewSouth Publishing, p. 241.
[43] Heywood (2009) op. cit.
[44] Old Treasury Building (2020) *Women work for victory in World War II*, Melbourne, Victorian Government; Alice Lovett (service record), NAA: A9301, 95994.
[45] Alice Lovett (service record), op. cit.

The beginning

Paul Hasluck, in the official history of Australia's war, blames 'male obtuseness' for the delay in making 'better use of women in the war effort'.[46] There was hesitancy among leadership in all the Services and the federal government (who were responsible for the armed services and changes to employment conditions) about women playing a more active role in the war effort. This hesitancy stemmed from several factors, including the belief that war was not a place for women, that women should not take jobs from men and that men and women should not mix in the workplace.[47] The Department of Veterans' Affairs (DVA) described the hesitancy to utilise women's labour as part of a broader societal view of women's role. They wrote:

> Military leaders and politicians reflected the attitude of Australian society that a woman's place was a domestic one. The idea of women invading the officers' mess was abhorrent. Issues of equal pay and of women taking men's jobs at the end of the war, and the threat such changes may make to society, all helped to instil fear.[48]

Prime Minister Joseph Lyons' government, however, was content for women to support the effort as they had done in WWI, through voluntary work. Former Voluntary Aid Detachment (VAD) and historian Patsy Adam-Smith quotes a Federal Cabinet submission from Member for Corangamite Geoffrey Street, where he wrote:

> Women's services, it is thought, would be restricted in the first place to relief and mercy work; canteen work; transport work for these services; and various auxiliary non-Government activities ...
>
> Registration of women, therefore ... should be maintained on a voluntary footing ... All women desiring to register would be asked to associate themselves with one or other of these organisations.[49]

Street would be appointed Parliamentary Secretary for Defence in July 1938, then Minister for Defence in November 1938.[50] Caution from the government did not stop women from establishing their own voluntary organisations. These organisations included the Women's Australian National Service (WANS) (1940), the Women's National Emergency Legion (1938), the Women's Emergency Signalling Corps (WESC) (1939, see also section on the WRANS), the Women's Voluntary Service, the Australian Women's Flying Club (1938), the Women's Air Training Corps and the National Defence League of Australia. Other organisations were preparing to help as they had done during WWI, including VADs, the Red Cross and the Country Women's Association (CWA) (see 'Working and volunteering' section). While hundreds of women joined these organisations, many were not widely accepted, with people ridiculing the women and describing them as 'play-acting'.[51] Hasluck wrote that 'it is clear from the files that male officialdom found them [i.e. women] something of a nuisance'.[52]

Women continued to advocate for a more formal role in the war effort. On 14 February 1939, a delegation of women met with Minister Street, by now Minister for Defence, at Victoria Barracks in Melbourne.[53] They told him that 'in the last war we stood behind our men, but in this emergency we would like to stand with them'.[54] By the end of the month, the formation of the Women's Voluntary National Register (WVNR) was announced after approval from the

[46] P. Hasluck (1952) *The Government and the people 1939-1941*, no. 1, Canberra, Australian War Memorial, p. 401.
[47] Hasluck (1952) op. cit., p. 401.
[48] M. Oppenheimer (2008) *Australian Women and War*, Department of Veterans' Affairs website.
[49] Quoted in P. Adam-Smith (1984) *Australian women at war*, Melbourne, Thomas Nelson, p. 139.
[50] Parliamentary Handbook (date unknown) 'STREET, the Hon. Geoffrey Austin, MC', The Parliamentary Handbook of the Commonwealth of Australia website.
[51] Oppenheimer (2008) op. cit.; (1940) 'Women Volunteers', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 14 December, p. 8.
[52] Hasluck (1952) op. cit., p. 401.
[53] Oppenheimer (2008) op. cit.; (1939) 'Women to offer services', *The Age*, 9 February, p. 3; (1939) 'Auxiliaries resume work - Resolutions Carried by N.C.W', *The Sun News*, 14 February, p. 36.
[54] Oppenheimer (2008) op. cit.

Federal Cabinet.[55] Adam-Smith writes that this was seen by women as recognition by the government of the 'ultimate need of using women's services';[56] however, it has also been called a 'token gesture'.[57]

Each state appointed a central council to oversee the registration of women who could nominate themselves for various types of work.[58] This included: mercy duties; employment in munitions productions, food manufacturing and primary production; substitution for men in roles such as stenographers, typists and clerks; and those with specialist knowledge such as pharmacists, photographers, artists who could do camouflage work and people who could be part of entertainment groups.[59] It was hoped that each state would register women in a uniform way to allow the federal government to easily use the Register, if needed.[60] By December 1939, 26,000 women had registered for the WVNR – mostly single women between the ages of 17 and 35.[61] Of the 30,000 names that were recorded, about a third were from Victoria, and large numbers took up the following roles in particular:

- 1,200 trained in home nursing
- 1,500 registered as 'comforts providers'
- 2,000 offered time as waitresses and cooks.[62]

This enthusiasm shown by Australian women to 'do their part' did not convince the government to form women's services. A War Cabinet meeting in July 1940 reaffirmed the government's position that there were higher priorities than women's services. While the Cabinet would allow the services to '[indicate] activities in which women could be most usefully employed should the need arise', it stressed that no men would be displaced in favour of a woman.[63] The minutes of a January 1941 Advisory War Council meeting state that 'the feeling of the Council was against the enlistment of women in the Fighting Services, particularly for duties which, in civil life, are performed by men'.[64] This fear of women taking men's jobs would continue throughout the entire conflict.

While the War Cabinet was not enthusiastic about the idea, the three main branches of the armed forces, the Australian Imperial Force (AIF), the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) and the Royal Australian Navy (RAN) were recognising that they could use enlisted women to fill gaps in their services. Throughout 1940, the RAAF had submitted several proposals for the formation of the WAAAF, but was careful to note that the WAAAF would be 'for the employment of women in musterings where trained men are not available or are not suitable for the work required'.[65] It specifically referred to a shortage of trained male wireless telegraph operators and highlighted that there were not enough men to staff the flight crews, let alone the ground forces. It was also noted that many women were already training as telegraph operators and so hiring these women would save the government the money for training them.[66]

All three women's services were officially established in 1941—the WAAAF in March, the WRANS in April, and the AWAS in August—but there was not a huge amount of time or money spent on recruiting women.

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[55] Adam-Smith (1984) op. cit., p. 140; (1939) 'For service in emergency: Voluntary Women's Register', *The Age*, 28 February, p. 10.
[56] Adam-Smith (1984) op. cit., p. 139.
[57] Oppenheimer (2008) op. cit.
[58] Oppenheimer (2008) op. cit.; (1939) 'Red Cross Society and W.V.N.R', *Bairnsdale Advertiser*, 26 May, p. 5; (1939) 'For service in emergency: Voluntary Women's Register', op. cit.
[59] (1939) 'For service in emergency: Voluntary Women's Register', op. cit.
[60] ibid.
[61] Oppenheimer (2008) op. cit.
[62] K. Darian-Smith (2009) *On the home front: Melbourne in wartime 1939-1945*, Carlton, Melbourne University Press, p. 56.
[63] Hasluck (1952) op. cit., p. 401; National Archives of Australia (1940) 'War Cabinet Minutes 416', *War Cabinet minutes - Minute numbers 343 to 520* (11158925), A2673, 17 Jun - 17 Sep.
[64] Quoted in Oppenheimer (2008) op. cit.
[65] Quoted in Hasluck (1952) op. cit., p. 403; (1939) 'For service in emergency: Voluntary Women's Register', op. cit.
[66] Hasluck (1952) op. cit., p. 403.

Attitude towards women in the services

As shown above, many only accepted that women should be part of the war effort if they were replacing a man who could be sent to a more front-line role, and these entrenched attitudes towards women in the workplace did not evaporate overnight. Women were told that they 'should not expect too much in the way of accommodation, but should regard it as a privilege to train ... and that women did not need, not want, luxury nor equal pay!'.[67]

An AWAS member recalls that:

> At first, it was a total battle to get men to accept us as workers. They were very hostile ... Articles in the press didn't help. 'Servicewomen keep their femininity,' and 'Girls don't lose their femininity in barracks.' ... The soldiers saw us as playing at work.[68]

Clare Stevenson, Director of the WAAAF, writes that 'there were many ... time-wasting incidents brought about by inter-service jealousy and dislike for women in the Services'.[69] One WAAAF member recalled in *The WAAAF Book* published in 1984, that her:

> ... greatest surprise was the attitude of airmen in general towards the women in the Force ... Amongst those I worked with there was generally an acceptance of the fact that I was doing the same work that they did, but there was a deep-seated prejudice amongst the ranks that would be completely unacceptable to the women of today.[70]

There was also the need to demonstrate that women were contributing to the war effort and were not playing as 'glamour girls'. One father of a WAAAF recruit referred to the WAAAFs as 'uniformed peacocks' and believed that women working in munitions factories 'who wear their own clothes and don't pose' were contributing more to the war effort than those who had enlisted.[71] The article next to this letter in the *Air Force News* satirically responded: 'As for glamour ... If you were looking for it, would you expect to find it as a clerk in the Records Section of the RAAF – or as a professional skating instructor in Sydney?'.[72] Many recruits had, however, grown up in areas with no running water or internal plumbing, so they were accustomed to some of the harsher circumstances they found themselves in, and some newspaper articles wrote that women were living under the same conditions as men without many home comforts.[73]

Others were concerned that women taking a more active role in the war effort would compromise their femininity and leave them 'unsuited to post-war motherhood'.[74] Christine Evans Appleyard, in her master's thesis on the AWAS, sums up the attitude many Australians had to the proposal for women to serve:

> To allow women to serve, some feared, would undermine male supremacy, compromise women's femininity and threaten the status of postwar society by reducing their suitability and desire for motherhood.[75]

Women's Auxiliary Australian Air Force

The Women's Auxiliary Australian Air Force (WAAAF) was the first of the women's services to be formed. While approval was given by the War Cabinet on 4 February, and by the Advisory War Council the next day, the WAAAF officially celebrate the anniversary of their founding on

[67] L. Ollif (1981) *Women in Khaki*, Marrickville, AWS Association of NSW, p. 22.
[68] Quoted in Adam-Smith (1984) op. cit., p. 263.
[69] C. Stevenson & H. Darling (eds) (1984) *The WAAAF Book*, Sydney, Hale & Iremonger, p. 54.
[70] Stevenson & Darling (eds) (1984) op. cit., p. 218.
[71] (1941) 'Furious Father', in Letters, 'Father has his say', *Air Force News*, 15 November, p. 3.
[72] (1941) 'Glimpses at some glamor girls', *Air Force News*, 15 November, p. 3.
[73] C. Evans Appleyard (2019) 'Civilising Forces: Class, Gender and the Australian Women's Army Service 1941 – 1947', MRes dissertation, pp. 30–31; (1942) 'A.W.A.S girls doing man sized job for Australia', *The Courier-Mail*, 1 July, p. 6.
[74] Evans Appleyard (2019) op. cit., p. 42.
[75] Evans Appleyard (2019) op. cit., p. 13.

15 March.[76] On 26 February 1941 the newspapers announced that around 250 already-qualified wireless and teleprinter operators would be accepted into the newly formed service as well as waitresses, cooks and kitchen hands for nurses' living quarters at RAAF hospitals.[77]

These women were initially *enrolled* not *enlisted*, as they were a temporary solution 'to meet the temporary deficiency of male wireless telegraphy operators until such time as men become available',[78] and it was not clear how to legally make them RAAF personnel.[79] It took until 1943 for the government to officially make them part of the RAAF.[80] After this, women were allowed to fill out a form of enlistment or attestation for the duration of the war and 12 months afterwards, changing their status from 'enrolled' to 'enlisted'.[81]

The initial 250 women would work full time and receive around two-thirds of the rate of pay of men, a comparable pay with those who worked in similar roles in civilian life (see 'Women in the workforce' section).[82] Many of the women were originally members of the Women's Air Training Corps (WATC) and the Women's Emergency Signalling Corps (WESC).[83]

Women in the WAAAF served in 73 different musterings,[84] including radio telephony, signals, radar operations, aeronautical inspections, flight mechanics and electricians, meteorology, catering, and clerical work.[85] Some women were involved in more secretive work, including 'dealing with the compilation, printing and distribution of all secret and confidential codes and cyphers, produced under stringent security conditions'.[86] Some WAAAF members were trained at the Melbourne Showgrounds in how to decode the Japanese Kana code – their equivalent of Morse Code. Some of those trainees were then posted to Point Cook to decode intercepted naval messages from Japanese submarines.[87]

Others worked in mixed-gender flight maintenance crews. [88] A flight mechanic at Point Cook, Alma Get, recalls:

> The sceptics around the place said ... we were theorists and would be no good when it came to doing the practical work ... it wasn't long before we were out to prove those sceptics wrong and prove it we did ... When I found myself solely responsible, this five foot two nineteen year old, for looking after a plane engine that had to carry human beings in flying day after day, I found it hard to believe.[89]

While WAAAF servicewomen served all over Australia and often far away from their home state, they were restricted by the Minister for the Air, who 'steadfastly refused' overseas service or even service in some more northerly areas in Australia where the RAAF was struggling to find trained male signals staff.[90] Much of the training in Victoria was completed at the No. 1 Training Depot in Malvern, with many staying at several WAAAF hostels in Toorak.[91]

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[76] Royal Australian Air Force (date unknown) 'Formation of the Women's Auxiliary Australian Air Force', Air Force website; Stevenson & Darling (eds) (1984) op. cit., p. 59; A. Heywood (2009) 'Women's Auxiliary Australian Air Force', The Australian Women's Register website.
[77] (1941) 'Women to form air force auxiliary', *The Herald*, 25 February, p. 4; (1941) 'Women's Auxiliary for R.A.A.F.', *The Sun-News Pictorial*, 26 February, p. 30.
[78] Quoted in Adam-Smith (1984) op. cit., p. 229; (1941) 'Women's Auxiliary for R.A.A.F.', op. cit.
[79] 'Formation of the Women's Auxiliary Australian Air Force', op. cit.
[80] 'Statutory Rules 1943, No. 69', Air Force (Women's Services) Regulations.
[81] Heywood (2009) op. cit.
[82] (1941) 'Women's Auxiliary for R.A.A.F.', op. cit.
[83] Department of Veterans' Affairs (2020) 'Leaving home', Anzac Portal website.
[84] Heywood (2009) op. cit.
[85] Oppenheimer (2008) op. cit.
[86] Stevenson & Darling (eds) (1984) op. cit., p. 98.
[87] A. Heywood (2003) 'Linnane, Joyce Enid (Joy)', The Australian Women's Register website.
[88] (1943) 'Technical jobs done by W A A A F', *The Argus*, 5 October, p. 6.
[89] Oppenheimer (2008) op. cit.
[90] Adam-Smith (1984) op. cit., p. 231.
[91] (1941) 'W A A A F hostel ready', *The Argus*, 23 October, p. 6; (1941) 'Memers of the WAAAF', *The Argus*, 8 September, p. 6; (1941) 'Malvern depot for W A A A F's', *The Argus*, 16 August, p. 6.

At its peak, the WAAAF had 18,667 officers and airwomen in October 1944.[92] In total, approximately 27,000 women served, including 700 officers.[93] At one point, women represented 30 per cent of the ground staff servicing the RAAF's equipment.[94] The Australian War Memorial lists the names of 48 WAAAF members who lost their lives during the war, including at least 12 who were born in or lived in Victoria.[95]

While some men were initially hesitant to allow women to serve, the Air Board wrote post war that women were 'unquestionably better than men at certain duties'.[96] The final WAAAF members were discharged in 1947 and in 1951, the Women's Royal Australian Air Force was established. In 1977 this was absorbed into the RAAF.[97]

Group Officer Clare Stevenson

Wangaratta-born Clare Stevenson was first appointed Chief of Air Staff, and then became Director of the WAAAF on 9 June 1941. She was reluctant to accept the role and said that 'the appointment was also a great surprise to my family, my firm and my friends'.[98] Stevenson said: 'Men were not running away from the possibility of death; who was I to run away from the unknown circumstance just because I was scared stiff?'.[99]

A contemporary of Stevenson's, Sybil Irving (see section on 'Australian Women's Army Service') said, 'Of all of us, it was Clare Stevenson who did the most pertinent pioneering work'.[100] Stevenson said of her time as Director:

> I fought for four years, nine months [for better conditions for the WAAAF]. WAAAF policy differed from that of AWAS. The army policy was to keep the girls in their own home state where possible. The WAAAF enlisted to go to war and that meant to go wherever you were sent, wherever you were most needed. The morale was high. The girls knew what a good job they were doing. They were mustered on parade with the men, the RAAF.[101]

One former WAAAF service member said that:

> Clare Stevenson insisted on her women, on volunteering, being enlisted to deferred pay and all the benefits to which RAAF was entitled. The old men blew through their whiskers, but she was adamant: either the women got the same benefits as the men or she would tell her enrolled girls not to enlist.[102]

Born on 18 July 1903, Stevenson moved to the city, attending school in Essendon before studying at the University of Melbourne. After moving from the faculty of science to enrol in a Diploma of Education, she graduated in 1925. Stevenson then worked with the YWCA and Berlie Limited. Between 1935 and 1939, she was a senior executive at Berlie while living in London. She was appointed as a Member of the Order of the British Empire and Member of the Order of Australia. Stevenson died in Sydney on 22 October 1988.[103]

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[92] Heywood (2009) op. cit.
[93] D. Jones (2024) *More than pin-up girls: a history of the WAAAF*, Canberra, Australian War Memorial; Australian War Memorial (2024) 'Women's Auxiliary Australian Air Force', AWM website.
[94] Australian War Memorial (2024) op. cit.
[95] Australian War Memorial (2025) 'Search for a person: WAAAF', AWM website; National Archives B883: Second Australian Imperial Force Personnel Dossiers, 1939–1947.
[96] Jones (2024) op. cit.
[97] Australian War Memorial (2024) op. cit.
[98] Stevenson & Darling (eds) (1984) op. cit., p. 15
[99] Oppenheimer (2008) op. cit.
[100] Quoted in Adam-Smith (1984) op. cit., p. 228.
[101] ibid.
[102] ibid., p. 232.
[103] M. Dahl (2012) 'Clare Grant Stevenson (1903–1988)', Australian Dictionary of Biography website.

Women's Royal Australian Naval Service

The Women's Royal Australian Naval Service (WRANS) was officially established in April 1941[104] and, due to the forward-thinking Florence Violet McKenzie, women were able to fill much-needed gaps immediately. The Melbourne-born 'Mrs Mac' was the first female electrical engineer in Australia[105] and in 1939 founded the Women's Emergency Signalling Corps (WESC) to begin training women as telegraphists.[106] She wrote to the Minister for the Navy in 1940 and then travelled from Sydney to Melbourne to see the Navy Board.[107] McKenzie recalls:

> The person in charge said "Girls in the Navy? What could they do?" I told him to send an examiner to Sydney and we would show him. Commander J.B. Newman came to Sydney in January 1941 and was "astounded". Three months later, the twelve girls – and two attendants – were admitted to the Navy under the proviso that there be no publicity about this break in tradition.[108]

The all-female team of instructors at the WESC provided free training in telegraphic and visual signalling to men and women who wished to enter the defence forces or Merchant Navy throughout the war. They ended up training more than 12,000 servicemen and hundreds of women in the communication branch. This was a voluntary contribution to the war effort funded by Mrs Mac and her husband.[109]

In 1940, after Newman's visit to the training school, he 'fought a rules-and-regulations paper war' to have the proposal to enlist women accepted by the government and Navy. Navy protocol, however, was one of the biggest hurdles.[110] Newman had to propose changes to traditional Navy rules, such as amending the wake-up procedure of being tapped on the shoulder by the bosun's mate—women would need to be allowed to use an alarm clock instead.[111] The Geelong-born Newman was a career sailor,[112] who later commented, 'I don't know how we would get along without them [i.e. the WRANS]'.[113]

The WRANS was led first by Annette Oldfield[114] and then from 1944 by Sheila McClemans, a lawyer before she was appointed Chief Officer. The first set of WRANS officers began their training at Flinders Naval Depot on 18 January 1943.[115]

The women worked a variety of shore-based roles, including 'technical duties of a secret nature, working long hours under exacting conditions, and [having to keep] absolute silence about their work, even after their demobilisation'.[116] Others worked in telegraphy and filled roles as visual signallers, writers, drivers, cooks, and as ordnance artificers.[117] In Victoria, many WRANS service members were attached to HMAS Cerberus or HMAS Lonsdale (which also included the secret stations Monterey and Moorabbin) around Port Phillip.[118] Moorabbin was a top-secret Australian-American listening post where many WRANS servicewomen were stationed.[119] Like the WAAAF, some WRANs were trained in breaking the Japanese Kana

[104] S. Fenton Huie (2000) *Ships Belles: the story of the Women's Royal Australian Naval Service in war and peace 1941-1985*, Sydney, The Watermark Press, p. 24; Ollif (1981) op. cit., p. 20.
[105] Fenton Huie (2000) op. cit., p. 19.
[106] ibid., p. 20.
[107] ibid., p. 24.
[108] Quoted in Adam-Smith (1984) op. cit., p. 210.
[109] Adam-Smith (1984) op. cit., p. 211.
[110] Women did not actually serve on ships until 1983. Australian War Memorial (2021) 'The Royal Australian Navy: Women's Royal Australian Naval Service (WRANS)', AWM website.
[111] Fenton Huie (2000) op. cit., p. 21.
[112] C. Finall (2024) 'Captain Jack Bolton Newman RAN – The Grandfather of Information Warfare Officers and RAN Communications', Naval Historical Society of Australia website.
[113] Finall (2024) op. cit.
[114] (1942) 'W.R.A.N.S. Chief', *The News*, 12 November, p. 7.
[115] Fenton Huie (2000) op. cit., p. 29.
[116] Adam-Smith (1984) op. cit., p. 218.
[117] Fenton Huie (2000) op. cit., p. 24.
[118] ibid., p. 115.
[119] ibid., p. 172.

code.[120] At Monterey, another secret code-breaking station shared with the Americans, there were no cleaners allowed in the building. WRANS members had to clean their own washrooms and lavatories at the end of their eight-hour shifts, something the men were not asked to do.[121]

The WRANS was always a limited service and was never meant to have the same numbers as the WAAAF and the AWAS.[122] In total it had 3,122 members, with a peak of 2,617, including 108 officers.[123] The service was disbanded at the end of the war but was reinstated in 1951 due to a manpower shortage. It was made a permanent part of the RAN in 1959; by the 1980s, all female members had been absorbed into the RAN and it was disbanded again.[124]

Florence Violet McKenzie

Florence Violet McKenzie, who was born in Melbourne but grew up in New South Wales, was the first female electrical engineer and helped establish the WRANS. The RAAF gave her the honorary rank of Flight Officer in the WAAAF and provided her with a uniform, but she was not paid for her work and did not want to be.[125] Over 1,000 women trained by the WESC entered the services as trained telegraphists and signallers.[126] The day before she died, McKenzie said 'It is finished, I have proved to them all the women can be as good or better than men'.[127]

Australian Women's Army Service

The Australian Women's Army Service (AWAS) was the last of the three main services to be formally approved by the War Cabinet on 13 August 1941. It was, however, the only women's service from the period that began not as an auxiliary service but rather was a unit within the AIF.[128]

Initially, there was a strict criterion for enlistment and selections would be made from applications to the WVNR.[129] Only women between the ages of 18 and 45, and married women with no children under 16, were allowed to enter the service.[130] All AWAS applications were vetted by the Manpower Authority to ensure that those who 'might be useful to industry or who came from areas where labour shortages were acute' were not enlisted and instead diverted to other areas of need.[131]

At first there was a low number of enlistments, and a lack of formal announcements on what women would be doing. Evans Appleyard describes the 'procrastination' of the Army to not confirm what women would be paid, where they would be accommodated and what uniforms they would wear, as proof they were hesitant to have women 'take on men's jobs'.[132] Like other services, women were limited to certain roles to release men for active combat, including roles such as clerks, orderlies, cooks, drivers, waitresses and signals staff. No AWAS members served overseas until 1944, as the War Office was required to give approval and it had refused until then.[133]

[120] ibid., p. 175.
[121] Fenton Huie (2000) op. cit., p. 182.
[122] ibid., p. 257.
[123] G. Hermon Gill (1968) *Royal Australian Navy 1942-1945*, Canberra, Australian War Memorial, p. 710.
[124] Australian War Memorial (2021) 'The Royal Australian Navy: Women's Royal Australian Naval Service (WRANS)', op. cit.
[125] Adam-Smith (1984) op. cit., pp. 211–212.
[126] ibid., p. 212.
[127] Quoted in Adam-Smith (1984) op. cit., p. 213.
[128] Evans Appleyard (2019) op. cit.
[129] Evans Appleyard (2019) op. cit., p. 44.
[130] Ollif (1981) op. cit., p. 71.
[131] Evans Appleyard (2019) op. cit., p. 65.
[132] ibid., pp. 46–8.
[133] Ollif (1981) op. cit., p. 71.

Ordnance work, which related to providing the army with 'the materials it needed to live, move and fight',[134] was one of the big areas for AWAS staff in Victoria; at its peak, 800 AWAS members were working in this area in Victoria.[135] An ordnance school was held in Berry Street, Melbourne, but this was transferred to Broadmeadows and remained there until 1945.[136] AWAS ordnance personnel included store women, office orderlies, painters, seamstresses, storekeepers, tailoresses, textile workers and kitchen hands.[137] Others became drivers, including those who went to driving school at Bonegilla.[138]

One count of the total number of women who served in the AWAS over the course of the war is 24,026.[139] At its peak, the AWAS had 20,051 members. The Australian War Memorial has the names of the 39 AWAS members who died during the war, at least 16 of whom were women who were born in or lived in Victoria.[140] The AWAS was demobilised by 30 June 1947.[141]

Colonel Sybil Irving

Sybil Irving followed in her father Brigadier-General G.G.H. Irving's footsteps in entering the armed forces. Born at Victoria Barracks in 1897, she lived in every mainland state during her childhood as her family moved with her father's job.[142] Irving was a long-time Girl Guide and was appointed secretary of the Girl Guides' Association in 1924. She held this role until 1940, when she was appointed assistant-secretary of the Australian Red Cross, Victorian Division. During WWI she served as a Voluntary Aid Detachment.[143]

Irving was appointed Controller AWAS (the equivalent rank to an Australian Army Lieutenant-Colonel) in 1941 and served until 31 December 1946. She was quite clear that she did not want women to bear arms, as 'they must not have the death of another mother's son on their hands'.[144] She wrote: 'Our aim is always to remember that we are women though we are in the services'.[145] Irving also said:

> Wise men have never doubted feminine courage, but never until this war have women of the Commonwealth been able to show that they can be as brave as men when the country needs their services. The courage and loyalty of our women are impressive and complete. There is among them a quiet, firm, steadfast resolution to play a part in bringing victory to us.[146]

After the war, Irving served as general-secretary of the Victorian division of the Red Cross from 1947 to 1959,[147] and was appointed Honorary Colonel of the Women's Royal Australian Army Corps—a successor to the AWAS. She died on 28 March 1973 in South Yarra. A remembrance plaque was installed at Victoria Barracks.[148]

Nursing services

Remobilised on 4 September 1939, the nurses of the Australian Army Nursing Service (AANS) served in every battle location during the war. The first group of army nurses left Australia in

[134] G. McKenzie-Smith (2016) "To the warrior his arms': Understanding the Australian army ordnance corps in World War 2', *Sabretache*, 57(3), pp. 13–17.
[135] Ollif (1981) op. cit., p. 214.
[136] ibid.
[137] ibid.
[138] ibid., p. 215.
[139] Australian War Memorial (2019) 'Australian Women's Army Service (AWAS)', AWM website.
[140] Australian War Memorial (2025) 'Search for a person: AWAS', AWM website; National Archives B883: Second Australian Imperial Force Personnel Dossiers, 1939–1947.
[141] Australian War Memorial (2019) 'Australian Women's Army Service (AWAS)', AWM website.
[142] Adam-Smith (1984) op. cit., p. 248.
[143] J. Bassett (1996) 'Sybil Howy Irving (1897–1973)', Australian Dictionary of Biography website.
[144] Bassett (1996) op. cit.
[145] Adam-Smith (1984) op. cit., p. 264.
[146] ibid.
[147] Bassett (1996) op. cit.
[148] ibid.

January 1940, and around 5,000 sisters served until the end of the war in various locations, including in Europe and south-east Asia.[149] Until 1943, members of the AANS were not given commissioned ranks, although Adam-Smith says that 'they had always received all courtesies extended to officers'.[150] Seventy-eight nurses died over the course of the war, including while prisoners of war (POWs) in Japan and Indonesia and through enemy action.[151] At least 26 sisters who were born in or lived in Victoria died.[152]

While the AANS was the largest nursing service, in 1940 the Royal Australian Air Force Nursing Service (RAAFNS) was formed, and in 1942 the Royal Australian Naval Nursing Service (RANNS) was formed.[153] The RANNS only had 56 nurses at its highest point and the RAAFNS 600.[154]

Annie Sage

Born in Melbourne, the Matron-in-Chief of the AANS trained at the Melbourne Hospital and the Women's Hospital in Carlton. She joined the AANS on 1 January 1940 and was appointed Matron of the 2/2nd Australian General Hospital in the Middle East. Sage returned to Australia in 1942 when she was promoted to Colonel, and appointed to organise the AANS in the south-west Pacific and the training of AAMWS. She was awarded the Florence Nightingale Medal (1947), the Royal Red Cross and the CBE (1951). She died in 1969.[155]

Group Officer Margaret Lang

After serving in Salonika during WWI with the AANS, Margaret Lang was appointed Matron-in-Chief of the RAAFNS in July 1940 and served in this role until the end of the war.[156] When she was awarded Officer of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire, the following was written about her service:

> She visited, from time to time, all RAAF hospitals in the South-West Pacific Area, and was untiring in her efforts not only for the welfare of the many sick and wounded ... but also for the welfare of members of the Nursing service.[157]

Born in Oxley, Lang went to school at Creswick State and Grammar School. She trained as a nurse at Wangaratta, completing her training in 1915.[158] After WWI, she spent 16 years as Matron of Stawell hospital and two-and-a-half years as Matron of the Victoria Police Hospital.[159]

Voluntary Aid Detachments and the Australian Army Medical Women's Service

Voluntary Aid Detachments (VADs) staff mostly worked in supporting roles. During WWI, the majority of VADs worked in a nursing orderly role, helping by bathing patients and cleaning floors, for example. They were most often employed at Red Cross convalescent homes rather than military hospitals.[160]

In 1940, some Voluntary Aids began being paid for their work and in 1941 the types of work conducted by VADs expanded to include roles such as clerks, ambulance drivers,

[149] Adam-Smith (1984) op. cit., p. 149.
[150] ibid., p. 157.
[151] Australian War Memorial (2021) 'Second World War nurses', AWM website.
[152] Australian War Memorial (2025) 'Search for a person', AWM website; National Archives B883: Second Australian Imperial Force Personnel Dossiers, 1939–1947.
[153] Australian War Memorial (2021) op. cit.
[154] Hermon Gill (1968) op. cit., p. 710; Oppenheimer (2008) op. cit.
[155] Oppenheimer (2008) op. cit.
[156] M. Hine (2012) 'Lang, Margaret Irene (1893–1983)', Australian Dictionary of Biography website.
[157] Margaret Irene Lang (service record), NAA: A9300, 500001.
[158] ibid.; Oppenheimer (2008) op. cit.
[159] Margaret Irene Lang (service record), op. cit.
[160] Australian War Memorial (2022) 'Voluntary Aid Detachments', AWM website.

seamstresses, storekeepers, radiographers, dental orderlies and laundry staff, cooks, clerks, mess women, telephonists, seamstresses and tailoresses, laboratory assistants, dispensers, radiographers, storekeepers, dental clerks, dental orderlies, orderlies, laundry workers and as administrative and general duties personnel.[161] In 1941, approval was granted for VADs to serve overseas and 200 embarked for the Middle East.[162]

By 1942–3, the Army was employing many VADs and so formed the Australian Army Medical Women's Service (AAMWS).[163] This was also to distinguish between full-time military VADs and those who were just volunteering.[164] On 1 September 1944, assistant pathologists, pharmacists, physiotherapists, dieticians and occupational therapists were moved from the AAMWS to the Australian Army Medical Corps.[165] In all, approximately 8,500 women in the AAMWS served as nurses, nursing aids and technicians alongside army nursing sisters.[166] The AAMWS merged with the Royal Australian Army Nursing Corp in 1951.

Major Alys (Alice) Appleford RRC, MM

Alice Appleford (née Ross King) was one of only seven AANS women to receive the Military Medal for her service as a nurse in WWI,[167] and was twice mentioned in Dispatches. Between the wars, she married veteran Sydney Appleford and became involved in the VAD movement.[168] From her home in Lang Lang, she trained civilians in first aid and home nursing.[169]

By 1940, Appleford and her family had moved to Essendon.[170] She was appointed senior assistant controller of the AWAS in Victoria with the rank of Major, a role she served in for the duration of the conflict.[171]

Born in Ballarat and educated in Melbourne, before WWI Appleford worked as an assistant to the matron of the Austin Hospital and then completed her nursing training at the Alfred Hospital. She enlisted as a staff nurse in the AANS on 5 November 1914 and spent time in Egypt and France.[172] In 1949, she was awarded the Florence Nightingale Medal by the International Red Cross. Appleford died on 17 August 1968 in Sydney.[173]

Life in the services

Pay

Like in the civilian world, women in the armed forces received less money than men for working at the same job. While some women received about two-thirds of the pay of men (which was about the same as in the public service at the time), senior female officers received approximately half of the male pay.[174] Many women were not eligible for deferred pay, pensions, dependants' allowances and repatriation benefits like their male colleagues.[175]

Stevenson recalls that the 'injustice of rates of pay' was shown when a WAAAF Cypher Officer or Meteorological Officer finished her shift and handed over to a male officer. While

[161] ibid.
[162] ibid.
[163] Adam-Smith (1984) op. cit., p. 194.
[164] Australian War Memorial (2022) 'Voluntary Aid Detachments', op. cit.
[165] Adam-Smith (1984) op. cit., p. 209.
[166] J. Smeaton (2022) '80th Anniversary of the Australian Army Medical Women's Service', Department of Veterans' Affairs website.
[167] L. M. Finnie (1988) 'Alice Ross-King (1887–1968)', Australian Dictionary of Biography website; Australian War Memorial (2025) 'Major Alice Ross-King', AWM website.
[168] Finnie (1988) op. cit.
[169] ibid.; J. Smeaton (2022) op. cit.
[170] Finnie (1988) op. cit.
[171] ibid.
[172] ibid.
[173] ibid.
[174] Bomford (2001) op. cit., p. 6; Stevenson & Darling (eds) (1984) op. cit., p. 223.
[175] Ollif (1981) op. cit., p. 176.

their workloads and time worked were equal, the male would be paid more, with added allowances for dependent adults or children.[176] The services did get pay increases during the war, but many of the news reports also mention that they received 'service concessions' such as uniforms, free medical and dental treatments.[177]

Throughout the war, the conversation about how much women should be paid was not restricted to those who were part of the services. Advocacy from the Council for Women in War Work, the National Council of Women and other bodies saw some women's wages increase and laid the groundwork for future progress.[178]

Uniforms

In the armed services, uniforms play a significant role in demonstrating belonging and seniority, and creating a sense of unity. Many senior members of the women's services had experience in Girl Guides and other voluntary groups who had strong uniform codes, and recognised how uniforms could be used in their fledgling organisation as 'a powerful symbol of unity and purpose'.[179] One AWAS rookie noted: 'Uniformity gives you loyalty and confidence. We are all one; we all belong to one service'.[180] It is hardly surprising, then, that the issue of uniforms featured significantly in both women's attitudes to serving and the surrounding debates about women serving. This was especially highlighted when VADs were transferred to the AWAS and were made to change their blue uniform to the army khaki. Many VADs did not want to give up their old uniform, causing tension with other AWAS recruits.[181]

While all three services eventually received standardised uniforms, the initial recruits experienced delays in receiving all the pieces of their uniforms, as well as having to contend with not all sizes being available, colours not matching and uniforms not being seasonally appropriate.[182]

The delay in receiving their uniforms meant that, in the early months of the services, to civilians, the women did not look like they were members of the military and so were not treated as such. This meant, for instance, some did not receive concession tickets on trams.[183] Others were not used to seeing women in uniform and believed that the WAAAF uniform in particular was a 'physical manifestation of the erosion of traditional womanhood', and that 'Air Force blue on a woman's body gestured to some the degradation of their characters'.[184]

Irving agreed that the AWAS uniform should follow as close as possible to the male pattern to ensure a uniformity with the Army, but did not agree with the use of a peaked cap and so the AWAS hat was modelled on her own brown felt hat.[185]

Luckily, there was a recognition that women's uniforms should be updated to reflect where they were stationed, changing fashions and mores. One of the first changes to the new AANS was updating the uniform—replacing the previous WWI uniform with a shorter skirt, a different skirt style and a low-crowned hat.[186] This was modified for those who served in the tropics, even allowing them to wear slacks.

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[176] Stevenson & Darling (eds) (1984) op. cit., pp. 31–2.
[177] (1942) 'Higher W.A.A.A.F. Allowances: Begin at next pay', *The Sun News-Pictorial*, 2 July, p. 4.; (1942) 'Increase in service pay and dependants' allowances', *Examiner*, 4 August, p. 5.
[178] Stevenson & Darling (eds) (1984) op. cit., p. 62; M. Anderson (2020) 'The Question of Equal Pay', Old Treasury Building website.
[179] Evans Appleyard (2019) op. cit., pp. 58–59.
[180] NAA (AWM): PR00114, Notebook, Pte. P. Rattray, 'Rookie' training lecture notes, 13 June 1942. Quoted in Evans Appleyard (2019) op. cit., p. 60.
[181] Adam-Smith (1984) op. cit., p. 195.
[182] ibid., p. 266; Stevenson & Darling (eds) (1984) op. cit., pp 111–113.
[183] Fenton Huie (2000) op. cit., p. 171.
[184] Jones (2024) op. cit., p. 12.
[185] Ollif (1981) op. cit., p. 69.
[186] Adam-Smith (1984) op. cit., p. 149.

Newfound independence and experiencing war

For many women, entering the services was the first time they had lived away from home and entered full-time employment. Especially in the first few months, only single women were allowed to enlist, and at least in the WAAAF two-thirds were under 21.[187]

For many women it was also the first time that they had learned about what the WAAAF administration termed 'Sex Hygiene'.[188] While they were taught the basics of contraception, abortion and how to avoid sexually transmitted diseases, one member wrote, 'I don't think I understood much of it', highlighting just how uninformed some recruits were.[189] While contraceptives were openly available to men in the RAAF, they were not provided by the services to any women or members of the AIF or RAN, and some women did fall pregnant.[190] Major Dorathea Skov, who served with the AWAS, said in 1984: 'Today's young can't go back that far. They can't appreciate how innocent—or how restricted—women had been'.[191]

While many women saw their time in the services as a time of adventure and learning, they were still aware that they were living through a war. Many women had relatives who were fighting on the front lines and formed relationships with men who were in active danger. One WAAAF member remembered, 'Yes, on our days off we played hard—and why not? Who knew what tomorrow's casualty lists would bring forth; so many brothers, sweethearts and husbands were away in the various theatres of war'.[192]

Another reflected:

> And I think, they were beautiful times but terribly cruel times. You'd go to a dance, you might have taken the signal that afternoon that a navigator you liked a lot was shot down, missing and now you were dancing with another navigator. You knew when he was next due in ops. room.[193]

Another reflected on watching returned air crews cycle by: 'We all knew those boys, and watched to count them when they came back after a strike'.[194] Another recalled the story of a typist in her office receiving news of the safe return of the brother of a woman in her hut. He had been reported missing and, in her excitement to share the news with her friend, she 'ran from the office, making incoherent though happy noises' to share the news, which 'was greeted with general rejoicing and some happy tears'.[195] While this broke protocol, it brought a moment of happiness.

Overseas duties

Aside from VADs and the AANS who served in both Europe and Asia, Cabinet approval was required for women to serve overseas, meaning most women were restricted to mainland duties. As it was reported in the end-of-war report, the 'vast majority have carried out day after day doing the same job with monotonous regularity without any of the thrill and excitement of physical danger under actual battle conditions'.[196]

This was frequently met with dissatisfaction from servicewomen, who generally sought equal opportunities to those of their male counterparts for participation in overseas military efforts. Australian servicewomen were often resentful of the American Women's Army Corps, largely because they were allowed to serve overseas. One AWAS woman reported being 'coldly furious' at the American WACs, not because they were dating American soldiers, but

[187] Stevenson & Darling (eds) (1984) op. cit., pp. 29, 47.
[188] Adam-Smith (1984) op. cit., p. 281.
[189] ibid., p. 284.
[190] ibid., p. 288.
[191] ibid., p. 289.
[192] Stevenson & Darling (eds) (1984) op. cit., p. 172.
[193] Adam-Smith (1984) op. cit., p. 284.
[194] ibid.
[195] Stevenson & Darling (eds) (1984) op. cit., p. 155.
[196] 'Army women's services', AWM MSS 780, n.d. [Post October 1944], quoted in Bomford (2001) op. cit., p. 6.

because the AWAS members were watching them sail out of Sydney Harbour to serve overseas.[197]

Finally, in November 1944, the Minister for the Army announced that up to 500 AWAS servicewomen would be posted to New Guinea.[198] This was met with great excitement, and on 3 May 1945 the AWAS embarked for New Guinea to work in signals and clerical duties.[199] Only single women or those whose husbands were POWs were allowed to go on overseas service.[200] The WAAAF also had members serving in Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands; however, the War Cabinet had refused to send a Kana Intercept Wireless Unit with General MacArthur as part of the Philippines invasion force.[201]

3 | Working and volunteering

As the war escalated, women were both encouraged and eager to contribute to the war effort, and many took on these duties outside the armed services. 'The home front' grew to encompass not only the military or nursing services but every aspect of life, from women's homes to the welfare of their male relatives fighting overseas. Women also moved into the workforce in numbers not seen before, and all the while were expected to continue their domestic duties in the face of rationing and austerity, the threat of air raids, and dramatic changes in the social fabric that came with over 30,000 American troops in town.[202]

In 1939 the *Women's Weekly Magazine* ran a large advertisement that read: 'Men must fight and women must work'.[203] This work took the form of the widespread and almost all-encompassing war industry—munitions and food and fuel supplies for the military—and volunteering time, money, and resources to ensure the welfare of Australian servicemen and servicewomen.

Volunteering and philanthropy

Volunteer work was generally taken up by the middle and upper classes, who had developed these skills and networks during the Great Depression as a form of philanthropy.[204] Those drawn to paid war work like munitions or the Land Army were motivated not only by patriotic service but by higher wages and secure employment, and were generally taken up by lower-class women.[205] Ironically, the free time that allowed upper-class women to volunteer their time was often only possible because they employed domestic workers, so much so that when the government proposed redirecting domestic servants into factories, upper-class women protested that the lack of domestic servants would interfere with their charity work.[206]

On a more practical level, 'the major prerequisite for voluntary work … was spare time, so … working class women were generally excluded from such voluntary organisations because they had no time to attend meetings'.[207] This changed, however, in 1942 after the Japanese entered the war and Australia's war requirements were greatly expanded, and even full-time workers volunteered at canteens after work, knitted socks during lunch breaks, or held competitions to raise war donations in their offices.

[197] Adam-Smith (1984) op. cit., p. 295.
[198] (1944) 'Australian forces: A.I.F. and R.A.A.F. To Fight In Philippines', *Bundaberg News Mail*, 16 November, p. 1.
[199] Adam-Smith (1984) op. cit., p. 269; Stevenson & Darling (eds) (1984) op. cit., pp. 66–7; Evans Appleyard (2019) op. cit., p. 95.
[200] Bomford (2001) op. cit., p. 7.
[201] ibid.
[202] M. Anderson (2020) 'The Yanks are coming!', Old Treasury Building website.
[203] M. McKernan (2014) *Australians at home: World War II*, Scoresby, The File Mile Press, p. 6.
[204] Evans Appleyard (2019) op. cit.
[205] Darian-Smith (2009) op. cit., p. 55.
[206] Old Treasury Building (2020) *Women work for victory in World War II*, op. cit.
[207] Darian-Smith (2009) op. cit., p. 55.

The two main volunteer organisations were the Australian Red Cross and the Australian Comforts Fund, although many smaller organisations were often organised and run by women and redirected their efforts after war was declared. An example of this is the Country Women's Association, which in 1944 had 306 centres nationally, allowing them to process large amounts of articles. Adam-Smith recounts that, from October 1943 to June 1944, the CWA handled:

- 78,000 jungle green trousers
- 19,000 tunics
- 9,500 greatcoats
- 123 bags of cleaning rags
- 1,050 hand towels
- 3,340 singlets
- 2,060 drawers
- 1,480 shirts.[208]

Red Cross

As war loomed in 1938, the Australian Red Cross (ARC) developed its own 'war book', setting out its relationships with the government and the military for the upcoming conflict.[209] Stores began to open across Melbourne to manage the influx of donated goods, new branches were created as membership numbers swelled, and ARC Emergency Service companies were created 'to train for personal service in all emergencies, the bushfire disaster of January and the threat of war'.[210]

The Red Cross was by far the largest women's organisation during the war years. At the height of the war around 8.5 percent of the entire Australian female population were members of the Red Cross or the Junior Red Cross.[211] Total national membership peaked at 450,000 in 1944, which was 6 per cent of a population of seven million people.[212]

Volunteers for the ARC grew across Victoria as the conflict spread. By late 1939 there were 570 branches in the state, and this number was to grow; at the height of the conflict in 1944, there were 770 Victorian branches with 87,096 members.[213]

Red Cross branches were primarily made up of women: 'Overall membership of men in both paid and voluntary positions did not exceed 5%'.[214] The town of Mortlake, near Warrnambool, had a Red Cross branch with 158 members, and then a separate Men's Red Cross Branch with 21 members.[215] Of the 584 branches that sent returns to divisional headquarters in 1941–42, only seven (11.5 per cent) had a male president.[216]

Women also generally occupied leadership positions in the ARC, either as members of the executive and the Victorian Divisional Council, committee members or directors for various departments within the Division, or as branch leaders. Lady Ruby Dugan, who was also the wife of Victoria's Governor, took over the Presidency and was Divisional Commandant in Chief of the Victorian Division at the outbreak of the war, and served until the end of the war.[217]

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[208] Adam-Smith (1984) op. cit., p. 346.
[209] This war book mirrored those prepared by the federal and state governments. See B. Reid & D. Reeves (2025) *The Victorian Parliament and World War II*, Parliamentary Library & Information Service, Melbourne, Parliament of Victoria.
[210] Australian Red Cross Society Victorian Division (1939) op. cit., p. 4.
[211] M. Oppenheimer (2014) *The Power of Humanity: 100 years of the Australian Red Cross 1914-2014*, Melbourne, Harper Collins, p. 83.
[212] Oppenheimer (2014) op. cit.
[213] ibid., p. 81.
[214] ibid., p. 83.
[215] Oppenheimer (2014) op. cit.
[216] ibid.
[217] Australian Red Cross Society Victorian Division (1945) *Thirty-First Annual Report and Financial Statements: 1944-45*, Melbourne, Australian Red Cross Society.

The Victorian Divisional Council and General Committee were made up of mostly women, many of whom were the wives of Members of Parliament or other officials, such as Jessie Dunstan, wife of the Premier, as well as Lillian Coles, Myra Beaurepaire, and Beatrice Campbell, wives of wartime and former Lord Mayors of Melbourne.[218] Ivy Weber served on the council and the General Committee and eventually as a government liaison.[219]

These women were almost always from the upper and middle classes, who had the time and resources for organising, planning, and fundraising.[220] Red Cross members were 'generally married … undertaking home duties, with a husband who may have enlisted, children and possibly parents to care for. They were not generally in paid employment, having given it up on marriage, which was usual at the time'.[221] However, many volunteers were women in the workforce who also wanted to support the war effort in their own time.

The work of the Red Cross on the home front was broad and varied and cannot be covered in this short paper. Its activities included providing clothing and food for Australian troops overseas, nursing and aid work in hospitals and at convalescent homes, a blood transfusion service, staffing canteens at airfields and railway stations, and operating horse transport, bicycle transport and motorcycle transport units.

The main work of the Red Cross during the war was fundraising. Table 1 shows the amounts the Victorian division raised each year. Victoria raised a total of £4,492,041 across the war, which in 2024 was roughly equal to AUD$388,432,710.[222] The most money raised in a year was the 1945–46 tally of over a million pounds, which converts to AUD$87,862,383 in 2024.[223] By comparison, the Royal Children's Hospital's Good Friday Appeal raises around $20 million each year.[224]

Table 1: Total funds raised by the Victorian Division of the Australian Red Cross during the war

	Amount raised (£)	Amount raised ($m in 2024)
1939–40	120,569	12.9
1940–41	354,507	36.8
1941–42	497,620	49.3
1942–43	690,210	62.7
1943–44	916,234	80
1944–45	896,814	79
1945–46	1,016,087	89.6
Total	**4,492,041**	**388.4**

Red Cross volunteers also worked to send donations to service people in Australia and overseas, and the Red Cross store in La Trobe Street received 2,542 consignments consisting of 232,358 articles in the nine months between the outbreak of war and June 1940 alone.[225]

[218] Australian Red Cross Society Victorian Division (1939) op. cit., p. 3.
[219] Australian Red Cross Society Victorian Division (1939) op. cit.
[220] Evans Appleyard (2019) op. cit.
[221] Oppenheimer (2014) op. cit., p. 81.
[222] Oppenheimer (2014) op. cit.; Reserve Bank of Australia (2024) op. cit.
[223] Oppenheimer (2014) op. cit.; Reserve Bank of Australia (2024) op. cit.
[224] Good Friday Appeal (2025) 'Funds Raised Year by Year', Good Friday Appeal website.
[225] Australian Red Cross Society Victorian Division (1940) *Twenty Sixth Annual Report and Financial Statements: 1939-40*, Melbourne, Australian Red Cross Society, p. 14.

The Red Cross built up supplies of clothing and food for the event of air raids, and sent some of this overseas to help British victims of the Blitz. At one point, this store had over 70,000 garments.[226]

Red Cross volunteers were also often involved in the work of VADs. VADs were enlisted by the Red Cross but came under the control of the military authorities; however, they could also be seconded back to the Red Cross. When the Australian Army Medical Women's Service was founded in 1942, all the initial recruits were full-time Red Cross VADs on the 'active' list. Of the 12,156 VADs, 2,847 immediately enlisted in the AAMWS. The Red Cross also had a field force that served overseas on hospital ships and aircraft carriers with 548 members, 200 of whom were women.[227]

Red Cross volunteers' work wasn't restricted to the war effort: in 1943, large-scale bushfires across almost the entire state killed 51 people, injured 700, and destroyed 650 buildings.[228] The Red Cross provided 20,000 garments to civilians, and women transport drivers alone drove 7,326 miles (11,790 kilometres) in Red Cross cars and trucks and 1,020 miles (1,641 kilometres) in trucks for the Forestry Commission.[229]

After the fall of Singapore and when Japan entered the war, the ARC became responsible for POWs in Singapore and the Netherlands East Indies (now Indonesia), while the US and Canadian Red Cross covered Japan, China, Hong Kong and the Philippines. The POW support service ran from its headquarters in Melbourne. The service mostly assisted with sending and receiving letters between POWs and their families, as well as a mail service for family members in occupied territories. This became increasingly difficult as the war in the Pacific escalated, and in 1943 and 1944 almost no supplies were reaching camps nor POWs' letters reaching home.[230]

The Red Cross' Inquiry Bureau for Wounded, Missing, and Prisoners of War ran investigations into the location of missing soldiers, particularly those that disappeared into POW camp systems. Throughout 1942 and 1943, only a thin stream of names of prisoners in camps in Japan were released to the Australian government, and the Red Cross Inquiry Bureau worked hard to obtain lists of prisoners, receive and pass on letters from prisoners to their families, and ensure supplies were reaching the camps. Women working at this bureau also assisted in informing relatives when a serviceman had died in Europe or the Pacific, and connecting those who had returned sick or injured with their families. A Prisoner of War Adoption scheme also allowed individuals or groups—such as schools or clubs—to 'adopt' a POW by funding their comforts and necessities sent by the Red Cross.[231]

Australian Comforts Fund

Originally established during WWI, the Australian Comforts Fund was a conglomeration of state-based 'patriotic funds', organisations that coordinated fundraising and the collection of goods to send to Australian servicemen overseas. As in the first war, the state-based funds were reconstituted into the Australian Comforts Fund (ACF) in June 1940.[232]

The ACF was distinct from the Red Cross in that its objective was to provide 'comforts' that servicemen wouldn't otherwise receive, rather than essential healthcare like the ARC was providing. The ACF supplied singlets, socks, pyjamas, cigarettes and tobacco, razor blades, soap, toothbrushes, toothpaste and reading material (newspapers and magazines). It also

[226] Australian Red Cross Society Victorian Division (1942) *Twenty-Eighth Annual Report and Financial Statements: 1941-42*, op. cit., p. 31.
[227] Oppenheimer (2014) op. cit.; Adam-Smith (1984) op. cit. p. 311.
[228] Attorney-General's Department Emergency Management Australia (2006) 'EMA Disasters Database', Emergency Management Australia (archived), Internet Archive, archived 27 September 2011.
[229] Australian Red Cross Society Victorian Division (1944) *Thirtieth Annual Report and Financial Statements: 1943-44*, Melbourne, Australian Red Cross Society, p. 22.
[230] ibid., p. 31.
[231] (1941) 'Adopt a Prisoner', *Box Hill Reporter*, 18 July, p. 4.
[232] R. Francis & C. Carter (2009) 'Australian Comforts Fund', The Australian Women's Register website.

provided recreational facilities, rest rooms, sporting equipment, gramophones and records, and writing materials.[233]

The ACF Victoria Division was also largely staffed and run by women, created by the merging of the Lady Mayoress' Patriotic League, the Returned Soldiers War Fund, YMCA War Services and parts of the Salvation Army. By 1940, there were 22,000 members and 300 branches.[234] The President of the Victorian division was usually the Lady Mayoress of Melbourne, and while other leadership positions such as secretary and administrator were usually men, branches were usually run by women, who organised fundraising and the collection and distribution of comfort materials.[235]

A central depot for receiving and sorting goods was established in the lower Town Hall in the Melbourne CBD, and a Red Shield Club House was established in Little Bourke Street in 1941, with 61,417 beds and serving 800 meals a day.[236] An ACF shop was established in Manchester Unity Arcade and welfare service rooms were set up at many military camps, including a specific room for WAAAFs at Laverton.[237]

The majority of this work was undertaken by women. Women worked at 'sewing corners', converting old service uniforms into children's clothing, or catalogued, sorted, and distributed the millions of items donated by the public. There were Welfare Officers appointed specifically for servicewomen working at camps and barracks, and even a specific Shopping and Welfare Bureaux established to help service men and women who couldn't take time to do their shopping due to their enlistment duties.[238]

The amount of work done by the women of the ACF is best conveyed through its numbers. Across the entire war, the Victoria Division raised £1,994,359 ($175,903,950 in 2024).[239] In their knitting activities alone, the women of the ACF made:

- 1,139,087 balaclavas
- 6 million handkerchiefs
- 582,610 pairs of mittens or gloves
- 374,677 pullovers
- 3,085,776 pairs of socks.[240]

In 1942 they sent out 60,000 Christmas hampers to troops in the south Pacific. In 1943 they catalogued 69,000 books for the Returned Army Nurses Book Depot, as well as playing 17 million feet of film at military camps, hospitals, and convalescent homes.[241]

The national numbers for the ACF's goods output are no less impressive. Throughout the war, the fund distributed:

- 168,906,340 cigarettes
- 2,355 ping pong tables
- 1,139,087 balaclavas and scarves
- 22,912,797 packets of chewing gum
- 3,552,070 books and magazines
- 12,184 cricket bats.[242]

[233] H. Denadic (2011) 'Australian Comforts Fund, World War II, 1939-1946', Museums Victoria Collections website.
[234] C. O. B. Jackson (1949) *Proud story: the official history of The Australian Comforts Fund*, Sydney, F.H. Johnston Publishing, p. 55; Darian-Smith (2009) op. cit., p. 55.
[235] Jackson (1949) op. cit., pp. 53-72.
[236] ibid., p. 61.
[237] ibid., p. 70.
[238] Jackson (1949) op. cit., p. 67.
[239] ibid., p. 332; Reserve Bank of Australia (2024) op. cit.
[240] McKernan (2014) op. cit., p. 237.
[241] Jackson (1949) op. cit., pp. 65–66, 68.
[242] ibid., pp. 333-334.

Though they reflect the huge amount of labour done by a predominately female volunteer force, these eye-watering numbers were not always considered welcome or appropriate. Commissioner of the ACF Eugene Gorman raised ire when he returned from Egypt and said:

> The women of Australia are wasting their time hand-knitting socks for men overseas … the men are in shorts most of the time … what they need are long, machine-made standardised stockings which fit far better than hand-made ones.[243]

'The best way to provide Comforts', Gorman argued, 'is cash'.[244]

Notwithstanding the huge amounts of cash the ACF also raised, the Commissioner's comments perhaps demonstrate how the act of handmaking these comforts was not merely practical but also symbolic and even therapeutic. They not only represented a way for women to feel they were helping the men—their brothers, fathers, sons, husbands and friends—survive a war being fought overseas, but also provided a sense of comfort, purpose, and hope in a time of immense uncertainty and emotional strain:

> Baking a fruit cake with part of the house ration and packing it in a Willow Brand cake tin, stitching calico tightly around this and stencilling the soldier's name and unit for an address was another bewildered, hopeful, hopeless act to help mark time and use up time that might otherwise be spent weeping.[245]

Women in the workforce

'Never before had Australia's women been so emancipated from the tyranny of the home, family, and conventional society', writes Adam-Smith.[246] Victoria's women were in the workforce long before the war started, but there was a dramatic increase in their participation due to both the increased desire of women to 'do their bit' to support the war effort and men leaving the workforce to enlist. The latter was felt particularly after Japan's entry into the war and the subsequent increase in both the conscription of men and the demands on Australia's economy and production capacity.[247]

As with women joining the armed services, women at work were almost immediately framed as a temporary necessity:

> Attitudes to women workers changed, with many commentators watching the transition in wide-eyed astonishment. But the transformation was only ever partial and it was always intended to be short-lived.[248]

A week after the bombing of Pearl Harbour, at a federal Cabinet Meeting on 15 December 1941, the Cabinet approved 'as a war measure … extensive employment of women in industries when men are not available … to attain the scale of production approved as a war objective'.[249] In order to calm those concerned about women taking men's jobs, Prime Minister John Curtin said that 'all women employed under the approved conditions would be employed only for the duration of the war, and would be replaced by men as they become available'.[250] A sub-committee was also established to 'deal with the matter with full regard to preventing an invasion of men's work by cheap female labour'.[251]

Women's move into the workforce became highly visible during the war, helped in part by concerted efforts of the government to harness their participation as a key part of war propaganda, but also to stress its temporary nature. One radio piece from the Department of Information declared:

[243] Adam-Smith (1984) op. cit., p. 342.
[244] ibid., p. 343.
[245] ibid., p. 344.
[246] ibid., p. 363.
[247] M. Anderson (2020) 'Women in the paid workforce', Old Treasury Building website.
[248] ibid.
[249] (1941) 'Women in war industries: widespread work', *The Age,* 16 December, p. 4.
[250] ibid.; (1941) 'More women in industry - Federal decisions', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 16 December, p. 9.
[251] (1941) 'More women in industry - Federal decisions', op. cit.

> Every member of this splendid little army of patriotic women is doing a man-sized job by releasing a fit man to fight the Japanese. These women are happy. They know that they are doing all that any woman can do to assist Australia's war effort, but the need for more and more women is growing.[252]

Women were motivated to work for many reasons; patriotism was a real reason given, but so was a need to support their families and even simply the fact that they 'got sick of staying at home'.[253]

In Victoria it was reported with curiosity that 12 women were allowed to work for Yellow Cabs in Melbourne, and it was noted that 'they will drive only in daylight and be free to choose their hours between 7am and 7pm'.[254] Women were also employed as porters for Victorian Rail, and in 1941 Melbourne's trams saw their first female conductors.[255] These conductors 'consistently demanded trousers' to allow them freedom to work, but were instead subject to a 'Most Popular Tram Conductress' competition (albeit organised to raise funds for a prisoner of war fund).[256]

Historian Kate Darian-Smith estimates that between the start of the war and the end of 1940, the number of women in the workforce rose in Victoria by about 100,000: from 644,000 to 744,000.[257] Women were most likely to move into what was considered 'war work', or work that could be seen to directly impact Australia's fight capacity, such as munitions, but also supplying the armed forces with fuel and food. At the peak of war production in 1944, 855,000 Victorian women were employed in the munitions industry, the military services, and rural tasks under the Women's Land Army. This made up to 25 per cent of the total workforce, and a third of all women aged 15–65 were in paid labour.[258]

Equal pay was raised as an issue early. In 1942, the Prime Minister stated 'we must … feel faith with the women of this country and ensure that, if they are capable of doing as much war work as men, they should be paid as if they were men'.[259] Nonetheless, the government initially dismissed plans for equal pay, mostly because, as the largest employer of women, a large female workforce created huge savings for the government in a time of war and austerity (estimated at around 50 million pounds).[260] The military paid women 56 per cent of the male wage for the same tasks, and a Women's Employment Board (WEB) was established in 1942 to regulate women's wages for temporary war work. The WEB awarded wages for women taking over male occupations at a minimum 60 per cent of the male wage, but most jobs under its jurisdiction paid around 90 per cent of the male rate. However, most women's jobs fell outside the WEB's reach and paid a fraction of male wages, including 'those producing the food, clothing and other goods required to equip the services'.[261] Several walkouts were seen across munitions factories over equal pay.[262]

Munitions

The most visible move of women into the workforce was into munitions work. Women had already worked in the industry before the war but there was a large increase in 1941, with the War Cabinet again seeing women as a way to 'free up' men to enlist by giving their jobs to women.[263] In 1939 there were about 570 women in munitions work in Victoria, which made up about 12 per cent of the total workforce. By 1942 this number was nearly 9,000, or almost a third of the Victorian industry.[264]

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[252] Darian-Smith (2009) op. cit., p. 58.
[253] ibid.
[254] Adam-Smith (1984) op. cit., p. 344.
[255] ibid.; Darian-Smith (2009) op. cit., 78-79.
[256] Darian-Smith (2009) op. cit., p. 60; (1944) 'Conductress raises £3500', *Weekly Times*, 13 September, p. 20.
[257] Darian-Smith (2009) op. cit., p. 57.
[258] ibid.
[259] Adam-Smith (1984) op. cit., p. 141.
[260] Darian-Smith (2009) op. cit., p. 61.
[261] Anderson (2020) 'The Question of Equal Pay', op. cit.
[262] Darian-Smith (2009) op. cit., pp. 61-66.
[263] Adam-Smith (1984) op. cit., p. 321.
[264] Darian-Smith (2009) op. cit., p. 60.

The bulk of Victoria's munitions manufacturing was carried out in West Melbourne. There was a small arms ammunition and cartridge case factory in Footscray and then a larger explosives factory in Maribyrnong.

The Maribyrnong factory employed 20,000 workers who were engaged in making and filling shells, bombs, mortar bombs, pyrotechnics, cartridges, grenades, fuses, primers, depth charges, naval mines and demolition charges.[265] The work was dangerous, and the threat of explosion was constant. Workers would remove all metal from their shoes and clothes to prevent sparks and would have to wait three seconds after knocking before they opened a door, so as not to startle the worker inside.[266]

Women worked 12-hour shifts six or seven days a week, with only 20 minutes' break for lunch, and the staff turnover at Maribyrnong peaked at 10 per cent per month.[267] There was also a genuine risk of illness from exposure to the chemicals used in the munitions, in particular TNT. Rita McKenna, a worker at the Maribyrnong factory, said: 'We were more scared of getting poisoned [than explosions]. We got head things, not like an ache, more like a migraine, and some got dermatitis'.[268]

Munitions had high wages compared to other jobs women could take, which drew many women who wouldn't usually work outside the home.[269] The 'overwhelming motivation [to work] was money', argues Darian-Smith.[270] While these jobs may have been higher paid because of their complexity and danger, women's wages remained significantly lower than those of men doing the same work.[271]

Women's Land Army

Australian women's war work was also essential to maintaining food supplies and raw materials, not only for Australia's war effort but also for US forces stationed in the Pacific. The Australian Women's Land Army (AWLA) was established in July 1942 under the jurisdiction of the Director General of Manpower to offset 'the serious depletion in the strength of the total labour force due to service enlistments and transfers to munitions and other war factories'.[272]

The AWLA sent women to work in horticulture, vegetable and fruit growing, pig and poultry raising, sheep and wool work, dairying, flax work and dehydrating vegetables. The postings were often remote and far from the women's homes, and often required billeting in purpose-built hostels or even camps:

> Working far from the areas where they could parade their uniforms through city streets, they toiled in unglamorous surroundings, at sometimes unpleasant and almost always heavy physical work, usually for longer hours than the 48-hour week then prevailing. Sometimes they lived in large camps in the bush with cooks and often they camped, a few together on the edge of farmlands, and cooked for themselves. They went where they were sent.[273]

The AWLA required not only hard work but also the development of agricultural skills, and some AWLA were certified as herd testers.

At the war's peak in 1944 there were 3,068 labourers in the field, made up of 2,565 full-time members and 503 auxiliary members. 'On the shoulders of these girls and women', writes Adam-Smith, 'rested … the responsibility of feeding the navy, army, air force and civilians of Australia and the US Servicemen, both in Australia and in the South-west Pacific'.[274]

[265] Adam-Smith (1984) op. cit., pp. 323–4.
[266] Adam-Smith (1984) op. cit., p. 323.
[267] Darian-Smith (2009) op. cit., p. 70; Adam-Smith (1984) op. cit. p. 326.
[268] Adam-Smith (1984) op. cit., p. 324.
[269] Adam-Smith (1984) op. cit., p. 328.
[270] Darian-Smith (2009) op. cit., p. 56.
[271] Anderson (2020) 'The Question of Equal Pay', op. cit.
[272] Adam-Smith (1984) op. cit., p. 298.
[273] ibid.
[274] ibid., p. 306.

Civilian life

Civil defence

Women often also joined the Volunteer Air Observers Corps (VAOC) or were appointed Air Raid Precautions wardens.[275] This involved patrolling Melbourne's streets to ensure homes and businesses abided by blackout and brownout rules.[276] Women staffed many of the 2,800 air observation posts across the state and reported any aircraft sightings to the RAAF.[277] One such volunteer was Margaret Tootel, a member of the VAOC who was awarded a certificate for her service after the surrender of Japan.[278] (See the Parliamentary Library's research paper on Victorian Parliament during the war for more on air raid preparedness.[279])

Austerity

Although they moved into the workforce in unprecedented numbers, women remained managers of the home, and so were responsible for feeding, clothing, and cleaning their families. Rationing of food and clothing began in 1942, and the availability of food and staples reduced rapidly. Depression-era cookbooks were reused, powdered eggs replaced real eggs, dried fruit took the place of fresh fruit, dripping was used instead of butter.[280] Meat rationing was introduced in 1944, and often only animal parts 'such as brains, tripe, livers and kidneys' were more available than better cuts of meat.[281] Shortages also often resulted in long queues, demanding more time from women.

Women also had to manage with fuel rationing, introduced in 1940 and lasting until 1950, and restrictions on firewood. Firewood was the primary means of heating, especially for poorer families, and had to be collected from local woodyards.[282] Self-sufficiency was encouraged, and women were encouraged to grow their own food and keep their own livestock as a way of reducing costs.[283] Restrictions on common goods from the government caused a black market to flourish, including at the Queen Victoria Market, and there were frequent reports of women fighting over supplies at stores and markets.[284]

[275] Evans Appleyard (2019) op. cit.
[276] Australian War Memorial (2019) 'Australia under attack: Scanning the skies', Australian War Memorial website.
[277] ibid.
[278] ibid.
[279] Reid & Reeves (2025) op. cit.
[280] Darian-Smith (2009) op. cit., p. 142-179.
[281] Evans Appleyard (2019) op. cit.
[282] M. Anderson (2020) 'Housewives to Action', Old Treasury Building website.
[283] Evans Appleyard (2019) op. cit.
[284] Anderson (2020) 'Housewives to Action', op. cit.

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